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Seething or Subtle, Donald Moffett's Art Is Always Political

At a gallery in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York, this painter takes on a new set of “knuckleheads.”



Donald Moffett in his studio standing next to “Lot 062619 (cell division, red)” and in front of “Lot 072619 (the new damson)” ahead of his show “ILL (nature paintings)” at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea.

Cole Wilson for The New York Times

By **Laurel Graeber**

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[Donald Moffett](#) first gained renown as an artist in the 1980s, when he was responding to a crisis that was frustrating researchers, polarizing lawmakers and threatening lives around the world. More than three decades later, he is still doing exactly that.

The causes, however, have changed. Fiercely dedicated to fighting the AIDS

epidemic then, Mr. Moffett is battling climate change now.

“The activism of both rely on science as ally and protagonist in the struggle,” Mr. Moffett wrote in an email after a recent interview at his studio in Staten Island. “And both activism faced or face a similar political resistance of knuckleheads as the prime antagonists.”

Mr. Moffett, 64, has never been shy about letting you know who he thinks those knuckleheads are. What may be his most famous creation, the 1987 lithograph “[He Kills Me](#),” features an orange-and-black target symbol next to a black-and-white photograph of a simpering Ronald Reagan; the title words are emblazoned in orange capitals beneath the president’s face. Marching AIDS activists used to carry posters of the piece, which is now in the collections of five major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Today, a large sticker that he designed, which Mr. Moffett calls a “naughty little work,” is on his studio wall. Equally searing, it has a blue background and huge white capital letters that read, “Break His Little Twitter Finger.” Mr. Moffett, who had the piece pasted around New York, signed it with the words “Unhinged Homos,” referring to gay men, like him, who object to President Trump’s policies. “It’s a little meanspirited,” he said with a chuckle.

Neither work, however, looks remotely like the art Mr. Moffett has destined for his new show, “ILL (nature paintings),” which will open on Nov. 7 at the [Marianne Boesky Gallery](#) in Chelsea. Abstract, sculptural and sometimes huge, these paintings — and the artist insists on that term — began as digital designs. They were then cut out of one or more layers of wood, covered with paint and coated with a resin that is sometimes so glossy that the results appear almost succulent. Incorporating holes and curves and occasionally edged with tiny spikes, the shapes can evoke anything from Hindu symbols to [paramecia](#). But they carry as much of a message as any of his other art.

“The language within the gallery is a special language,” said Mr. Moffett,

who lives in Manhattan with his longtime partner, the artist Robert Gober. “It can involve irony in a serious way — and humor — but still make significant points.” When he created posters of “He Kills Me,” which he initially pasted to New York buildings in the middle of the night, he was making art that shouted. This is also true of “[Think Science](#),” a billboard in Lexington, Ky., that he created last year for the organization For Freedoms, whose [50 State Initiative](#) enlisted artists nationwide to make public works encouraging civic engagement.

“There’s a much subtler didactic undercurrent to this work in the gallery than to something on the street,” he said. His latest art is more inclined to whisper, though it can whisper insistently.

Consider “Lot 082519 (cocoa brain),” part of the new show. (The lot number, part of his cataloging system, refers to the date he started working on a piece.) This four-part chocolate-colored work, about eight feet tall, is based on a photograph of a cross-section of the human brain. You could say that it is a charitable representation of what Mr. Moffett thinks fills the minds of climate-change skeptics. It’s about “the stupidity of half the conversation around the climate crisis,” he said. “‘Cocoa brain’ somehow describes that. It is the idiocy, lunacy, tragedy of the climate-crisis deniers.”

Of course, people looking at the work may not immediately think that it concerns global warming. Or that the shiny green tentacled piece “Lot 072419 (the new pippin)” refers to Pippin apples and the way contemporary food is processed and engineered. Or that “Lot 091819 (the pentagonal oak),” which was inspired by an 1883 specimen of oak leaves that Mr. Moffett found in [the botany collection at the Staten Island Museum](#), reflects the decline of species. But the titles of the show and of the individual works provide clues.

“The title is really important,” said Mr. Moffett, a San Antonio native whose work reflects his dual university degrees in biology and art. Naming his pieces, he said, “brings language to these abstract forms,” and the words

and the art “find each other somewhere in the middle.”

Marianne Boesky, whose gallery has represented Mr. Moffett for nearly 20 years, said that he could communicate “very layered messages,” but that it was up to viewers to discover them. Or, she added, you can look at the pieces, which sell individually for about \$40,000 to as much as \$250,000 or \$300,000, “and just revel in how beautifully they’re made.”

In “ILL (nature paintings),” the pieces will be hung with custom-made hardware that enables them to float at a certain distance from the wall. The shadows around the art and what is visible through the holes in the wood become part of the work.

“Painting is what people have said is dead every decade, but Donald can make it so fresh and exciting,” Ms. Boesky said. She added that she hoped the show’s visitors would investigate its meanings: “If you lift the hood a little, there’s a lot to talk about.”

That includes subjects other than the environment. With its perforations and sweeping curves, the art also alludes to gun violence and sexuality, other topics Mr. Moffett has explored. But even though he said he expected scientific progress to prevail in the climate crisis, as it had with AIDS, he said the threats to nature would continue to be the most important theme for his art.

“The dilemmas that we face and the problems that we face in relationship to the natural world call for, I would suggest, all of our attention,” Mr. Moffett said, “but certainly the attention of an artist who brings as much from our world into the studio as I take out of the studio into the world.”

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