

Art in America



Portrait by Grant Delin

IN THE STUDIO: DONALD MOFFETT

By Steel Stillman
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Donald Moffett was born in Texas in 1955 and moved to New York twenty-three years later. Like many artists who came into their own in the late 1980s, he leaned heavily on juxtapositions of text and image in his early work, appropriating mass-media tropes and redirecting them. But unlike the deconstructionists who emerged a decade earlier, analyzing images and taking them apart—Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince, for instance—Moffett was bent, or so it seemed, on an activist course, using images to make things happen. In 1987, he wheat-pasted posters he made bearing an orange and black target, a black and white Ronald Reagan headshot, and the tagline “he kills me” on buildings in lower Manhattan. *He Kills Me*, today arguably his best-known work, led to significant chapters in Moffett’s career: he became a founding member of the AIDS-activism artist collaborative Gran Fury (1988–93) and, shortly thereafter, a coprincipal, with artist Marlene McCarty, in the design firm Bureau (1988–2001), which produced unorthodox projects for corporate clients, arts organizations, and groups seeking social change.

During those same years, however, in the relative quiet of his studio, Moffett was becoming a painter. His breakthrough occurred in 1994, when he began creating abstract paintings with cake-making tools. These “extruded paintings,” easel-size monochromes with dense loops or bristles of often brightly colored paint resembling fur, are still at the core of his work. The first were solid rectangles, but they’ve since developed complex perforations. Today their thick wood supports are digitally routed.

The extruded paintings have been joined lately by at least two other bodies of work. The “light loops,” started in 2001, are monochrome canvases—generally painted, not extruded—that have video projected onto them.

Frequently reverberating with political implications, these began with a triptych featuring footage of Texas congresswoman Barbara Jordan's powerful denunciation of Richard Nixon during the House Judiciary Committee's 1974 impeachment proceedings. The "contraptions," first exhibited at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, in 2012, are sculptural assemblages—made variously of derelict machinery, concrete garden statuary, and other found materials—that serve as dedicated frames or supports for particular paintings, extruded ones predominantly.

Taken together, these three categories of work provide a flexible infrastructure around which, depending on the exhibition, Moffett introduces other media, such as photography, drawing, collage, or sound, and changing thematic content. Governmental and individual abominations and violence, especially those directed at gays, are often addressed in his work. But so, too, is a profound preoccupation with material beauty and color. And sex: the holes that are everywhere in his oeuvre are as tender as they are tough.

Moffett's current New York show, "Any Fallow Field," at Boesky, is his reflection on whether rural settings and experiences can provide relief from the 24/7 clamor of contemporary life. It contains extruded paintings, canvases that are merely primed before being coated in layers of tinted, translucent resin, and resin-coated landscape photographs. The paintings and photographs are punctured and sometimes shaped by patterns of perforations derived from shotgun blasts and microscope images of plants. All the photographs and some of the paintings hang directly on the wall, with the remaining paintings being incorporated into pared-down contraptions made of found timbers painted white.

Moffett, who still lives in New York, earned bachelor's degrees in art and biology from Trinity University in San Antonio in 1977. His exhibition career began in 1989—alongside artists like Félix González-Torres and David Wojnarowicz—and he was included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. In 2011, he was the subject of a traveling midcareer survey, "The Extravagant Vein," organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

We met in June at the suburban ranch house on the shore of Staten Island that has been his studio for the past decade. He employs a small team of assistants and has additional space in nearby Richmond Terrace. As we looked out at the spectacular 180-degree view, from the Verrazano Bridge to the southern tip of Manhattan, we had the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, which had occurred a few days earlier, very much on our minds.

STEEL STILLMAN: What part of Texas are you from?

DONALD MOFFETT: Hot, dry central Texas. I grew up in San Antonio, but in the summertime my brother and I would relocate to a big ranch in the Hill Country owned by my parents and grandparents. Until I was about twenty, I spent a lot of time in that intense, beautiful landscape, which could be quiet for days on end before suddenly erupting in incident: a water snake swallowing a stringer of six fish, a cornered buck luring our dog into deep river water, the electric first time I saw horses fuck. Visually and emotionally, the breadth of my experience there shaped my adolescent brain.

STILLMAN: Where did the impulse to make art come from?

MOFFETT: I'm not sure. But as a young boy, I had the patience to draw. And though it seemed peculiar to my parents, they didn't dissuade me. For my part, what felt more peculiar was the fact that I was gay, though I didn't know how to articulate it. Looking back, it seems clear that art allowed for a kind of indirection that football or hunting, say, didn't. In college, intending to pursue another love, I started out majoring in biology, but art wouldn't leave me alone.

STILLMAN: From the time you arrived in New York until your firm, Bureau, closed, you were regularly going back and forth between solo studio activities and collaborative enterprises. How did these endeavors get along?

