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APPRECIATION: Donald Moffett

by Seth Orion Schwaiger
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"Lot 121909 (18/0)," 2009, **Donald Moffett**
Oil on linen on wood, 17" x 17"

Damn you, Texas. Seems every time I dig into a celebrated artist who is willing to claim you, there's some turning point in their career when they decide to leave. Funny thing is, it's rarely that they found a foothold in Texas and moved on up, but rather the opposite: they did not, and vacated for lack of it, finding their hold instead somewhere else--namely, New York or LA. Such is the case for Donald Moffett, but the artist's romantic notions of the Texas rural hill country, along with the strong multiple family ties ubiquitous to Texas natives keeps him coming back in a cyclical journey, traces from which can be found in the artist's multifaceted practice. The impressive depth of that practice is currently evidenced in a solo exhibition at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, which opened in August and runs through February 28, 2016.

In a 2012 article called "Ranch Hands and Farm Animals" for Art in America, Moffett looked back on his Texas roots: "The hill country land is long gone from my family," he wrote. "The reality is that selling it paid for my education and my brother's, so that, in the end, we could move away... But what is firm is the continual live feed that is the juice and protein from those days with the ranch hands and farm animals (and their predators) and how it has entered into my work." Moffett earned a bachelor's in art and another in biology at Trinity University in his hometown of San Antonio before leaving for New York in 1978 at age 23.

Ironically, for an artist who was so clearly impacted by Minimalism, at the same time Moffett was leaving Texas for New York, Donald Judd was taking the opposite journey, leaving the pinnacle arts infrastructure of New

York in search of the comforting nothing he would find in Marfa. Much of Moffett's current work still echoes aspects of Minimalism, but one can only imagine how some of his more politically charged early endeavours would have been received in deep red '70s and '80s Texas. Take *He Kills Me* (1987), for example, an offset lithograph split in half, with a target-like series of orange and black circles, and a photo of Ronald Reagan over orange text reading "HE KILLS ME." The national context: Reagan resisted using the word AIDS in a public address until 1987, six years and 20,000 deaths into the AIDS crisis; The Texas context: Reagan was re-elected by an unrepeated 64% of Lone Star State voters and anti-gay sentiment is the norm. Today Texas remains one of 17 states with anti-sodomy laws on the books--despite the Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* invalidating such.

Far away from conservative Texas, Moffett joined the NY-based AIDS activist group ACT UP and co-founded its artist/propaganda arm Gran Fury. During this time, Moffett lost several of those closest to him. That frustration spills out in powerful works like *He Kills Me* (actually completed before Gran Fury, but used repeatedly by ACT UP at their protests), and again in *Call the White House* (1990), an equally simple text-based work reading "CALL THE WHITE HOUSE 1 (202) 456-1414 TELL BUSH WE'RE NOT ALL DEAD YET." This last work was made for a two-person show with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist working in the same vein, whose reputation would go on to vastly trump that of Moffett's. Moffett himself describes this work as "an aggressive piece that has been denied the status of art, but not by me."

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston director Bill Arning, in a 2011 catalogue on the artist, called Moffett an "artist's artist." That is, he remains important to arts specialists and to the trajectory of contemporary art from the '80s to present, but never made the jump to the wider renown of some of his peers. Why not? Veronica Roberts, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Blanton Museum, spells it out plainly: "Any artist who has a signature style and who is very consistent and whose work you can look at and know immediately who they are, those artists tend to be more valued by the market. Someone like Warhol or Koons--these market darlings have a signature style or touch. One of the things I admire about Donald's work so much is that he takes risks again and again and I never know where he's going. His art does not resolve tidily into a style, and unfortunately, that means he is less well-known."

Gran Fury collapsed in the mid-'90s after the death of member Mark Simpson, and soon after, Moffett took time away from making work. When he returned to his practice, it was through the seductive powers of painting. This later work emphasized material, as in his use of monochrome extruded oil paint to make highly textured pieces (think resin-soaked shag carpet, but slicker). Further blurring the line between painting and sculpture, these works at times included arrangements of holes bored through the supporting linen and panel, referred to by the artist as "comfort holes." When included in assemblage sculptures, these holes bore straight through thick wooden pillars and other sculptural supports beyond the painting. More than merely breaking from painting's long tradition of illusionistic space by adding actual dimension outward from the canvas, Moffett extends actual depth through and beyond the surface, going past the picture plane, to break the plane usually occupied by the wall itself.

From painting many other series sprang forth: a group of zippered paintings that are colored from the inside and build in unexpectedly exciting ways on color field's stale history, "Light-loop paintings" (made first in Texas!) of pearlescent material, or aluminum paint applied to traditional surfaces, then shot with video projection, and installations made of all these elements coupled with audio. Alongside these new practices that combined minimalist aesthetics with his interest in strangeness/familiarity, sexuality, violence, and long-arch questions on painting's potential and limitations, he continued to address the socio-political landscape. After the mid-'90s, however, Moffett becomes observer rather than volatile activist. Take *Mr. Gay in the USA*, (2001) for example, a suite of 17 drawings from the sentencing of Ronald Gay, a Vietnam vet who shot up a gay bar in Virginia, killing one and injuring six. Far from angry, the works give off the vibe of being perplexed at the occurrence, even sympathetic towards the perpetrator and his own personal damages: a far cry from the calls to action of his early works.

Pondering all of these different facets to Moffett's practice (not to mention the Model series of nearly perfect anatomical renderings of flaccid male genitalia, unaccompanied sound works, or portraits of politicians), it is easy to see how Moffett presents a curatorial problem: one can either curate a cohesive show of Moffett, or a

comprehensive one, but not both at the same time. It is not just that Moffett is not a market darling—Rauschenberg was not a market darling, and his fame is still monumental—it is that viewers cannot hold a solid definition of Moffett in mind. He's had tremendous success in terms of high level museum and gallery exhibitions, but despite his engaging artwork he remains too mercurial for non-aficionados to track.

Which brings us back to Texas. Despite its faults, the state has an unexpected strength in its good-'ol-boy capacity for the long, slow conversation, and a provincial lack of a desire for sound bites and buzz. Complicated characters like Moffett may be better understood here. That, paired with Moffett's increasing profile abroad and Texas's sure-fire propensity to celebrate its own, led to an expansive mid-career survey of his work, "The Extravagant Vein," at CAM Houston in 2011. In one of those fantastic strings of events when Texas's various scenes work together, Moffett rippled throughout the state. His work was shown at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2013, and at Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin the same year, then in 2014 in his home town of San Antonio at Linda Pace Foundation, followed by what in Texas terms is called a "bumper crop year." In January, his light-loop projections exhibited in a solo show at Lora Reynolds, and in February, an example of his paintings hung in Dallas at The Warehouse (open until November 30). This fall, various works can be seen in his solo show at the Blanton Museum, in Austin, following a recent acquisition by that museum of the artist's work (and now holding the largest collection of any institution). Thus, a committed viewer could see one Moffett show, digest it, then see another, and digest that, then synthesize them all into a richer understanding of the artist as a whole. That sort of slow burn is at the heart of Moffett's current practice—and Texas just may be the only scene that can come close to doing it justice.