



VISUAL ART

Ron Moppett

Nancy Tousley

For anyone who watches his work closely, there is always something new in a show of work by Ron Moppett. In his most recent exhibition many images or visual ideas speak to motifs that have repeatedly threaded their way through his body of work. Since the 1970s, this Calgary-based painter's favourite MO has been based on assemblage and collage. It's an aesthetic approach that has served him well formally and philosophically, both in honing what he calls "the edge between a real thing and the representation of a thing," and in constructing what can be seen as a poetics of everyday life that allows for the return and reconsideration of its fleeting, ephemeral, ever-revolving bits and pieces.

"The sense of a restlessly shifting range of stimuli is the essence of the collage—a restlessness reflecting the individuality of the artist's becoming, as embodied in the willfulness of



top: Ron Moppett,
Day, 2000-2001,
allyd on canvas,
92.5 x 89 3/8" overall
Photographs courtesy
Trépanier Baer
Gallery, Calgary

below: Ron Moppett,
Night, 2000-2001,
allyd on canvas,
92.5 x 89 3/8" overall
Photographs courtesy
Trépanier Baer
Gallery, Calgary

his attention," writes Donald Kuspit. "The unsettled state of the collage is itself emblematic of the will to individual becoming which emerges from the display of fragments." It is within this "relative state of artistic affairs," Kuspit goes on to say, that "collage makes poetry with the prosaic fragments of dailiness." And more than this, in collage, there is a "playful purposefulness," which is "a direct acknowledgment of the relativity of individuality in the world, as well as a way of expanding that world to include it, and of expanding individuality to include the world."

Kuspit's essay, "Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art," written in 1983, seems apt in close relation to the way the collage aesthetic operates in Ron Moppett's painting, to his work's reflection on "the artist's becoming, as embodied in the willfulness of his attention," and to the character of the world Moppett creates within the confines of his studio. Thus, the very structure of his work becomes a metaphor for its operations. His work constructs a kind of mental landscape in which his individuality expands to include the world, and vice versa. A sign of meditative cognition, his painting is a form of concrete poetry, filled with symbolic and iconic signs and metaphors. Moppett's painting is not "of" something, it is about becoming something as elusive as scent, sound, flavour, feeling or passing thoughts.

Moppett composes with images in the way another artist might use collage elements, materials and found objects. His paintings usually begin

as cut-paper collages or as collage drawings, which he plots by putting one image next to another and responding by adding a third, and so on. Indeed, he sometimes uses materials and found objects as images, though very few, if any, of these materials are ever what you could call raw. He reaches for manufactured things that already have been coded with a strong signifying power. Likewise, he fashions his painted imagery from fragments of daily life, signifiers chosen and clipped from the "high and low" layers of the image world.

Almost every image Moppett selects has been passed through the filter of visual culture, more than once. He finds his images in newspapers, magazines, ad flyers, fabric stores, art books and catalogues, postcards, the Yellow Pages, his own doodles and sketchbooks. The fabrics, like the toile he favours in recent work, are printed. Swatches of landscape painting retain the seductive glamour of commercial travel photography; the circular abstract painting representing a faceted gemstone begins in the schematic of an advertising graphic; a top hat descends equally from Manet (a sketch for the infamous *Olympia*) and the cartoonist's pen.

While this has been true for many years, Moppett's compositional strategy has changed significantly from the piling on and layering of signs that characterized his work in the 1980s. In more recent paintings, he clusters or aligns the image-signs, allowing them to occupy discrete territories with contiguous borders. Their separation clarifies the fact that each image is

the representation of an object, even, perhaps, that a representation can be treated as an object of a kind, say a mental object, and further emphasizes the grounding of Moppett's painting in collage.

The clearest statement of this proposition is the abstract "Gem" series on circular canvasses, for which studies like *Diamond 1* (2000) were done in enamel paints on vinyl lps. The idea had come up earlier; *Rug* (1979) is a painting on top of a small, circular, hooked rug that, as in the case of the lps, uses its form as part of the signifying process but lets it retain its characteristics as an object. This very particular relationship between object and representation has also had a significant impact on three, major, recent works on show, *Night and Day* (2000-2001) and *Painting at the Edge of the Sea* (2001).

The latter is a big romantic painting, a vertical stack of three discrete images, with a full moon rising in a dark blue sky at the top and an inverted city skyline silhouetted against a red dawn at the bottom. In between, a dusky overhead view of a snow-covered hillside, dotted with glowing cabins, is cut by a curving line of blue-shadowed trees. This aerial view opens a volume of space at the work's centre while the trees connect bottom with top, setting in motion the flow of day into night like a slow revolution of the drum on an offset printing press. The elegantly restrained *Day and Night*, alike except for the substitution of yellow in *Day* with blue in *Night*, have a clockwise compositional rotation. It is brought into play by the movement of yet another colour from image to image

through the 11 discrete image-objects that comprise each of these apparently simple, yet complex, four-canvas paintings.

If there were a formal theme to be found among these works, it would be that of the circle, culminating in the compositional movements within the paintings just described, which echo the orbital movements of the planets around the sun and the works' cyclical subjects. This circularity also refers back to collage itself, to Kuspit's idea of collage as a model of its operations and to Rosalind Kraus's insight that collage is "a representation of representation." *En bas*, Moppett's primary interest has lain in his works' experiential and emotive affects on the viewer. But there might be more going on here than even he thinks. The evidence, expanded in a beautiful and sparse three-canvas painting called *Schnittke Paints a House* (2000), shows that thinking of the image as an object has opened a conceptual door, one through which image-objects like a dog house, pilfered from a Canadian Tire ad, can be provocatively broken down into their material and immaterial constituents—roof, walls, empty doorways and cast shadows. A hole in light, a shadow set apart is a portal to another world, one that elevates dailiness to the metaphysical. ■

"Ron Moppett: New Works" was exhibited at the Trépanier Baer Gallery in Calgary from September 29 to October 27, 2001.

Nancy Tousley is a regular contributor to *Border Crossings* from Calgary.