

BROOKLYN RAIL



Portrait of Donald Moffett, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

DONALD MOFFETT WITH DAN CAMERON

Interview with Dan Cameron
November 2019

Donald Moffett (b. 1955) says he doesn't know what kind of art to make—given the situation. It's a moving thought for an artist who is showing fantastic new paintings in his seventh solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky's gallery. Inspired by botanical discoveries Moffett made with his studio crew at the Staten Island Museum in the summer of 2019, these works are ambitious. In the run-up to the opening, Dan Cameron paid a visit to the artist's studio to talk about the evolution of Moffett's art practice, his work with *Gran Fury* and *Act Up*, and the possibility of being in another expansive period of new vocabulary and new conversation.

Dan Cameron (Rail): I want to start by asking a couple of questions to pin down chronology. Have you been showing with Tony Meier [Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco] since the beginning?



Donald Moffett, Lot 072519 (late biology, blossom), 2019. Pigmented epoxy resin on wood panel support, steel , 50 1/2 x 55 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Donald Moffett. Photo: Joseph Parra.

Donald Moffett: No, I was not there in the beginning. But I followed that program and, you know, everybody was showing there. Tony Feher was the one—he was a good friend of mine—

Rail: It's an interesting story. Jay [Gorney] was eating at One Fifth with someone, and Tony Meier—who was then a student at Stanford, I believe—was eating at the table next to them. I think he was eating with Peter Nagy, but he can correct the record, and Tony happened to hear them talking about the art world. I think he heard the name Sherrie Levine drop, and then he heard Peter Halley's name drop, and he leaned over and he said, "I'm sorry, I hope you don't think I'm eavesdropping, but you seem like you're in the art world." So their friendship started with Tony telling Jay, "I think I'd like to have a gallery some day."

Moffett: What was he doing?

Rail: I think Tony Meier was a college student at the time, or just out of school.

Moffett: Oh, I didn't know.

Rail: Tony's maybe 10 years, 12 years, younger than us.

Moffett: Yes.

Rail: So Jay had just opened Jay Gorney Modern Art on 10th Street in the East Village, and that was how they met. I remember Jay calling me and saying, "I just had the most interesting meeting," then I met Tony Meier. The other person who comes into this of course is Tony Feher, who soon became my very best friend.

Moffett: I didn't know you guys were so close.

Rail: Yeah, Tony and I spent every summer on Fire Island together for years.

Moffett: Lucky you, lucky you.

Rail: Tony was very very special



Donald Moffett, Lot 031419 (blue looks back at itself), 2019. Pigmented epoxy resin and UV clear coat on wood panel support, steel, 47 1/4 x 63 1/4 x 6 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Donald Moffett. Photo: Joseph Parra.

Moffett: He—Tony Meier—loved Tony Feher.

Rail: I know, it was very deep.

Moffett: In fact, I'm sure you were—well, I don't know where you were right there at the end of Tony's life.

Rail: I was by his bedside when he took his last breath.

Moffett: Just a couple of weeks before Tony Feher died, Tony Meier said, "let's have dinner at your house" and we said "absolutely." So the four of us had a lovely, incredible dinner.

Rail: Tony and Tony?

Moffett: Tony and Tony and Bob and I. And there had been all that talk, which again you would know much more than I do, because I was just peripheral, but, you know there were some money troubles...

Rail: Oh, I lived through all of that.

Moffett: I'm sure. And I thought, now's the moment! Because I always loved the glitter works, and so I called Tony M. and said, "Come on! I want one." So it had arrived here and the work was hanging in the dining room, and Tony F. didn't know it had gone through.

Rail: So he walked in the door—

Moffett: And he said, "What's that doing there," and I said "it's our finest possession." Anyway it was all really sweet, and then within just a couple of weeks he was gone.

Rail: Yeah.

Moffett: And you know, he was himself except he was definitely finicky about food, which I know was all related.

Rail: Yeah, everything tasted awful to him at that point.

Moffett: But I'm so glad that worked out, it was just very special, because I loved him too. It's one of those things, though, you guys were super good friends, but we only had these episodic things. Once we found ourselves in Geneva in a group show a hundred years ago, we had a ball.

