



One New Work

Ron Moppett:
Do You Remember/
Snow & Stars



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How to Read a Wrap-around Painting

by Nancy Tousley

Ron Moppett: *Do You Remember/Snow & Stars* presents a painting installation that begins with a new work of the same title and stretches out to circumnavigate the *One New Work* gallery. The long painting made up of discrete panels of different dates and sizes charts the senior Canadian artist's journeys in space and time; from England, where he was born, to Canada; from 1981, the date of the earliest painting in the installation, to the present day. Although Moppett, who is based in Calgary, does not habitually work this way, he accepted our invitation to make a wrap-around painting that viewers can walk into. At its centre, under a lightbulb covered by a green metal shade, stands the assemblage sculpture *Ghost/Flow* (2017); its chair, usually a symbol of the artist in his studio, is seen here floating metaphorically on a chunk of ice, moving through the metaphysical sea of spacetime, the vast continuum we inhabit.

As if a painting might hold space, time and memory, Moppett attends to the microcosm of daily events in *Do You Remember/Snow & Stars* (2019) and locates it within the macrocosm of the cosmos. He contemplates the complexities of near and far, as well as the pictorial space of painting. He measures the passage and deepening of time, as well as time as it is represented by a collage of images painted on discrete panels arranged in a montage. He visualizes the operations of memory as fragments of images held in the mind, as well as the vivid "memory glimpses" or highly coloured visual fragments he paints.

Do You Remember: Snow & Stars (2019) is constructed as an allegory, in which Moppett looks back on his life and career. The light of a burning match in the left-hand panel signifies inspiration and the influences of the painters Francis Bacon and Vincent van Gogh. At art college Moppett had learned the rhetoric of images in classes on graphic art for advertising and absorbed the history of art, whether it was old master, modern or contemporary, from illustrations in books. A spur-of-the-moment trip to London led him to the Tate, where he was knocked out by a Bacon painting, *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1966), because it was, first of all, "real" art, i.e. not a reproduction but an image made with paint on canvas. Van Gogh becomes important when, during an early phase of his career (1976-79), Moppett assumed the Dutch artist's persona in a series of works in which he explored the myth of the artist and established a series of signs, such as a chair and a candle, to represent him.

In close proximity to the Bacon and van Gogh references, a postcard of New York City, (an object collaged to the surface of the panel), connotes the importance of travelling to see art. There are references to his two wives,¹ to his English school-boy fantasy that western Canada was the land of "cowboys and Indians" (he immigrated at age 12), and to the meditative space of the studio at night, among other things. A small panel painted with a schematic sign for a house with a lighted window at the far right indicates the place the artist occupies



Ron Moppett, *Ghost/Flow*, 2017

now, a space from which to acknowledge his working-class roots and to locate his place in the universe. A point on a spinning globe, he is an artist who creates a poetic private world from the ever-changing, kaleidoscopic visual stuff of the world that surrounds us with images.

For Moppett painting is also always about painting and self-reflexive in declaring its nature as artifice. He works with a collage esthetic and sees his paintings as objects, even as wall sculptures. He develops them as montage by adding panels of the same or different sizes that

carry painted images of varying scales, styles, colours and textures. He might use printed fabric as a collage element or as the ground of a panel or add one or more found objects. The majority of his images are found, appropriated or quoted from magazines, newspapers, advertisements, comics, art books, product packaging and old photographs, though he also uses stencils, diagrams, cut papers or schematic drawings that he makes. He will begin a new painting by sifting through the piles of clippings he keeps in the studio until a particular image sparks a chain reaction of associations. One panel becomes two, then three and so on until he deems the composition to be complete. When he needs an image refreshment, he makes a trip to the mall.

The painting installation *Do You Remember/Snow & Stars* reiterates his working methods. It extends the new painting into an installation by including panels borrowed from earlier works that were selected by looking through his photographic documentations and arranging them together side by side. Moving back and forth between day and night, inside and outside, present and past, image and object, and representation and abstraction, the panels form a montage of Moppett's frequently used themes. Several images — moon, stars, snow, ship, chair, owl, window, flowers, planes, constellations, hands, jewels — are employed here more than once, as well as mirrors, which appear in two panels and the sculpture. The repetitions point to Moppett's development over the years of a vivid figurative language of signs and symbols, as other modernist artists such as René Magritte, Max Beckmann or Philip Guston, have done. All of them have been available to Moppett as models; Guston is the one he greatly admires.

