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Damian Moppett's one-man history of art

MARSHA LEDERMAN VANCOUVER — From Monday's Globe and Mail Published Sunday, Nov. 27, 2011 6:00PM EST Last updated Tuesday, Nov. 29, 2011 1:32AM EST



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Damian Moppett's body of work reads like a sort of art history class. The Calgary-born, Vancouver-based 42-year-old has art in his bones - both his parents were artists, as were his maternal grandparents. And his work unabashedly riffs off Rubens, Rodin, Picasso, Hollis Frampton, Carl Andre, and others.



"I always just felt like it made sense to make it obvious to people," Moppett says. "If I'm going to make a sculpture that's talking about [sculptors Alexander] Calder or Anthony Caro, to make it obvious and not to hide it."

PHOTOS In photos: Damien Moppett at the Rennie Collection at Wing Sang

This unbridled appropriation makes the work particularly interesting to prolific Vancouver collector Bob Rennie, whose Chinatown exhibition space hosts a comprehensive

survey of Moppett's work, which opened Saturday.

"Young artists always come along, saying I'm changing the ... world," Rennie says. "But they don't know what the world was like before them. So how can you say you've changed things if you haven't got a clue what was there before? Because you can't just change to change. You have to change off the foundation from which you came."

Rennie, who made his fortune marketing condos in the real estate-obsessed Lower Mainland, has been exhibiting small slices of his vast art holdings at his Rennie Collection at Wing Sang since it opened just over two years ago. Moppett is the first Canadian artist to be shown here, following exhibitions by international artists such as Mona Hatoum (Palestinian), Richard Jackson (American) and Martin Creed (British).

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"We deliberately did not want the collection to be read as a Canadian collection," says Rennie, "and if we showed Rodney Graham as our first show or Ian Wallace, all the other artists in the collection would always have to be overcompensating or explaining that they're not an anomaly within the collection, but that they're actually the collection."

Moppett is a mid-career artist. Touted as a whiz kid early on, he has not disappointed. Rennie has been collecting his work for a decade, and decided to make Moppett his first Canadian exhibition.

"We thought about it a lot. Do we show Damian? There's Brian Jungen, there's a dozen great Canadian artists in the collection in depth. If we had opened with senior statesmen like Rodney Graham or Ian Wallace, were we trying to make too big a Canadian statement?," Rennie says.

"It's not to discredit all the other Canadian artists. We will do one-person shows with them, but we've got 20 years to do that."

Rennie is speaking in the main-floor gallery, where six of Moppett's untitled works hang: creepy and exquisitely rendered acrylic-on-canvas creatures made of limbs, eyeballs, and other organs, which Rennie likes to compare to the doodles you'd find in the back of an art student's notebook. The 1998 works are unusual in another sense: Only one of them references another artist's work (Dali).

Upstairs, 127 drawings and watercolours on paper are grouped by subject matter: artistic influences, Moppett's studios, etc. Rich with autobiographical references, they together comprise one work, created over nine years.

"I really believe I have his self-portrait here," says Rennie of the Watercolour Drawing Project.

The interviews take place on a landmark day: Moppett has just installed *Broken Fall*, a 160-kilogram (approximately) aluminum mobile, mostly red. A clear reference to Calder, it had never been put together before this installation. (It was commissioned for the show.)

Underneath, one branch lies like a crime scene body on the pavement, upsetting the balance of the enormous mobile above.

"I'm really happy because it could have been a total disaster," Moppett says. "I wasn't even sure if it would touch the walls or not because I designed it and thought 'Oh yeah, I'll make that 10 feet long, and that 12 feet long.' I'm not an engineer, so I didn't totally figure it out. I just hoped that it would work."

Damian Moppett: Collected Works is at the Rennie Collection at Wing Sang until April 21, 2012. Public viewing is available through guided tours on select days, booked in advance (renniedcollection.org).

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