MOFFETT: Various. Fitfully. At times, perfectly. There was always cross-pollination. From my first job in New York—as a subscription clerk at Lincoln Center’s New York State Theater, which introduced me to forms of high culture that barely existed in San Antonio—to frequenting contemporary galleries on 57th Street and downtown to learning typesetting in a small type house on Madison Avenue and 37th Street, these roles and activities constituted my highest education. I introduced them to one another and incorporated them all into my daily studio practice. *He Kills Me*, for instance, which predated my work with *Gran Fury*, was an art piece made for the street that employed straight graphic design. Nothing new there. Barbara Kruger was my guide. Art is obviously different from propaganda and design, but doing and believing in all three was like speaking one language and having multiple conversations. Much as I dreamed during the *Gran Fury* and *Bureau* days of working full-time in my studio, I had rent and citizenship to attend to. As I found out later, these never go away.

STILLMAN: In 1996, in an exhibition at Jay Gorney Modern Art, you introduced the first of the extruded paintings. Those early crimson, white, and black works had series titles like “Blood Loop,” “Surrender,” and “Osteolacrima”—a homemade word, with Greek and Latin roots, that roughly translates as “bone tears.” They struck me as perhaps memorial. What led to them?

MOFFETT: When *Gran Fury* was over, I retreated, somewhat tattered, to the studio. At the same time, I began casting around for a nonart activity that could overwrite a pervasive sadness that so many people—friends, colleagues, untold others—had died. I went to cake-decorating school, and to my surprise icing led me straight back to painting. Though thicker than paint, icing was notably paintlike. And it stood up!

I was not alone in turning to abstraction in those years. Extruding paint gave me a way of working that didn’t rely on images or graphics or overt messaging. My aim was to say nothing but to show quite a bit. The titles refer to ooze of all kinds. I wasn’t thinking of the paintings as memorials; they were more like circulation systems, pumping or squirting with imperfect hearts.

STILLMAN: What is the story behind “Range,” a 1997 series of mixed-medium drawings you made on paper that Robert Beck (now Robert Buck) had shot through with a .22-caliber handgun?

MOFFETT: Bob had been doing works that involved shooting guns at pads of paper, and I asked if he would give me one to open up and work on. I was interested in the residue of that violent act, which left a gorgeous hole through every sheet and diminishing gunpowder sprays on each succeeding page. I wanted to draw on them with fudge, and the motifs developed spontaneously, loosely resembling biological forms. I was dressing the holes, connecting a violent act to the touch of soft graphite and an even softer brush.

STILLMAN: The first “light loop” paintings I saw, in 2003 at Boesky, featured projections you shot in the *Rambles of Central Park*. It took a few moments to realize that they weren’t plein-air paintings but videos and that the leaves on the trees were moving. I was intrigued by the idea of paintings being treated as screens, not as windows or objects. There was something metonymic about your approach: much of art is a matter of projecting ideas and histories onto material supports. How did you decide to do that?

MOFFETT: The idea came as I was doing research in Barbara Jordan’s archives at Texas Southern University. I kept watching her speech over and over again. Then, feeling flustered, I wondered if I couldn’t just project it on linen, call it a painting, and be done with it. In the months it took to answer that question and to work out the mechanics of projection and surface, I began thinking about other subject matter.

I first got to know *the Rambles* when I was walking across Central Park to my job at Lincoln Center. I marveled that so many people could spend their days lying around there, and I vowed to do the same someday. Given the vulnerabilities of all involved, you don’t just show up in *the Rambles* with a video camera and expect to be warmly received. So I resorted to the more passive dodge of using a tripod and letting the camera run while I sat nearby.

The Rambles is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, a fabricated wilderness. It’s all about the romance of nature and, as a gay cruising spot, the romance and dangers of romance. Historically, social and political circumstances have contributed a great deal to art—think of Goya’s “Disasters of War,” Manet’s *The Execution*

of *Emperor Maximilian*, and Picasso's *Guernica*. Or perhaps more to the point here, Malevich, who projected his own beam of ideas onto what seemed like blank canvases.

STILLMAN: About ten years ago, you showed two series of paintings, "Fleisch (Flesh)" and "Gutted," which were both inspired by news reports of the Kassel Cannibal, who killed and ate another man in 2001.

MOFFETT: I think it was around 2004 that my attention was drawn to that grisly story. A gay German man had posted an ad seeking a volunteer to be butchered. A man responded and the two went through with their tryst. They started with the volunteer's penis, which was cut off and sautéed, before proceeding to the abominable climax.

The "Fleisch" paintings were extremely pared down—raw linen stained with rabbit skin glue, the stains like bodily excretions. Very simple elements were added: one, two, or four zippers and one or more black circular shapes, about one inch in diameter. Often there was a circular hole, also one inch, with embroidered edges. The first paintings were twenty-four by twenty inches, torso-size and comfortably embraceable. There was very little to them, just enough to imply the pathological impulse that drove those two men to their brief, deadly intimacy.

