

A poster, two sculptures and a film

GALLERY SHOW | 'That's the whole enchilada' of Damian Moppett's current exploration of 'things floating between two poles'

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On South Granville's gallery row at Catriona Jeffries is a show so austere that it's almost an unshow, you may think at first. There is no danger of gallery fatigue.

After a preview, I called the 34-year-old artist, Damian Moppett, to ask if that was it. "Yep," he said, "that's the whole enchilada — a poster, two sculptures and a film."

The show, running through Dec. 6, is called, cryptically, *1815/1966*.

And this is how — unchanged — I find the gallery again nearly two weeks later. The room is blank except for the film that runs on a 15-minute loop, and two tiny pieces that look like chairs, which, if in life-size, would be equally uninhabitable. One is high-tech-abstract and monochromatic red, something you'd expect of a Memphis Group designer or the Russian constructivists. The other is primitive, made of twigs and string. Otherwise, their design is amazingly similar.

In the film a rustic woodsman in a long beard (Moppett himself), with a rope for a belt, wanders through a Brothers Grimm-like forest with an axe and explores the dense underbrush. There's no sound but the hyper-ambient ones of nature: wind rising to gales so strong they make you look upward, pelting rain, twigs and branches snapping — otherwise silence.

Taking particular care in such a wealth of vegetation, the man selects branches and cuts them, netting them with hemp into what looks like a chair — an exact replica of the three-inch model on the plinth. Periodically, he sits, meditates and sleeps.

The film is oddly provocative and the images stick in your mind, especially the sounds of weather. There's a tension between what's happening on-screen and the two tiny sculptures, impeccably constructed by Moppett.

But what could it be about: Rousseau's noble savage, man the tool-maker, arts-and-crafts (the close-up of Art Nouveau thistles) versus modernism? And what does the crude chair have to do with the Memphis Group?

I was wrong, as Moppett pointed out when we met and I asked him what the dates meant in particular. The chairs weren't chairs at all. The high-tech piece was a sculptural abstraction, made in 1966 by the English artist Antony Caro, who was an assistant to Henry Moore. It collapses the view of a room into planar surfaces, an elegant room reduced to

its elegant bones. The wicker "chair" is really a fish-trap, as might have been made by a West Coast fisherman circa 1815.

"And I don't find this room austere. I find it pristine," Moppett says, unrecognizably shorn of his beard, which, it turns out, was only a prop.

But it seemed a bit anomalous to find a show of conceptual art — that is, art you can only "buy" in your head — on gallery row.

"Oh, it's for sale," Moppett says. "How much," I asked.

"You'd have to ask Catriona Jeffries," he said.

It was hard, at first, to get into Moppett's head because of the arcane art-speak. I asked why he was speaking a foreign language. "I like art-speak," he said. "It validates you. It's like getting into the right gallery." Fluency with the inbred jargon of art-speak means, in certain quarters that count, that you've arrived.

"But the only people who can understand it are art academics and curators," I said. He insisted he liked it but he was sort of smiling and may have been kidding.

At least, I hope so, because some of what he said made sense, even to a heathen. Moppett is interested in that area of "strange purgatory" where things exist in a limbo between the esthetic and functional, the fictive and the real, of form not following function nor vice versa. "I find it interesting when things float between two poles. Faltering between them is what gives them life."

Caro's stylized room-abstraction puns on the fish-trap, which is not even usable as such. The impracticality of one abstraction puns on another design based on trapping and human nutriment. Art, too, is an impractical but in a way vitally necessary source of human sustenance.

He was born in Calgary to artist parents but is adamant about not wanting to talk about them. "Why?" I ask. "Are you mad at them?"

"No." He volunteers that his father is a painter, his mother, into multimedia.

He studied two years at Emily Carr College in Vancouver, did graduate studies at Montreal's Concordia University and returned to Vancouver in 1990. He started as a draftsman and painter, and his "processual" photographs — of balloons and Lego vignettes, with the photographs existing as the object — have been collected by the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Ontario Art Museum and the National Gallery.

He's assembled playful architectural schemes made of detritus like cigarette butts, beer caps and pizza leftovers. He makes the



Artist Damian Moppett in his prop beard posed as a rustic woodsman in the 15-minute loop of a film he shot on Saltspring Island as part of his current show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

banal, the everyday, coexist side by side with the classical, with skilful knock-offs of the rococo painter, Boucher.

It might stand to reason that he'd be mislabelled as a "slacker artist." This is ironic since he once proposed to Emily Carr Institute that he teach a course on slacker art; they accepted.

"The point was to get students not to use the term 'slacker' any more — the slob wandering into

the studio in a drunken stupor, slapping something together and charging \$5,000 for it. There's honest work that has chaos infused into it. But it commonly makes people spew out the word, slacker."

Art is hard work, including art conceived in the spirit of play — humour is important to Moppett — and so is the licence of ambiguity: for a show to stand up and make sense even when funda-

mentally misunderstood, as I'd misunderstood his.

Ultimately, the show may be about solitude, just as it's about the lushness of the environment — it was filmed on Saltspring Island.

But he didn't want the film to be too lush. There's something like threat to the sounds of weather, recorded by Moppett's digital body microphone, that "enhances the beauty of the nat-

ural environment."

Basically, "I like to manipulate what's been done already, classically. Hours of misery can go into a light work and still elicit a smile from the viewer" — he laughs "because it sounds corny."

One of his favourite artists is Brancusi, who said, "When we stop playing, we are already dead."

Catriona Jeffries Gallery is at 3149 Granville.

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