

BROOKLYN RAIL



Donald Moffett, *Lot 110123 (nature cult, houses)*, 2023. Wood, acrylic and steel. Courtesy Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

DONALD MOFFETT: NATURE CULT, SEEDED

BY CHRID CROSMAN
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Donald Moffett was raised in San Antonio, Texas. He studied both biology and art at Trinity University, a small—by Texas standards—bespoke liberal arts school. His formative youth was bookended by the turbulent, roiling sixties of his childhood and early adolescence—the Vietnam War, political assassinations, the civil rights movement, the rise of second wave feminism—and the 1980s, which foregrounded the AIDS epidemic and gay rights, just as he came of age as an important artist of conscience and someone to watch closely.

His recent exhibition, *Nature Cult, Seeded*, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA) was organized by former CMCA director and independent curator, Suzette McAvoy. McAvoy notes:

Art and nature have long been intertwined in Maine ... generations of artists have been drawn to the state by its natural beauty, its rugged coastline and wooded interiors. Moffett's installation extends this continuum to the present day. With the knowledge that the water temperature in the Gulf of Maine is rising three times faster than the global average, and the recent catastrophic flooding across the state, Moffett's artistic response to environmental concerns is both timely and consequential.

The casual visitor looking to escape urban heat for sea breezes and shade trees in Maine will not likely find respite in this unruly show. Its eclectic waywardness includes paintings that are sculptures, or the reverse—works hovering seductively beyond easy definition. Hard, polished, high-gloss surfaces are punctured with perfectly rounded or elliptical perforations that occasionally seem to look back at the viewer like multi-eyed creatures of video games or mediated memes. To my mind, their curving, sleek, asymmetrical low-relief surfaces reference oceanic oil spills, foliage, dancing Disney flames, crime scene blood droplets, Hokusai wave spindrift, and 3D Road Runner cartoon splats. A wall-mounted triplex of birdhouses, *Lot 110123 (nature cult, houses)* (2023), is awash with a vibrant ultramarine blue that natural light in the Toshiko Mori-designed main gallery transforms into infinite gradients of a deep, purple-violet mist. Other free-standing birdhouses are literally held aloft on spindly wood poles, stripped naked and seeded at their bases by loose piles of sunflower seeds, corn kernels, and pecans.

These “life-size” (for birds) sculptures are juxtaposed with seemingly unrelated, free-floating, conceptual objects: a digital print of a brutalist style Bates Motel-like concrete picnic table, photographed by Moffett at night; a handwritten envelope inscribed with a poem by Margaret Atwood ending with the words, “together / we eat this earth.”



Installation view: *Donald Moffett: NATURE CULT, SEEDED*, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME, 2024. Courtesy Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

We are greeted at the exhibition entrance with a hand-made wooden sign announcing, “Vacancy,” with letters made of twigs, rebar, and bent spikes—leftover fragments from some apocalyptic collapse or, more probably, bits of junkyard detritus swept into a demolition site waste bin. The sign is mounted within a galvanized metal watering can next to a chartreuse birdhouse, itself placed on a rubber car tire filled with pecans. Tilting and wobbly, the sign and birdhouse question stability in a world increasingly anchored only by our certainty of uncertainty. The vacancy sign—made of pointy objects—suddenly becomes the whole point: an open-ended non sequitur announcing a last refuge for human kind in empty birdhouses—and art.

The centerpiece installation, *Lot 030323 (the golden bough)* (2023) is covered by an all-over, enamel-based gold paint. The towering structure is largely composed of driftwood tree trunks and branches held together with industrial, stainless-steel bolts. It, too, reaches, rather forlornly, heavenward. Arm-like branches of the totemic structure hold an art book, opened to paintings by the nineteenth-century animal artist Thomas Hewes Hinckley, depicting a cow and bull. Moffett was primarily drawn to these works for their gentle portrayal of bovine personality with what one contemporary of Hinckley’s called, “the greatest attention lavished on the smallest details of expression or attitude.” This now forgotten, once prominent artist and his owner-commissioned portraits of farm animals speak to a bygone agrarian America where animals and their keepers once knew one another at levels of place, identity, and survival.

A section of the *golden bough* sculpture is called *Lot 040424 (the chorus)*. The quiet irony of a driftwood boat (comprised of wood gathered from near Moffett’s Staten Island studio) holding books about rising sea levels by noted environmental journalist, Jeff Goodell, is unmistakable. The collection of thirteen used, identical volumes, probably sourced on eBay or secondhand bookstores, includes several texts marked as formerly belonging to different public libraries—an oblique comment (ship of fools) about widespread, even willful, public indifference and ignorance regarding the facts of climate change.



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Moffett's work is often wrapped in visual ironies of brightness and humor framing darker, more distant emotional landscapes. Speaking of the exhibition title, he wants "a word after 'nature' that perturbs..." *Nature Cult* is thus "seeded" by fervency and passion cultivated by scientific reckoning. The vacant birdhouses and *golden bough* remind us of something Rebecca Solnit and friends also suggested in their [Brooklyn Rail video conversation](#) about climate change: grief is okay, doing nothing is not.

Nature Cult, Seeded, is akin to walking into a group show. It is, of course, by a single artist with much to say and many ways to articulate complex and compelling thoughts regarding our being in, with, and of nature. Moffett's work flows alongside non-mainstream, unexpected, but particularly American practices—for instance, custom car models and backwoods chainsaw art. Resin-filled, epoxy air-sprayed lowriders and soot-blackened roadside stump-bears shadow and color the exhibition.

Empty birdhouses adorn golden boughs and dead tree limbs. The overall installation, as well as individual works, simultaneously hold disparate forms, media, materials and ideas. Together they coalesce around the possibility for hope, and Moffett's shaman-like ability to conjure presence from absence. Vacancy not only marks places: it signals a dangerous mindlessness. It is telling, perhaps, of the artist's core poetic sensibility, that the most memorable, heart-breaking, throat-catching work of art in the installation is not an object at all. It is a plaintive recording of a bird call echoing periodically throughout the entire CMCA space. It is the sound of a now extinct tropical species calling for its mate. The absent mate we now understand—by the exhibition's seeding of unsettling visual discourse and backing choruses of conscience—will never come.