STILLMAN: The "Gutted" works, with their opened zippers, suggest undressing.

MOFFETT: The first "Gutted" painting was in the "Fleisch" exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery, in London, in 2007, and became a small but transcendent finale to that dark show. Like the others in the "Gutted" series, it was a stretched and unpainted rectangular canvas, with four diagonally placed zippers that opened from the center to each corner. They are meant to be installed with the flaps open and pinned back to the wall. This first piece was painted white on the inside to match the wall behind it, which is of course what it was framing. Nothingness.

STILLMAN: What led you to move your paintings off the wall with the contraptions?

MOFFETT: With the "Fleisch" and "Gutted" works, my crew and I had interrogated, physically and visually, the guts and posteriors of the paintings, but the wall was a barrier that stopped us. So we pushed further, drilling more holes and cutting shapes out of the extruded paintings. Eventually it became clear that it was the convention of paintings-on-the-wall that had to give. So one day, we took a painting out into the garden and hung it on a driftwood plank, and that led to three-dimensional space. Much of the material and equipment for the first contraptions was lying around the perimeter of the Richmond Terrace studio. A lot of it was unrecognizable, although I used a cement mixer and some kind of ice cream machine. I had little regard for what these things had been and was entirely focused on their utility and interest as supporting structures. My aim was to reconcile the delicacy of the paintings to the brute contraptions that held them. Only in hindsight can one speak like this, but my mother was dying when these works were developing, and something about that may have led me to seek out alternative supports for paintings. Something profound was falling away, and something else was found to replace it.

STILLMAN: As the contraptions evolved, you added kitsch garden sculptures—a pair of donkeys, a drunken man leaning on a lamppost, Snow White—figural elements that began to suggest narratives.

MOFFETT: You're referring to *The Double Hazard* [2011], *Petunia* [2011-12], and *One's Own* [2012], respectively . . . and respectfully, I hope! There are certainly narrative dimensions to these works, though I'm indifferent to direct interpretations. The lawn and garden elements may have kitsch qualities, but I don't see them that way. Their repurposing equates with the reuse of the cement mixer; their original characteristics are subsumed in the calibration of the tableaux.

STILLMAN: If a fallow field is one in the process of regaining its fertility, what does the title of your fall exhibition point to? And why are you including photographs?

MOFFETT: When the phrase came to me in Texas recently, it seemed to suggest a kind of spatial and temporal openness, a precarious and physical present suspended between past and future. If at times I've felt like a warrior in my work, for this show I was hoping to look out at nature, quite literally, for a change. In the new pieces I'm dialing back the overt referentiality of the contraptions, though I'm hoping their hyperbole will still range from the awkward to the disturbing. The photographs are perhaps another way of keeping the real world at the center of the work. They are of landscapes, with occasional signs of civilization: a road, a fence, irrigation equipment, nothing extraordinary. They will be mounted on the same kind of wood panels we use for the paintings and will be overlaid with multiple coats of resin; in my mind they are paintings, too. These works, which will mostly hang on the wall, and a new series of extruded paintings, will be drilled with recognizable motifs that suggest both biological and destructive forces. As ever, in our world, beauty and violence are interlaced—like the beauty of the young people murdered in Orlando.

STILLMAN: Despite the sculptural quality of the contraptions, you persist in calling them paintings. Is that because painting for you isn't simply a matter of materials, genres, and procedures but is instead a way of thinking?

MOFFETT: If artists want to dig into the deepest part of the past one hundred fifty years of art history, then they must grapple with painting. I'm interested that you put your question in terms of thinking. What often goes unsaid in the critical discourse is how productive and illuminating your thinking and learning can be when you're actually painting. Of all the activities I'm engaged with around the studio, whether reading, paying bills, or trying to learn something new, the best thinking occurs—oddly, weirdly, freakishly—when I'm bent over one of my paintings.

STILLMAN: Your work has addressed society's uses of nature before. The Rambles pieces are just one example. I have the impression that the landscape photographs, and this show as a whole, arise from your uncertainty about whether it's possible to turn away from the news and our device-enabled self-absorption to find enlightenment somewhere else.

MOFFETT: I'm wondering whether nature can still hold our attention. It's actually kind of boring compared to the rowdy intensity of culture: the news, Trump, assault weapons, Mitch McConnell. I'm not so naive as to think that we can go back to the land. It's too late for that; there are too many of us and not enough land. But, what's left out there? Can we experience it quietly . . . again . . . still? I've said in the past that I proceed with one eye on my work and the other on the news, and that's precisely the tension I'm feeling right now. Much as I've wanted this show to turn away from violence and spectacle, I'm not sure it can. I'm not sure I can.

"Donald Moffett: Any Fallow Field," Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, Sept. 8–Oct. 15.