

SHARLA SAVA / In the Studio with Damian Moppett

Damian Moppett grew up in Calgary, studied for two years at the Alberta College of Art, for three weeks at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, before moving in 1990 to the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver to complete his BA. He then did a two-year graduate degree at Concordia University in Montreal and returned to Vancouver in 1994. We spoke in his studio in late August 2008.

SS: You moved to Vancouver in 1990 and enrolled at ECIAD?

DM: Yes, but not right away, I moved out here and painted on the fire escape of my building for several months, and then applied to get into third year. Luckily, I got in. It was a great year for me, the people who were there at the time—Ron Terada, Steve Shearer, Allan Switzer, Christine Corlett, and others—were equally ambitious and interested in similar things. I think my timing was quite lucky; those two years had a lasting effect.

SS: Did you know then that you wanted to be an artist? You were young, after all, in your early twenties.

DM: Coming to ECIAD and having such great fellow students in school really changed my education. It was far more inspiring and beneficial than I expected. Rick Williams was one of my favourite teachers, because he taught drawing in unconventional ways. Landon Mackenzie and David MacWilliam were the Mom and Dad for the painting department. I had Joan Borsa, a fantastic teacher, for Canadian art history but I was impatient to learn about contemporary artists and had little interest in anything prior to the '70s. I remember becoming quite enraged about having to write an essay on Rodin. Looking back, I wish I had been more interested in the threads of history while I was in school.

SS: What made you realize and appreciate that history was something to learn from, a place from which to work, rather than something to overcome?

DM: For a long time I really held on to just a select few artists. Philip Guston was the only artist in my head for about five years. The idea of looking at and learning from artists, their work, and the various layers of history is something I developed slowly, and only after I finished grad school.

SS: As a young Vancouver artist you also encountered the dominant discourse, the so-called “Vancouver School”—artists like Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas and Ken Lum were increasing influential in town. I wonder if you can talk about being a young artist, about what it was like to create work at the time.

DM: In 1994 I had a studio with Ron. Steve was in the next studio over. They were both painting. In my last year of grad school I had virtually given up painting and become a self-proclaimed photographer. I remember thinking that I had to have a show, and I had to contextualize myself within the medium of photography to legitimize my new-found practice.

SS: I imagine that your engagement with photography had something to do with Vancouver’s growing reputation, as a place for post-conceptual photography.

DM: Yeah, so much had to do with the fact that I had just given up painting. My friends were painters and I knew they would survive as artists in Vancouver, but I had just become a photographer and was quite insecure about what that was and what I was doing. I didn’t feel that I had any work behind me to lean back on, or ‘photo friends’ to talk to. I felt a kinship with the work of Kelly Wood, in particular the work from the *This is Not A Cake* exhibition. I befriended her, together we approached Howard Ursuliak and the three of us pitched a show of our work to Keith Wallace at the CAG [Contemporary Art Gallery] and wrangled Roy Arden into curating and writing for the exhibition which he titled *Bonus* (1997).

SS: What do you think about the claims made by people like Scott Watson and Philip Monk, that you are part of a generation rebelling against the seriousness of the Vancouver School?

DM: At first I was really happy to be characterized that way, although I would say in the end it really came down to working with different materials, toward different ends. Of course, emerging Vancouver artists have benefited from the attention that artists like Wall and Douglas have brought to Vancouver, and the critical rigor that infuses their work. But a lot of things changed between 1996 and 2001—a younger generation was creating room for itself and I think it was inevitable that the kind of art being made in Vancouver would evolve. I know, for myself, that things felt dynamic and possible, and this probably has a lot to do with the quality of artists here, the galleries and curators.

SS: Your work is full of references to other artists. How do you find your references?

DM: I'm a compulsive catalogue buyer. Through reading about specific artists I get turned on to others. It is cumulative. I will look at Robert Grosvenor, and get turned on to Tony Smith, and then I'll get turned on to Frederick Kiesler, it goes on like that. My desire is to make those references clear in my work. In my first series of photographs, *The Office* photos, I was inspired by Oscar Niemeyer's architectural drawings, but you would never have known that, as a viewer. A few years ago I started a series of watercolours and drawings, in order to make a lot of the obscure invisible references and inspirations visible. Not always understandable, but at least visible. There are images of my artistic influences, and also autobiographical images—an image of a concert, a book cover, places I've been—which are probably the most obscure for the viewer. It's kind of difficult being able to decipher what a picture of a trailer on Denman Island is saying in relation to my work. I hope this series will give the viewer a cumulative understanding of where I've been and where I'm going.