However, Moppett's source images, which are largely appropriated, are taken for

the most part from contemporary visual culture. Significantly, most of his images begin life as mechanical reproductions in mass publications. They are already circulating cultural signs that Moppett chooses because they are "things everybody knows." They are part of a collective cultural and social memory that they also help to create. As Moppett puts them to work, they speak not only to the artist's life but also to how we live, and in this they are evocative and open-ended in their ability to support more than one inference, reference or interpretation. Detached from their surroundings and whatever text might have accompanied them, individual images that Moppett assembles into paintings, as if they were cut-outs, become fragments of the material to which they were once attached. Deprived of context by these removals, an image fragment becomes a floating signifier awaiting reassignment; when placed next to another image of Moppett's choosing the original connotations of both begin to shift.

The fragment, around which there is a philosophical postmodern discourse, is the elemental unit of Moppett's compositions. Thus the poetics of a painting of images whose relationships operate like those gathered into a collage begins when an image fragment is juxtaposed to another fragment, and another, and the result is a revitalization of each of them. Reassembling panels from other paintings into a painting installation in the form of a montage operates in a similar way. Each of these panels is a fragment of a larger work made at a different time. When the exhibition is over, each will be reunited with the work from which it was taken. Thus the installation structure and the structure of an individual work made of panels contain within them the theoretical potential for dispersal and rearrangement. This is not something Moppett would

condone happening to a finished painting outside the confines of this installation. It is, however, a reflection of the instability of the sign and the logic of the fragment, both constituents of collage, as well as their lack of spatial and temporal continuity and their resistance to fixity.

Moppett's assemblies of signifying fragments are emblematic of a state of continual becoming as if the fractured structures of his painting hold together pictorial signs as an elusive instance in the cyclical time of memory, diurnal events or recurring thoughts. It is the nature of painting to manifest such ephemeral moments in material objects, but the divisions between the panels rupture conventional painting's unified time, organic composition and indivisible surface. In like manner, given their biographical content, they shatter the idea of a stable self and point to subjectivity as a construction that is continually in process.

Moppett makes and remakes his own myths and myths of origin here. The way he has painted the flame of the lit match in the left-hand panel of *Do You Remember/Snow & Stars* (2019) opens it to allusions. It might be a bit of moist English atmosphere or a patch of Constable sky. The dark blue shape it abuts is the inverted silhouette of a cowboy, symbolic of the artist's childhood Canadian fantasy, overlaid with a line drawing of a woman sitting in a chair and reading a book. The line drawing is a reference to his wife Katherine, whom he has transfigured as a constellation of stars set against the night sky. On the right-hand side of the painting, a galleon drawn inside the curve of a crescent moon recalls "The Highwayman," a romantic poem sure to stir a boy's imagination by the English writer Alfred Noyes, in which "The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas." Across the gallery, a smaller schematic painting of a camper's Coleman stove, a sign for



The artist, age 12, two months after arriving in Canada from England in 1957. Photo courtesy Ron Moppett.



outdoor life in Canada, hangs on a wall-sized image of printed fabric, an English toile in the pattern “Country Life,” in which idealized peasants enjoy a pastoral idyll. An abstractly shaped fragment of this fabric hovers in the window of the next painting like an empty floating signifier. Is it outside or inside?

Images of boats shift their shapes and connotations from galleon to sailboat to a ship towing sparkling treasure to an object, a toy, a Playmobil pirates patrol boat. This and the above offer only a partial inventory of Moppett’s image signs and their semantic potential. More to the point is that extending his method for making an individual painting into a gallery-sized, wrap-around montage puts emphasis on the interface between method, medium, form and content in his work, and the ways in which they point to its larger implications.

Moppett employs the image fragment as a genre of expression in painting, while the paintings show us paradoxically that their conceptual medium is collage. Furthering the idea of rupture and relocation embodied by the fragment and the collage, the paintings are made of panels structured as montage in which different and seemingly unconnected images are placed in contiguous relationships. The return of signifying image fragments across the long discontinuous pictorial space of the installation, and over the years, gives it unity and reinforces the idea that aspects of Moppett’s biography are present as part of an incomplete, ongoing story.

A chair signifying the artist figures in one of the earliest paintings here, *Small Death Painting* (1986), and in the newest, *Do You Remember: Snow & Stars* (2019), there is a three-legged stool with presumably the same connotation. However, chair and stool are not represented by the same kind of depiction, nor are they rendered in the same style. In *Ghost/Flow* (2017), the artist represents himself with a real wooden

chair painted two colours and sinking metaphorically into melting ice. The connotations of visual signs that return again and again become nuanced by the ways in which they are rendered.

Time passes and circumstances change. Self and world are in a constant state of becoming. The sign of this becoming is alternately the fragment (the medium), painting-as-collage (the method) and montage (the method/form). In structure and content, Moppett’s work is all of a piece. The genius of his method lies in the medium which becomes the mechanism for producing new work, a vehicle for Moppett’s boundless imaginative capacity for invention. The medium is the message. In the meantime, meaning shifts with the cycles of life and work in the studio, the seasons and the heavens, remaining dynamic and indeterminate.