Rail: You also had the same hometown.

Moffett: More or less, we're both Texans. I wasn't from Corpus.

Rail: Right, but he was born in San Antonio.

Moffett: He was?

Rail: Yes.

Moffett: Then we have the same hometown.

Rail: He lived in San Antonio until he was maybe five. And then he grew up in Corpus Christi.

Moffett: Oh I didn't know that either! We were probably born in the same hospital: the Nix.

Rail: So I was reading your interview with Douglas Crimp, and I was beginning to get the sense that a lot of the interviews that you've done start with Act Up and Gran Fury and that period of your "career"—I hate that word. I don't want to go down that route, because I think everyone now has fully digested that.

Moffett: They got it: He Kills Me, you're the guy who did...

Rail: I was thinking about your first show at Jay's. I mean he was very, very pleased that he had done that.

Moffett: And do you remember those beautiful Catherine Opies in the front? The L.A. Freeways?

Rail: Mhm.

Moffett: I was like, "Jay, sell one more of my paintings, I want an Opie so bad." It was the stupidest mistake I've ever made, I didn't have a fucking penny, but I wanted one so badly. Anyway that was great, that was wonderful.

Rail: Yeah those were great days. I feel like I followed your work without really knowing you. I sort of knew you, but it was all second hand, it was all like through Bob or through other people who knew you better than I did. So I started thinking about the work that you've been doing since you started showing really with Marianne [Boesky], cause this is your fourth show?

Moffett: Seventh.

Rail: Seventh show, wow, okay.

Moffett: My partnership with Marianne Boesky is going on 18 years. It's been long and mostly successful.

Rail: So I had a response from that body of work, and I still have that response, and I'm having it today. So I want to pursue the idea of the work that you're doing now as a sort of a refuge. Because, I feel like as gay men of a certain age, who've experienced a lot of loss, a lot of turbulence, we're in one of the most unstable moments in American history, probably the most unstable, disquieting time that any of us have ever experienced. I'm interested in this sort of movement from one form of knowledge, one form of experience, to something that is based on beauty and rooted in a kind of sensual relationship to the world. That seems to be a very important part of what you've been moving towards, in the time that you've become a more commercially viable artist

Moffett: Good. “Tank gawd” (as they say on Staten Island).

Rail: And I’m wondering what your thoughts are right now about ideas of pleasure, the capability to transmit sensual pleasure, through your work, and how you experience that as the maker of the work?

Moffett: I might be able to answer that, and this is absolutely parallel with the show: through nature. The beauty and the tragedy of nature is really fundamental to where this work is. It’s what’s driving this work and where it’s coming from. I would never apologize for that. I am of a certain age, and I did a certain kind of work that was very focused on people in the broadest sense, and that interest, frankly, in people in particular, has faded.

Rail: So people are not the focus of your attention?

Moffett: They’re not the motivating factor in my interests, in my work, or even in my politics.

Rail: Can you elaborate a little bit about when you felt that that was really a thing, that you had transitioned away from being a people-oriented artist to being a nature-oriented artist?

Moffett: The sociological dimensions of my art, which were central with a political underpinning literally ran and drove the work for decades. And the political part is still right there, in terms of the driving motivations, but the sociological part has been absolutely supplanted with flora, fauna, and nature in its broadest form. That’s some of what I’m trying to get at in this show. I actually had to look up the word nature to see exactly how broad it went. I don’t know if you’ve ever done that, but I really didn’t know, does it encompass everything, or is it just flora and fauna? How far out does nature go? Does it go all the way out, to the edge of the universe, which is why I made Night One. I didn’t actually know it was that broad, and that my interests could expand with it. Nature could go further, and did go further. Also, I have a degree in biology, I don’t know if you knew that.

Rail: I found that out in my research.



Donald Moffett, Lot 082019 (cocoa brain), 2019. Pigmented epoxy resin on wood panel support, steel, 96 x 84 x 6 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Donald Moffett. Photo: Joseph Parra.

