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[Home](#) | [Features](#) | [Correspondents](#) | [Exhibitions](#) | [Artists](#) | [Recommendations](#) | [Videos](#)

## Masterpiece in Focus. Related Works: Ron Moppett and Damian Moppett

By Jonathan Shaughnessy, Associate Curator, Contemporary Art, NGC on May 11, 2017



Ron Moppett, *Whatif/Twilight*, 2008, oil, alkyd, and acrylic on canvas, installation dimensions variable. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of the artist, Calgary, 2015. © Ron Moppett. Photo: courtesy of TrépanierBaer Gallery

Through the spring and summer, the National Gallery of Canada will be taking a closer look at the work of two established Canadian artists, who are also father and son, in [Masterpiece in Focus. Related Works: Ron Moppett and Damian Moppett](#). The exhibition examines convergences and departures in the production of each, while also reflecting upon how a collection is built through purchases, donations from patrons, and gifts from artists themselves.

Ron, for example, donated a major work to the collection following its restoration by NGC conservators after it had been nearly destroyed by devastating floods that struck Calgary in 2013. Damian, for his part, completed an ambitious project of more than one hundred works on paper between 2003 and 2011, supported by Vancouver patron Bob Rennie, who recently donated the series to the national collection. Gallery curators had been keenly aware of the development of this body of work, making this gift all the more extraordinary. Together, Ron's *Whatif/Twilight* (2008) and Damian's *Watercolour Drawing Project*, were the catalyst for this latest Masterpiece in Focus exhibition.

The NGC acquired its first painting by Ron Moppett in 1971 — a work titled *December (Rose) - B* (1970–1971). At the time, the British-born artist was in his mid-twenties. He and his then-wife, artist Carroll Moppett (now Taylor-Lindoe, whose work is also in the national collection) lived in Calgary, and had two young sons: Nathaniel and Damian.



Damian Moppett, *Studio with Blue Window*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 23 x 34 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of the Rennie Foundation, 2017. © Damian Moppett, Courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Photo : Blaine Campbell

In the early 1990s, Damian left Calgary for Vancouver — where he continues to live and work. He attended Emily Carr College (now University) of Art and Design. This was a particularly fertile time at the school, with artists such as Ron Terada, Steven Shearer, Geoffrey Farmer, Kelly Wood and Damian himself determined to re-interpret and challenge the photoconceptualism that had shaped art-making in Vancouver in the decades prior. Damian's contribution to this dialogue — his series of photographs, *Untitled (Impure Systems)*, created in 1999–2000 — garnered widespread attention, and was acquired by the NGC in 2001.

*Related Works* was also inspired by the exhibition [Ron Moppett + Damian Moppett \(Every Story Has Two Sides\)](#), organized by and presented at the NGC's partner institution, the [Art Gallery of Alberta](#), from September 2016 to early January 2017. That show arose out of numerous discussions between the artists and the AGA's Executive Director and Chief Curator, Catherine Crowston. Crowston had been particularly intrigued by the artists' shared interest in mining the history of art, in the use of allegory, and in exploring the dialogue between painting and sculpture, as well as the use of assemblage and collage as modes of production and as conceptual devices.

*Related Works* picks up on many of the same themes and subjects as the exhibition at the AGA, while focusing on pieces in the national collection. In addition, in the case of Ron's work, the NGC show includes study materials and two early "tape" paintings from the 1980s, borrowed from the artist's studio. These works shed a fascinating light on the internal logic and dynamics that have long grounded Ron's distinct artistic vocabulary. Melding abstraction and figuration, his paintings habitually extend beyond their frames, combining oil and acrylic with an eclectic range of readymade objects, paper and ephemera.



Ron Moppett, *Home and Away*, 2006, oil on canvas, 163.1 x 250 x 3.8 cm overall. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Ron Moppett

*Dunce: 2 (Tango)* (1982), a generous recent donation to the national collection by Calgary-based collector Ken Bradley, extends the exhibition's analysis of Ron's ability to shut the door on the logic of the outside world when reconfiguring its parts inside his studio. *Home and Away* (2006) — an important diptych painting by Ron, acquired by the Gallery in 2008 — also features in *Related Works*. Produced using his signature cut-paper templates and stencils — some of which are on view in the show — the painting reflects a medium that has been a hallmark of the artist's process and approach for decades.

There are no corresponding study materials by Damian in the exhibition. This is primarily because the works on view — watercolours, drawings, and the sculpture *Untitled (Cardboard)* (2010), graciously lent by Ottawa collector John Cook — can be read, in many ways, as formative to his oeuvre. Damian's *Watercolour Drawing Project* is a serial endeavour for which, over the course of many years, he would regularly produce works of graphite or watercolour on paper. The works illustrate intersections between life inside and outside the studio, and reflect his own work, the work of other artists, aesthetic forms, cultural mores, materials, music and even the mundane.



Damian Moppett, *Untitled (Cardboard)*, 2010, steel, wood, cardboard, clamps, 54.6 x 72.4 x 20.3 cm. Collection of John Cook. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Photo: SITE Photography

In 2006, Damian described the series to curator Diana Nemiroff as a “recording, or rather, re-recording, [of] my interests and inspirations, with the goal of creating an image bank which elaborates on my practice’s origins and directions.” He mentions “re-recording” rather than recording — a curious correction and, indeed, what is deceptive about the series of supremely well-realized drawings and paintings is that they are not based on scenes from “real” life, but life as first observed through a camera lens.

The fact that his *Watercolour Drawings Project* is based on photography harkens back to a discussion of the medium so integral to his Vancouver home and schooling. It also distinguishes the studio approaches of the two artists — connected by genealogy, yet separated by a generation — who nonetheless have both made this hallowed production space the subject of their work.



Damian Moppett, *Fingers in Front of Camera / Lamps and Sofa in Studio*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 40.8 x 30.3 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of the Rennie Foundation, 2017. © Damian Moppett, Courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Photo : Blaine Campbell

For Ron, the daily grind of art-making involves entering the studio and leaving the world behind. For Damian, the mysteries of studio production are not so much assumed as prodded and questioned; recorded and re-presented. “For my generation,” Ron has commented, “it was enough to say ‘yes,’ whereas for Damian, there is always a ‘yes, but.’”

This “yes, but” is expressed throughout Damian’s Watercolour Drawing Project. It is also one of many possible approaches for visitors to *Related Works: Ron Moppett / Damian Moppett*. In the end, it is an exhibition that recognizes a particularly creative lineage in Canadian art, and two artists who see both themselves and their work as part of a malleable continuum. It is a continuum fused out of their respective aesthetic dialogues between past and present, near and far. It also explores the intimate and the unfamiliar for each artist within their respective studios: stacked within a pile of brushes and paper stencils in Ron’s case, and lodged somewhere between paper and a preparatory photograph in Damian’s.

***Masterpiece in Focus. Related Works: Ron Moppett and Damian Moppett* is on view at the National Gallery of Canada from May 12 to September 10, 2017 in Gallery C218.**

## About the Author

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