

Moppett refuses to put signature on style

Established categories defied by exhibition's pairing of fine art with craft, high culture with pop, the humorous with the serious

VISUAL ARTS

DAMIAN MOPPETT: THE VISIBLE WORK

At the Contemporary Art Gallery until April 24

◆ Damian Moppett's new exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery consists of graphite drawings, watercolours, a three-screen video installation, clumsily made clay pots and only slightly more accomplished faux-modernist steel sculptures, and (in collaboration with Toronto resident Zin Taylor) promotional buttons, posters, and fliers for a fake band, the Spiders.

Moppett's purpose in creating this varied and somewhat motley group of objects is to X-ray contem-

porary visual art, exposing those distinctions—high-/pop-culture, art/craft, modern/postmodern, et cetera—that operate like hooks, enabling critics and historians to attach artists and their works to pre-defined critical categories.

Moppett declares his impatience with this state of affairs by refusing to declare his allegiance to any particular medium, or to develop a "signature style". Instead, he presents a whole gallery full of stylistically varied objects, some highly finished and refined, others amateurish in execution. In this way, he deflects attention from the "visible works" in the gallery to the conceptual decision-making that led him to create them in the first place.

Moppett has transformed the CAG's larger gallery into a museum display. Discreet spotlights in the darkened room illuminate large steel sculptures, perhaps modelled on the work of modernist sculptor Alexander Calder. The sculptures are ragged and roughly formed, and bear fabricators' measurements in coloured chalk or grease pencil on their sides. Hanging from the sculptures are little trays of clay pots and bowls whose blobby forms and cracked edges signify the work of a beginning potter.

The steel sculptures are like designer pedestals; they demonstrate, in a dryly funny way, how the "look" of modern art has, since the late 1940s, been absorbed into craft and design, and, similarly,

how formal qualities like "fidelity to materials" have not received the same level of critical respect or recognition in the craft genres as they have in critical discussions about painting and sculpture.

Writing about these works, Moppett has likened them to a car crash between art and craft, an event rendering one form indistinguishable from the other. As he says in an exhibition-catalogue interview with historian John Welchman, he sees "the pairing as humorous, but not disrespectful towards the capacity or history of either form."

In the CAG's smaller gallery, Moppett is exhibiting dozens of watercolour and graphite drawings. Some are homages to his favourite artists: filmmaker Hollis Fram-

ton; painters Ed Ruscha and Philip Guston; the cheeky Swiss sculptors Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Others are more idiosyncratic: a flock of Salt Spring Island sheep; potters' kilns and Denman Island houses; a grinning psychedelic nightmare full of huge eyeballs, sharp teeth, and torch flames.

By refusing to differentiate among his images or to organize them into any kind of hierarchy, Moppett compels viewers to consider the cumulative effect that these seemingly incompatible and unlikely sources—Sepultura? H.P. Lovecraft? Fifties sculptural-kitsch master Isamu Noguchi?—have had on his alternately comic and profound art practice.

> CHRISTOPHER BRAYSHAW