Moffett: You know they say you just kind of circle round the same territories, you just roam around it differently depending on where you are at in a given moment. And so, this represents a big, great circling back, but I think that’s the key to what—I even hesitate—I don’t really talk about “beauty,” I mean these have luscious surfaces, no doubt about it.

Rail: They also have luscious shapes and luscious colors.

Moffett: Yes, they do. We work very hard on all of that, but it is driven by only what one could or wants to see in nature. This one is taken from a real cross-section of the brain, and loaded up with chocolate, you know it's just Cocoa Brain. So you know, the political dimension is still very much there, I mean I think we've got mushy leadership at the moment, and this is my pointing at that fact along with—then we move right along to Night One and organic, biological shapes in the middle, and fruit in its deformed way. That one's called a New Pippin, you know as in "Pippin Apple."

Rail: Ah, the green?

Moffett: The green. And that's named after a black plum. But, you know, I'm not going to mimic nature, not in my household!

Rail: But you're channeling nature? Would that be a way of thinking about it? I mean was there a turning point in your personal relationship to nature in the most simplified, dumbed down expression? Like did you walk in a landscape and have an epiphany?

Moffett: Kind of, but it was all about a returning. This is quite uninteresting, but I had a very small family, although my parents are gone. I started showing with Lora Reynolds in Austin—do you know Lora?

Rail: I know her pretty well, but haven't seen her in years.

Moffett: Well, she just asked me, and I said, "you bet," cause I just wanted to be in Texas. So when I would go there, do a show, or check in with her or see what she was doing, I would then take off into the Texas hill country, where I spent a lot of time growing up. And it was a revelation

Rail: I actually know the Texas hill country, I have family in San Antonio and Austin, so I've spent some time there.

Moffett: So you know, in the spring, it's as good as it gets, you know it's just profoundly beautiful. Although I'd spent 40 years trying to get away from Texas, a lot of us did. We needed out. And that was not an ill-informed or bad decision, but a few years ago, I felt a profound pull to go revisit the best of the Texas landscape.

Rail: So it's a connection to boyhood in a sense?

Moffett: You might be way ahead of me, psychologically, because I'm not always in front of my psychology, but it was certainly a reconnection with the sensations of my youth.

Rail: In nature.

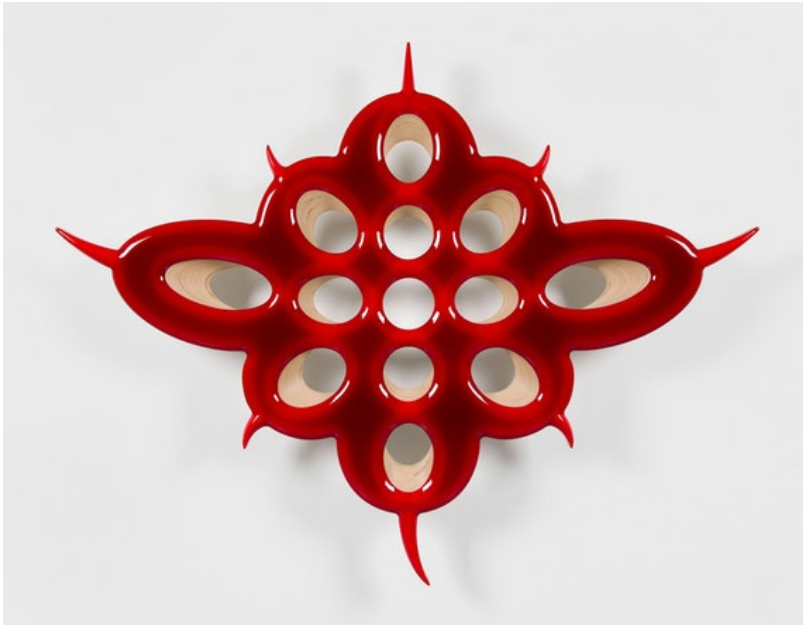
Moffett: Yeah, and all of that richness.

Rail: I would propose that boys of a certain level of sensitivity, who have access to the woods, to the hills, to beaches, mountains, are drawn there because they want to experience themselves as being part of nature, but they're getting a message—especially if you grow up in a non-homophilic environment, you tend to have a sense that you're an aberration or a freak, or something that nature would not have wanted, would not have condoned.

