

ART

Puttin' on his top hat

Ron Moppett's
new work dazzles

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Top hats and twilight predominate in Ron Moppett's exhibition titled, *I'm So Like... New Work*. Six oversized paintings, a variety of smaller works, and two wall sculptures dazzle in a collage of canvases, methods and icons.

REVIEW

Ron Moppett:
I'm So Like... New Work,
on view at
TrepanierBaer
Gallery through
today

Moppett, who was awarded the prestigious Gershon Iskowitz Prize in 1997, recently completed his tenure as curator/director of the Illingworth Kerr Gallery at the Alberta College of Art & Design, a position he held on three occasions between 1969 and 2005. Moppett's longstanding involvement with art and its history enters his recent works as pastiche.

This referencing of earlier works of art, often with satiric intent, was pursued in full force in the late 1980s and carried forward as "sampling," as in hip-hop music. Moppett samples art history, deliberately choosing images that have achieved



Courtesy, TrepanierBaer Gallery
Blue Window Year: 2005 is oil, tacks, paper and acrylic.

an immense position in popular culture. It's smart work, and the viewer who pursues the details will be rewarded.

Mondrian meets aliens in Moppett's sculpture titled *Huszar*. On the surface, it's the contrast of outrageously popular art forms. Mondrian's name may not be familiar but his art is. His bright squares of colour and black lines on a white canvas have achieved a cultural ubiquitousness as reproductions on mugs, T-shirts, pillows, clocks and switchplates.

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MOPPETT:

Paintings playfully blend toys and art history

Upon a wall-mounted platform painted in the style of Mondrian stands the plastic alien toy from the movie *Toy Story*.

Ethereal original meets mass production, a contrast humorously enhanced by a knowledge of art history. Mondrian is generally said to have used only three colours: red, yellow, and blue. The statement is incorrect but it taints popular descriptions of his work. (Incidentally, Red/Yellow/Blue is the title of another work in Moppett's show).

It is factual that Mondrian eschewed green in his mature paintings. Green was alien to his belief system, a point represented in Huszar by the green monster standing upon the Mondrian foundation.

In this sense, Moppett's paintings are visual puzzles inviting viewers to dig deeply into the history of art. Some of the earliest surviving paintings from 15,000 BCE are located in caves at Lascaux, France.

In one section of the caves, a bull's head is framed by stars. Four on one side represent the belt of the constellation Orion and seven on the other represent the seven sisters of the open star cluster, Pleiades. A dotted area records lunar phases. Moppett arranges groups of four and seven stars to form the pretend constellation Top Hat. Full moons mimic the roundness of top hats while the waxing crescent echos the elliptical shape of the hat's brim when viewed from the side.

Blue Window is an elegant work in which a large crescent moon illuminates two rooftops withing a deep blue sky.

The lower part of the painting is a window grid that creates shadow boxes. Each contains a single piece of coloured paper.

Moppett's inspiration is clearly Henri Matisse's 1913 painting entitled *The Blue Window*. Matisse's blue is applied to Moppett's window grid and in the background of the Matisse is a similar rooftop.

A still life sits on a table, painted in green, yellow, red, and blue, the same colours Moppett has tacked up, using the late Matisse technique of collage, in the shadowboxes. More formally, the objects of Matisse's still life appear dramatically separated from the background. It's no wonder that Moppett, who revels in applying iconic images in compartmentalized form, would be attracted to this particular image.

paintings in the exhibition are compared. The four collage colours of Blue Window repeat in Luna Del Sol (Boat) as a minimal quadrant. A small painting attached to Cartier (I'm So Like) is duplicated in Luna. Discoveries are made, associations are applied. Images suggest deeper meanings. We are tempted to spin our brains in attempts to link the elements of Moppett's wily works to definite meanings, but ultimately these are his private puzzles.

He has chosen images that evade explanation by way of their multiple references, meanings, and associations.

For example, the British slang word "topper" has three meanings: a top hat; an exceptional person or thing; a conceited, arrogant person.

Those with a knowledge of art history will discover many salient references and non-artists may readily apply personal associations because these are also populist images.

The image of the top hat sits on Sargent's portrait of Lord Ribblesdale, a man who inspired the phrase "high hat." It tops Fred Astaire and Felix the Cat.

Moppett never reveals whether one meaning or association is correct, in fact he admits to creating ambiguity. And by doing so he gives us room to choose. We become spectator and speculator. We discern that the 11 stars originate in Lascaux. We might as well believe our theory because the artist has made it clear he enjoys referencing and he never provides a more definitive explanation.

The verbal phrase titling his show describes Moppett's stance perfectly. "I'm so like ..." is the truncated jargon of chick-pop, a meaningless phrase on its own, but one that lures us in.

Moppett has refined the technique, creating works that say, "I'm so like ... Matisse, like Sargent, like top hats and moons, like these and more. I'm so like ... kewl. I'm so like ... Moppett."



Calgary Herald Archive
Painter Ron Moppett.