

Push-me pull-you art

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IMPURE SYSTEMS

New work by Damian Moppett

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 3149 Granville, until March 11

Back in the beer-hall days of college, it was a regular event to gather around someone's kitchen table and talk and talk and drink and talk and smoke and talk, usually about the urgent need to build a better world. Into the wee hours those marathon festivals of youthful ardor and endurance would wind, leaving in their wake table tops strewn with bottle caps, cigarette wrappers, overflowing ashtrays, plates of cold takeout food and a landscape of other oddments that fidgeting young hands might arrange and rearrange.

What is the impulse that propels us to doodle with this kind of domestic disorder? When no one in particular is watching and there is no idea we want to communicate, and no conscious reason to do so, why do we reach out for that beer cap and try to balance it on its end, or roll that bit of discarded paper into a little strut to support an assemblage of other stuff that will soon enough be tidied away into the trash?

Damian Moppett, a brainy new force in the ranks of Vancouver's conceptual artists, raises the possibility that such unguarded behaviour might in fact be the very face of creativity. In *Impure Systems*, his series of photographic works now on display at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Moppett presents monumental photographs of an old Formica-topped kitchen table in the aftermath of an intense session of makeup, gossip, photography and takeout food. Out of this Serengeti of empty film canisters, cold French fries, cigarette butts, empty highball glasses, Q-tips and errant lipsticks, Moppett photographs the doodling constructions of a pair of idle but determined hands: little Towers of Babel composed of bobby pins and makeup sponges, crumpled paper, candle wax, toilet paper and all the rest of the raw material that appears so lushly at hand.

These tiny constructions are balanced precariously: between empty glasses, for instance, or atop a plinth-like roll of toilet paper, artless in their unselfconsciousness. Or are they? Part of Moppett's idea seems to be a hunt for the moment — the precise instant — when a human gesture becomes art. On one's own kitchen table, these strange little doodles may indeed be artless. But what happens when an artist consciously creates them, and then fixes them into a kind of artistic eternity by making photographs of them? Like some Escher image of infinity, Moppett's pictures seem to be about themselves or, in another way, art-making about the idea of art-making.

Moppett is 31, a Calgarian born into a family of artists. He trained at Emily Carr Institute and then took a graduate degree at Montreal's Concordia University. He has been thinking about the nature of artifice for some time. A recent suite of work, for instance, includes a quartet of painstaking, hand-drawn copies of images by French Enlightenment painter François Boucher, interposed with Moppett's

own faux-adolescent, pop-eyed portraits of a tribe of alien mud-pie monsters. By juxtaposing the two — one a faithful, obsessive copy of images that many would consider refined and conventional, the other a warty flight of fancy — Moppett is asking us to consider the edges of what constitutes art. Are his own crazy, *Mad* magazine creations somehow more artful than his careful copies of Boucher's frilly allegories on the four seasons? The question is confounding because our middle-class intentions might otherwise lead us to overlook the mud-monster images as mere adolescent doodles.

Which brings us back to the photographs in *Impure Systems*. The subject matter may appear utterly temporary and unselfconscious — the photographs themselves appear to have been taken on an inexpensive camera with a built-in flash — but the actual artfulness by which they come to be hanging on a gallery wall is profound. Moppett arranged his table tops so that the focal plane is hovering somewhere in the images' middle ground. The complex geography of makeup bottle and film canister makes for intricate patterns of focus. As Melanie O'Brian observes in her closely argued essay on the exhibition, "the odd focal points make the viewer work ... pulling the eye from foreground to background in a woozy manner."

If Moppett has a signature effect, it is precisely this push-me-pull-you quality: forward and backward in the focal plane of these images, between high art and low art in their subject matter, and back and forth between the faux-Boucher and the *vrai*-Moppett of *The Four Seasons* and *The Three Graces*.

The 10 images in *Impure Systems* present an array of ideas out of art history. For the most part they are composed as portraits, with the precariously balanced constructions front and centre, as if they were noble human subjects. And the colour prints themselves

are large, certainly many times larger than the flotsam out of which the images were created. The sense of monumentality is further increased by the way the actual photographs have been hung low to the gallery's floor. The effect is rather like looking down at Stonehenge from a low-flying plane — we know something large and enigmatic has gone on down there, we just can't be sure exactly what.

In several of the images, a female forearm or torso is visible, heightening our sense that these are glimpses of an apprehended event. People are in the midst of doing things: of applying makeup, of drinking and smoking, of talking and, most self-referentially, of taking photographs. And there's the old push-pull Moppett again, worrying us with the implication that the artist is at work, even in the midst of this seemingly random and unselfconscious event.

It was Freud who first drew the link between childhood play and art-making. "Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative artist, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him," he asked in *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*.

Moppett is working similar ground here, blurring that line between art-making and daydreaming. We have all fidgeted with wine corks or turned a paper napkin into confetti. But have we all been making art at the same time? Moppett, in this ground-breaking exhibition, suggests the link is faint but perceptible.

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