SS: Is it fair to say that one of your artistic motivations has to do with artistic process, with how to make art?

DM: That's always been an interest of mine. Everything that I've done, since my first series of photographs, has been in some way about the process of making.

SS: Your parents are both artists—do you think about how they deal with particular artistic materials or media? Are you consciously informed by them, or rebelling against them?

DM: I learned a lot from my mom, in terms of being able to select a particular medium based on its appropriateness for a particular project. She is a painter, sculptor, installation artist and photographer. When I was young I wasn't really aware of the works she was making, but I think I learned a lot about how diverse and appropriate particular materials were to what she was doing.

SS: The post-medium condition seems consistent with what you are doing in your work. In my mind this notion is productive because it retains an awareness of modernism's struggle with medium specificity, rather than supposing that we are in an era of *anything goes*. You work in an expanded field of practice, but you also seem

particularly sensitive to the tensions that occur between painting, sculpture, and photography. Is that right?

DM: Yes, although I'm amazed at my own romantic and deeply modernist leanings.

SS: Assuming that some readers are unfamiliar with your work, can you discuss a few projects, as a kind of background for looking at the TCR portfolio of your paintings?

DM: I'll start with *1815/1962* (Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 2003). The video is about a trapper in the year 1815, and the second date in the title, 1962, refers to the year that Anthony Caro made the sculpture *Early One Morning*. I played the trapper, who, for the first half of the video, seeks out wood and materials and, for the second half of the video, builds a trap that formally resembles Caro's sculpture. For the exhibition installation I made a small replica of both Caro's *Early One Morning* and my trap. The two models were placed side by side on a plinth to underscore the formal relationship between the two. By building a trap in the form of Caro's sculpture I turned a well-known modernist piece into something that could provide sustenance and skins for clothing, both of which would be essential to the survival of my fictional trapper. I wanted to provide a tangible/practical use value for the art object. It was almost like putting the Caro to work.

That installation evolved into *The Visible Work* (Contemporary Art Gallery, 2005), where I presented a series of welded steel modernist sculptures, reminiscent of Alexander Calder's stabiles. Several ceramic objects were balanced on each of them. These were the first ceramic objects I had made after deciding (about eight months before the show) to take up pottery. I thought about ceramics as the start of a sculptural moment. I didn't glaze them because I didn't want them to look like functional objects. I had a whole grand scheme when I was planning the show. I was going to do a completely organic ceramic production: get the clay from the land, build my own kiln, and use horse manure for glaze. But that turned out to be a little more difficult and time consuming than I had thought. In the end I taught myself how to do ceramics, and kept everything I made, incorporating them into the CAG show, and into many of my sculptural works since. I honestly wanted to make ceramics, and to have my growth as a potter visible. I wanted part of it to be about learning, the potential of the material and form rather than the polish of the finished object.

Placing the ceramics in relation to the steel sculptures was about creating an equality and, obviously, a balance between the two almost opposite forms.

In the last few years I've made two figurative sculptures, *The Fallen Caryatid* and *The Acrobat*, both of which reference Rodin. I first showed the Caryatid in *The Fall of the Damned* exhibition (Carleton University Art Gallery, 2006). The exhibition consisted of the Caryatid sculpture, and 75 drawings and watercolours. The drawings and watercolours were also in *The Visible Work* show—they are a single work which I keep adding to. They represent artworks, artists, people, places and things that have all influenced me and my work. I consider them to be almost like a giant didactic panel for understanding my work. I now have 100 drawings and watercolours, and the most recent show the direction I am planning to take in the next couple of years.

SS: The title of that 2006 exhibition was *The Fall of the Damned*. Are we the damned?

DM: No, perhaps more like falling from grace, rather than eternally damned. I see both the *Caryatid* and *The Acrobat* representing possibility rather than a state of damnation or purgatory. They are in different positions, yet both are 'authors.' They represent different stages or conditions of being an author, and contrasting approaches to what they have made.

SS: I remember going into Catriona Jeffries Gallery in 2003, and seeing your exhibition, *1815/1962*. There was such a sense of humour, something clever there. I wonder if you had a sense of inhabiting a role at that time, a moment where you were kind of becoming the trapper.

