

Annie MacDonell, Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition), Mercer Union, Toronto, January 20 – March 10, 2012

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Number 75, Spring–Summer 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/66441ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (print)

1929-3577 (digital)

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Cite this review

Moser, G. (2012). Review of [*Annie MacDonell, Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*], Mercer Union, Toronto, January 20 – March 10, 2012]. *esse arts + opinions*, (75), 79–79.



Annie MacDonell, *Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*, Mercer Union, Toronto, 2012.
photo : Toni Hafkenscheid

Annie MacDonell, *Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*

Mercer Union, Toronto, January 20–March 10, 2012

In *Camera Lucida*, his lyrical, book-length study of the affective powers of the medium, Roland Barthes proposed that, “more than other arts, photography offers an immediate presence to the world—a co-presence.” This immediacy of photographic inscription, its ability to conjoin two otherwise separate times and spaces, is a fitting introduction to Annie MacDonell’s multimedia installation that considers the camera’s uncanny ability to mirror and transpose the external world.

MacDonell’s exhibition is a nod to the ways in which photography has challenged the ideal of artistic originality in the gallery and museum, borrowing its title from art critic Rosalind Krauss’ 1981 article that critiqued narratives of artistic innovation in the history of modern art. In the five framed images that open the installation, MacDonell makes her historical sources of inspiration explicit, presenting groupings of found photographs culled from the Toronto Reference Library’s Picture Collection for their depiction of reflective surfaces, either in the form of mirrors or reflective pools of water. Doubles and inverted images abound in these photographs; in one, a swanky living room interior and two decorative mirrors have even been positioned to face one another, creating an endless *mise en abyme* where it is impossible to identify the original object of reflection. This doubling effect is reinforced through MacDonell’s presentation: the found images are associatively grouped and taped onto her studio wall, then re-photographed for presentation in the gallery, where they are spotlighted by two oversized lights. Here, MacDonell uses photography’s transportive possibilities to bring the space of research and production (the library, her studio) into the space of display (the gallery) as a kind of allegory about what it means to make images in an era of photographic saturation.

Across from the framed photographs, a giant camera obscura, covered in mirrored plexiglas, serves as another mechanism for artistic self-reflexivity. Built to the exact dimensions of MacDonell’s studio space, the structure houses a video projection showing a male actor, dressed in a wool suit, who delivers his theoretical musings about originality and repetition. Between the looping video clips, ghostly, upside-down versions of the found photographs on the outside of the structure are projected onto the screen by the camera obscura’s lens. Through its transposing of inside and outside space, MacDonell’s mirrored camera positions us as both the object of its gaze and its viewer, confusing the acts of framing and being framed, looking and being watched.

Staging so much self-reflection runs the risk of making work that is insular, a kind of artistic “inside joke” that seems to leave the viewer out of the fun. But in MacDonell’s installation, the sense of having seen these scenarios before is exactly the point, reminding us of the enduring impact of photographic repetition.

[Gabrielle Moser]



Damian Moppett, *Broken Fall*, detail, 2011.
photo : SITE Photography, Vancouver, courtesy of Rennie Collection, Vancouver

Damian Moppett, *Collected Works*

Rennie Collection, Vancouver, November 26, 2011–April 21, 2012

The work of Damian Moppett subjects the history of art to a precarious balancing act, a suspension of belief, and a number of catastrophic falls. His survey exhibition at the Rennie Collection is testament to this, bringing together work from the last fifteen years, spanning the breadth of his practice in its sweeping range of painting, drawing, sculpture, and video. The collected works represent an intensely thoughtful and self-reflexive investigation of the practice of making art, characterized by an effacing monumentality and deadpan wit.

A gigantic Alexander Calder-like mobile, more than twenty-five feet tall, is suspended from the ceiling, high above viewers’ heads. Bright red aluminum disks branch out like tentacles, each piece carefully balanced on the other in a play of levity and movement, as if in spite of their massive scale and weight. One piece, however, appears to have fallen and lies haphazardly on the ground. Is it a prank? A trap? Moppett’s most recent work, *Broken Fall*—both an homage and an irreverent doubling—is a culmination of his interests to date.

Throughout the exhibition a series of “stables,” or floor-based mobiles, appropriate the form of modernist sculpture as a base for amateur ceramics. Apparent tensions—between craft and high art, amateurism and expertise, manufactured and handmade—rest in careful balance in these works, often literally. In a similar vein is *Studio at Dawn*, a fifteen-foot long steel form modeled after Anthony Caro’s *Early One Morning*. Instead of Caro’s original red, Moppett has painted it matte white (camouflaging it within the framing devices of the gallery: walls, plinths, etc.) and placed handmade pottery on its surface. The pottery is a lure, drawing one into the space of the sculpture, whose massive size, long bars, and sharp edges suspended high in the air, appear subtly threatening.

Moppett’s work is often described through its referentiality. Indeed, this work is hyper-aware of its historical contexts and draws on a notable cast from the history of art—from Calder and Caro to Constantin Brâncusi and Lygia Clark—appropriating iconic works in an interrogation of authorship. Looking closer, Moppett’s references are more eclectic than predictable, and refuse to chart a singular trajectory through the canon by giving equal weight to the everyday.

What is most impressive in its quiet and insistent monumentality, is Moppett’s *Watercolour Drawing Project*, an omnibus of the artist’s personal archive, over 100 drawings that together comprise one work, created over nine years. It seems that everything that passes before his eyes becomes the subject of drawings, from studio ephemera to iconic artworks, the covers of art magazines to the Gulf Islands. Clustered in thematic groupings, the work forms a comprehensive index to Moppett’s complex oeuvre and underscores the idea that art is not just the practice of making but the practice of looking.

[Kathleen Ritter]