

VISUAL ART

Ron Moppett and Carol Wainio

Anthea Black

Painters Carol Wainio and Ron Moppett are both artists who, several decades into their respective practices, remain deeply committed to questioning their well-established methods. Their works issue from contrasting aesthetic traditions and tackle radically different themes, but together, there is much to be gained, and learned, about each. Their two-person exhibition at TrépanierBaer Gallery signals a real willingness on the part of the gallery to experiment and to stimulate a critically engaging discussion. The pairing of these powerhouse senior painters certainly left audiences swooning over the playful juxtaposition, as if we were seeing the work of each artist afresh. Listening to a discussion between the two artists, I'm convinced that the exhibition, "Transformation-Swan" has the potential to reveal new ideas about painting itself.

Wainio's paintings appear to be a hatching of children's book illustrations and found pen and ink drawings emerging from among ruined buildings and piles of garbage. A cast of runaway rabbits, chatting pigs and clothed rats innocently occupy this landscape. It's as if they'd sprung from the pages of translucent, melting books that frame these scenes in a world where things are much dirtier and complicated. There are treasures to be found in these dumpy vistas, and each closer look into the muddy detritus is rewarded with swaths of

bright green, red, rosy pink or cool white. Her thrown-away plastic shopping bags bear logos of big-box stores—and turn into literal "bag people"—but they're rendered with the painterly conviction that an artist in another time might bring to heavy drapery or fine silk.

An ongoing roster of images and symbols are repeated throughout



Ron Moppett's practice, always tempting us to try and unravel his method. There are the familiar, hard-edged shapes of top hats, crescents, cabins and antlers assembled here with enlarged sketches and chunks of patterned fabric. These say as much about the history of image making in art as they do about domesticity or advertising. There's also a strong current of Canadiana running through the paintings, but the lone sculpture in the show clinches it. The assemblage includes a nod to Walter May's axes, a white-washed gourd that could be a goose or an Eric Cameron "Thick Painting," and hints of the West Coast totems that Moppett found in plastic garden frogs. He confirmed that influences can come just as readily from *Vogue* magazine as from a history book, but cautions "there was a time that people looked at my paintings and thought—if I just had the key to the signage, then I could read this sucker—but that was never true."



Wainio and Moppett speak to each other in conversation in much the same manner as their paintings do in the gallery. They complete each other's sentences or interject with a more detailed personal description, and also pause to disagree—but only slightly—as they dart from painting talk to archives in disarray, from subject matter to abstraction. It's clear that both artists share a commitment to play itself, especially the kind of serious play that research and consistent studio practice comprise.

Moppett's repeated shapes turn somersaults from canvas to canvas, in the same way Wainio's plastic bags are inflated by a few light brush strokes as they also whirl around the perimeters of each work. Moppett offers up vernacular patterns from children's bed sheets and printed toile to sit on the wall near the personified animals from Wainio's archive of illustrations and children's books. Both invoke tangents about Disney's

top: Installation view at TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary, 2008.

lower left: Ron Moppett, *Blue Fall Roof*, 2007/08, oil and acrylic on canvas, 64 x 66". Courtesy TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary.

lower right: Carol Wainio, *Runaway*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60". Courtesy TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary.

appropriation of images from art history and the illustrated fables of Grandville alike: the ones that Wainio also often picks from her collection of references where she could, she said "find one illustration of Puss in Boots, and another dated 60 years later, reproduced in almost the same way. I find this process more interesting," she adds "than particular works by particularly brilliant artists."

They're meticulous with painting, history and language alike, but still willing to let intuition lead until a different kind of visual thinking takes over. Moppett says this process "recalls bits of vocabulary from previous paintings, where we're always mining our own places. The work is just the next sequence in a long line of things." Wainio agrees, "There are so many references that you can keep pushing forever and not get there." It can be dizzying. Here I am reminded of Jeanne Randolph's performative lectures where her vast archive of slides are pulled from their sleeves and used to cue specific strings of ideas as they flash onto the projector screen. Also, like Randolph, Wainio has "never been that interested in the history of art as a discreet history." No wonder such elegantly painted piles of vernacular detritus collect at the edges of her paintings.

Leave it up to the two painters to remind us, as Wainio says, "how demanding and difficult painting can be." Even after so many years. ■

"Transformation-Swan" was exhibited at TrépanierBaer Gallery in Calgary from March 13 to April 5, 2008.

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