DM: Absolutely. I am trying to find a way, a reason, to do another video work. I am still looking for another role that would allow me to act. I think it makes sense that someone who references the work of others to the extent that I do would also enjoy the chance to portray a historical character, fictional or otherwise. I have always preferred the term inhabiting over quoting. I feel inhabiting represents a different degree of investment and involvement. *1815/1962* is the mother of all the pieces I've made since, it was the start of a new phase and approach to work. The sculptural pieces I am making now and plan to make for my next show have an obvious material and conceptual link to that video.

SS: What does Caro's work mean to you?

DM: Well, I chose *Early One Morning* because of its status as an iconic and influential modernist sculpture. At the time I wasn't that fond of Caro's work. I've grown to appreciate it a little more, but his oeuvre is not as important to me as say Henry Moore's is. Actually I'm making two new sculptures that use *Early One Morning* (one-third scale models of the work) in them, but now the work is almost becoming more of a punching bag, rather than an object of homage.

SS: What about Rodin, is your relation to Rodin similar to your relation to Caro? A jumping off point?

DM: My relation to Rodin is best explained by talking about Rodin, Medardo Rosso, and Brancusi, who worked roughly in the same historical era, and who made work that crosses various media boundaries. Medardo Rosso for example, who was known for his ghostly, almost abstract figurative sculptures, would take photographs of his sculpture, and then paint and cut on the negatives. The resulting photographs are an almost perfect triangulation between painting, sculpture and photography. Brancusi photographed his sculptures in his studio because he believed that the light and conditions offered an ideal context for the works. And with Rodin it's about how he shows the making of the work within his work. He lets you see the seams of the cast, and the unfinished evidence of cutting the figure from the base cutting. His process is made completely visible in his work. So between these three guys there is a lot of sustenance for my own work. My first photographs were about painting and sculpture. I have always made sculptures, but it's only recently that I've let my sculptures be shown outside the context of my photography.

SS: Something Robert Linsley said to me a long time ago, working as a painter, he said you couldn't choose your teachers, or your artistic influences. Sometimes you are influenced by artists that you don't really want to be influenced by. Are there artists you think you *should* be influenced by, as compared to artists that you actually are influenced by?

DM: For me it has always been the work that I hated initially that I learn from. I guess Rodin would fall into that category. It's a consistent thing, it's the work that you are repulsed by initially, or that puts you off balance, that is the work that you come back to. It's also true in terms of being an art producer. For me, if I have something

I want to make, and I understand fully how it's going to look and work, and it's a nice little package, I may make it, but there will probably be nothing there for me at the end. Often it's something that seems completely illogical or out of left field that I learn from. Once it's made I will realize, two years down the road, thinking back, that it's more complicated, and maybe worthy of further investigation.

SS: So you are compelled through challenge, rather than through what seems the easiest route. I was thinking about Jeff Wall's *Thinker* (1986), which also has a connection to Rodin.

DM: The theatricality of that work is really quite unnerving.

SS: It's interesting that both of you have taken up Rodin's figurative sculptures in a kind of serious way, and in a climate that does not necessarily condone figuration, or not without skepticism.

DM: Yes, although Jeff's investigation into Rodin was singular, and didn't carry on beyond *The Thinker*. That photo seems anomalous for him, in terms of showing an investigation into the work of Rodin, whereas I am looking at and working in relation to Rodin repeatedly. Through my approach the viewer gets the impression that there is an investigation into an historical framework that is relevant to the present moment. For me it is about an evolving sculptural project and Rodin, among others, is a key figure in that.

SS: You are both interested in figuration, in the gesture and the pose. There is a curiosity about the viability about using the human figure, which seems bankrupt and exhausted, and yet something that we can't do without.

DM: That is something that I want to build into my work. I want figuration, my use of the figure, to evolve within my work. I'm interested in figuration and also what it will lead to. For me it's a jumping off point—in terms of the concept as well as the media and technique.

SS: Can you talk a little bit about the work that you are doing right now?

DM: For the last few months I've been painting which is the thing I most often do when I'm not making sculptures. I find painting relaxing and sculpture quite frustrating and hard. So I procrastinate the making of sculptures by painting. In

the past couple of years my figurative sculptures, the caryatid and the acrobat, have evolved into a series of abstract sculptures, which also have a ceramic component.

