



The Sculptor's Studio is a Painting, by Damian Moppett

Photograph by: Handout, Catriona Jeffries Gallery

Damian Moppett: The Sculptor's Studio is a Painting

On now, until June 26

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 274 East 1st Avenue

Info: catrionajeffries.com

VANCOUVER -- Examining the work of Vancouver artist Damian Moppett is a bit like falling into the deep end of the pool of art theory: It's best if you know how to swim. However, even if you don't have a clue, there are enough artistic pool noodles around in the form of recurring motifs and various interesting colourful abstractions to keep you afloat.

Take the candle. It's in nearly all the works in Moppett's new show, entitled, "The Sculptor's Studio is a Painting," currently installed at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery. Easy to identify, this recurring shape is an access point — a figurative diving board into each painting that allows the viewer to follow Moppett's artistic journey into abstraction. First — spot the candle. Then watch as he changes it and hides it and covers it in the various works, to eventually move away from the figurative altogether into a completely abstract and at times chaotic realm. The end result is a panoply of richly colourful paintings, framed in vintage-looking, Mondrian-inspired

wooden frames that seem to pop out from the gallery wall. "I did a residency in London a few months ago," says Moppett on the phone from his studio, "and I really wanted to focus on my painting." He adds, "I wanted to get to a point where I left the source imagery behind. All the paintings in the show have about five paintings underneath. I'd paint — then turn canvas — paint another image — it's about 70 per cent destruction and 30 per cent creation. And the layers that are covered are not invisible. They might just be a texture that's barely noticeable, but it all makes a difference."

Moppett, who is an Emily Carr graduate and part of a generation of Vancouver artists that came after the so-called "Vancouver School" of photo realism, has built a solid international reputation on work that is all but invisible. Rather than the works themselves, it is the hidden relationships between his works and the various media represented in them that really turns the art-theory types on. As modernist art historian and contemporary art critic John Welchman has observed, "his real work lies in the space between the various media and procedures he's adopted."

Over the past decade or so, Moppett has been exhibited at the Musee d'art Contemporain in Montreal, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the National Gallery. He was part of an exciting show called "Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists," at the Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen in Belgium, and his latest coup is a prestigious three month artist-in-residency appointment at the Glenfiddich distillery in Scotland, where he says he hopes to incorporate drinking into his already multi-disciplinary practise.

Though his paintings are compelling on their own, to call Moppett a painter would be a mistake since he also does photography and sculpture, and has ventured into film, and most recently, ceramics. "I'm not comfortable with saying I'm a painter, or that I'm a sculptor," says Moppett. "It's the play between those practises that I'm interested in. They're dependent on each other. I don't believe in the idea that a painting is just painting. I want painting to be like sculpture and vice versa." Hence the, at first, cryptic-seeming, but ultimately descriptive name of this show, "The Sculptor's Studio is a Painting." First of all, Moppett shares a studio with sculptor Liz Magor, so he does in fact inhabit a sculptor's studio. Furthermore, in Moppett's universe, inspired by artists like Modardo Rosso and Constantin Brancusi, the studio itself often becomes part of the subject of his work.

In this exhibition, there are strong relationships between each painting, and also between the paintings and the sculptures and collages included in the show. Once the viewer becomes aware of those connections through closer observation, there is the added excitement of identifying and witnessing a shared visual vocabulary, an almost voyeuristic insight into the artist's creative process.

There's even a secret "key" to the show.

Like a coded message, a small watercolour of a Rolling Stones album cover hangs demurely near the entrance to the gallery. It's the "Tattoo You" face, faithfully rendered by Moppett. He chose to include it because the basic composition, the figure of a face with complex tattoo design work layered across it, symbolizes his approach to the entire body of work in the exhibition: Begin with a recognizable figure, and then layer imaginatively and spontaneously on top of it to create abstraction. Moppett admits that this connection may at first be hard to see, and that the Rolling Stone album cover might seem a little out of left field. But for collectors and exhibitors of his work, it is this very challenge that makes his art interesting.

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