Notes

- Moppett is married to writer and independent curator Katherine Ylitalo who curated his retrospective exhibition, *Painting Nature with a Mirror*, shown at the Glenbow Museum in 1991. His first wife, the artist Carroll Taylor-Lindoe, is the mother of their son, the artist Damian Moppett.

List of Works

Dimensions are given in centimetres, height precedes width.

Fire 2, 1981
oil on canvas
121.92 x 121.92 cm
Collection of Glenbow
Shown on vinyl mural of *Country Life*; toile pattern by Waverly, Inc.

Small Death Painting, 1986
oil on canvas
182.8 cm X 152.4 cm
Collection of the Nickle Galleries, University of Calgary

Settle, 1989
oil on canvas
Right panel: 195.5 cm X 94 cm
Collection of the Artist

Everything is True, 1993
oil on canvas
Left panel: 162.6 cm X 119.4 cm
Collection of the Artist

Shadowland, 1995
oil, alkyd and fabric on canvas
Right panel: 228.6 cm X 81.28 cm
Collection of the Artist

Painting at the Edge of the Sea, 2001
oil and alkyd on canvas
Middle panel: 137.7 cm X 274.3 cm
Collection of the Artist

Bijourose, 2008
acrylic and oil on canvas
Left panel: 160 cm X121.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

Home and away/Katherine, 2012
oil, alkyd and fabric on canvas and wood
Center large panel: 238.7 cm X 142.24 cm
Collection of the Artist

Star/Trail, 2018
acrylic, alkyd and oil on canvas
Right panel: 144.78 cm X 165.1 cm
Collection of the Artist

Do You Remember/Snow & Stars, 2019
acrylic, oil, alkyd and mirror on canvas
Four panels; overall dimensions: 162.56 cm X 342.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

Maquette for Do You Remember/Snow & Stars, 2019
mixed media on card
31.75 cm X 41.6 cm
Collection of Cheryl Gottselig and Yves Trepanier

Ghost/Flow, 2017
mixed media sculpture
91.4 X 91.4 X 99 cm
Collection of the Artist

Bios

Ron Moppett, one of Canada’s leading contemporary artists, lives and works in Calgary. Born in England in 1945, he immigrated to Canada in 1957. He attended the Alberta College of Art (now the Alberta University of the Arts) from 1963 to 1967, and the Instituto de Allende in Mexico in 1968.

His career has garnered many honours, exhibitions, publications and awards, including the Gershon Iskowitz Prize (1997), the Alberta Centennial Medal (2005), and the Alberta College of Art + Design Board of Governors’ Alumni Award of Excellence (2013). Surveys of his work have been shown at the Walter Phillips Gallery, the Banff Centre, 1982; the 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Art, New York, 1988; the Glenbow Museum, Calgary (1990), the Nickle Galleries, University of Calgary (2015).

Moppett also has worked as a curator and teacher. In 2013 he curated *Made in Calgary: The 1970s*, the second installment of the Glenbow Museum’s five-part *Made in Calgary* series.

In 2016 selections of his artwork and artwork by his son Damian Moppett, also a prominent contemporary artist, were

shown in *Damian Moppett + Ron Moppett (Every Story Has Two Sides)*, shown at the Art Gallery of Alberta in 2016 and at the National Gallery of Canada in 2017 as *Masterpiece in Focus: Ron Moppett and Damian Moppett*.

Nancy Tousley, winner of the Governor General’s Award for significant contributions in the arts, is a nationally known senior art critic, arts journalist and independent curator. A graduate of Vassar College, she was art critic of the *Calgary Herald* for more than 30 years and the first Critic-in-Residence at the Alberta College of Art + Design. She began her curatorial career at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, and continued it at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Her writing has appeared in art magazines in Canada and the United States since the early 1970s, and in more than 40 public art gallery and museum catalogues and books. *Ron Moppett: Do You Remember/Snow & Stars* is the eleventh exhibition in the *One New Work* series and the thirteenth exhibition she has curated for Glenbow.

One New Work

One New Work is an ongoing series of small, focused exhibitions, curated by Nancy Tousley, which began at Glenbow in 2016.

Each exhibition features a new work by an artist shown with other works or objects that were selected to set the new artwork within a context. This can take many different directions. It might be provided by an artist’s earlier, related works; preparatory sketches or maquettes for the new artwork; art, artifacts or archival material from Glenbow’s collection; art or artifacts from the artist’s collection; and so on. At times, it will simply be one new work that illuminates a new direction in an artist’s practice.

Ron Moppett: Do You Remember/Snow & Stars is on view in the One New Work gallery from February 8 to May 24, 2020 and is the eleventh exhibition in the series.

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