At the moment I am moving into something akin to 1815/1962 in that I'm taking my own abstract sculptures and specific abstract sculptures by other artists like Tony Smith for example, and *pelting* them. By 'pelting' I mean turning a 3D object into a flat, faceted object that is hinged together, so that it can fold up and make the original. Or it can fall down, or remake a different shape. I am also having abstract-figurative objects made of clay, which will be shown with the pelted modernist sculpture.

In terms of the portfolio made for this issue of *The Capilano Review*, the images are part of a series of paintings that I completed during the past two months. All of them are painted from photos I've taken, and they show works in progress in my studio. They are as much about the life of the studio as they are about the evolution of my work.

SS: What does the studio mean to you?

DM: I guess the studio is the art. It's the thing I am inspired by. The studio is the place where I interact with what I've made, and the place where I learn. I feel like there would be no point in making something if you are not learning from it, and I really learn more from my work in the studio than I do in the exhibition context.

SS: Is the studio private space? Or public space?

DM: Neither, really. Because I have imaged my studio so often in my paintings there is an obvious desire to make it public, even though it is a very selective process. I don't think my studio is private, though I do think my relationship to my own work is private, and how I respond to, and learn from, my own work, is private.

SS: But the studio doesn't symbolize that?

DM: Yes or I suppose it implies it. First and foremost the studio symbolizes the creation of the work.

SS: For me the artist's studio signifies the place where art is created, and to some extent art comes from the interior of the self, from a subjective, creative place that has some connection with privacy, with being solitary—with passion, and the freedom of imagination, and so on. This image of the studio has, of course, been

mystified and fetishized in endless Hollywood movies. When I look at your art and it takes the studio, or your artistic process, as its subject matter, I can see a mode of conscious self-disclosure. By disclosing who you are influenced by, or works that inspire you, or experiences in your life that have been influential, or paintings in progress, you seem to be inverting the social norm, which equates the artist with the romance and privacy of the studio. When you externalize the studio, and open it to the public, there is an interesting transgression, and an inversion. Do you think the notion of the artist's studio is anachronistic, out-dated?

DM: It's a lot easier for artists today to make art without a studio at all. There are a lot of artists that have no need for a studio, through having people fabricate their work or simply not needing the space. I have people fabricate components of my work. I've also done without a studio for quite a while. It's important to my work now, but it's not impossible to imagine a world without a studio.

SS: Is there a way in which you are attempting to recover the artisanal or hand-made, older forms of creative production? Is the studio about that, about artistic autonomy and independence?

DM: I know that sometimes my work deals with those issues but I don't see myself as someone that is trying to champion the 'hand-made' way of working. For now the studio operates as a site where I have a dialogue with my work. If I appear in one of my own paintings, as a sculptor—as opposed to just showing one of my own sculptures in the studio—then painting becomes a romantic statement about the artist in his studio. I am wary of that. I'm focusing on objects in the studio. Going back to Guston, I am thinking about how he made paintings about the objects that surrounded him, a can of paint brushes, an iron for pressing drawings. He developed this lexicon of things which appeared over and over, like little actors taking their place on the stage. I like that. I like the idea of showing, not so much the tools, but what goes on in the studio.

SS: I was also wondering about the studio as a symbol in relation to our social moment. We have a generation emerging that does not appear to need privacy. Media culture is all about going behind the scenes, or telling us how it's made, or disclosing shameful secrets. I am thinking about blogging, Reality TV, and dvd "special features." When you work as an artist and you are all about showing your

process, are you working on this mode of full disclosure, or are you asserting the studio as a symbol of privacy, as a document about the ongoing process of self-expression which demands—contrary to the blog, contrary to a society of immediacy and total distraction—some kind of solitude, as well as time taken for private reflection?

DM: I tend to think that the more we have this Reality TV-style life, the more we will need to distance ourselves from it. That said, I think most of my works are not politically charged in relation to what we're talking about. Despite the underscoring of process in my sculptures, drawings, and watercolours, I think there will always be a necessary degree of privacy about my process. There are parts that I simply could not articulate to anyone. For me the paintings have a definite personal quality and, despite their repetition and the familiarity resulting from that, they seem to be slipping into abstraction. With their anachronistic qualities they are also dissolving into something else. I hope that against all odds my paintings appear to be of the moment, and contemporary, with only a corner here and there slumping into a yearning for simpler times.