Moffett: We're talking the early '60s.

Rail: Exactly, but speaking from my own experience, the pre-puberty relationship that I had, spiritually, with nature became a very very powerful force, 20, 30, 40 years later.

Moffett: Really? So you're identifying actually with me currently, or in the last few, say, 10 years in a similar way?



Donald Moffett, Lot 062619 (cell division, red), 2019. Epoxy resin and acrylic on wood panel support, steel, 50 1/2 x 65 x 6 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Donald Moffett. Photo: Joseph Parra.

Rail: I am, because I recognize what you're describing, because it happened to me. And that was a lot of Tony's and my relationship to Fire Island. There's a way of being in nature there that is, you know, very innocent, very pure, and I guess we responded to a hunger for that, an almost primeval dialogue with nature.

Moffett: So maybe my answer is good enough in a sense, if you have some parallel thinking. Because it's not like we sit here and worry about beauty, you know, and worry about making beauty, but if you just turn your attention the slightest bit to nature, and you're swamped—

Rail: Overwhelmed—

Moffett: By it. So, that's the key. We still make, political art here, as far as I'm concerned, it just happens to have a very lush form and finish.

Rail: How do you experience the political aspect of it? As a former political artist—as a former maker of what is commonly thought of as “political art.”

Moffett: Subtly, you know, in terms of the expression. They're subtle, but, through titling, you know I'm sitting there looking at Ill, it sets it up—kind of frames it—as this is about the underbelly of where we find ourselves in relationship to nature. The titling of the works themselves frame them in some way, and the context too. You'd be surprised, possibly—I don't know, are you friends with Marianne [Boesky]?

Rail: We're friendly.

Moffett: You'd be surprised how much encouragement and framing the gallery does in this respect. Given her posture—you know her excellent dresses, her excellent, rich tastes. But she is a person with deep political impulses. So this gallery space itself is considered—in my opinion—a frame for meaningful, content-driven, works of whatever finish, of whatever form. But rather than the context I, again, I'm just gonna indulge myself and go back to this idea of refuge.

Rail: Oh yeah, I want to get back there. That's a beautiful word.

Moffett: I think that we come to nature and to art at different points in our lives for the purpose of finding a refuge. And again, I think if you live through periods of political upheaval the idea that you can, in full consciousness, have an aesthetic experience that connects you to that primal relationship with nature, then that itself is an awakening, it's a form of connection through nature, through beauty, if you want, back to yourself, back to who you... how you find yourself.

Rail: Where I was gonna go with that: your poetic articulation of that refuge had an extremely concrete reality in those very years we're alluding to. Those early horrible years. And I want to get back there.

Moffett: We might have a little trouble. I'm still... I cannot talk about it, I go weepy, which is hard to believe all these years later.

Rail: Trust me on this.

Moffett: Well I'll try. I don't know why I should, but I'll try. Because there are points where I'm likely to say "that's it, we can't go any further, it's still too messy." Anyway, Don Ruddy, did you ever know the extraordinary Don Ruddy? He was not really in the art world, he made concrete furniture. Anyway, I'm off topic but he was actually dying and he would say, "All I wanna do is get back to my studio." You know, a lot of us felt that way. See, I'm already like, I'm already like...

Rail: You okay?

Moffett: Funky. Anyway let's bring it up a little bit. The thing is just that the studio is clearly that: a refuge.

Rail: I think you do talk about that in an interview that I read, that you needed to get to your studio.

Moffett: Yeah.

Rail: To kind of like, shut the door.

Moffett: Quit Gran Fury. Gran Fury had to be put down. You know, it really did. We all felt that way and it felt timely in some ways. And you know, I went back to my studio to review, replenish, right after. I retired to rebuild.

Rail: Because nobody really knew who you were beyond Gran Fury? Yeah, it didn't seem like you were producing objects and putting them out there in the world. It seemed like what you were doing was you were making the work that you made and there wasn't a refuge, there wasn't a way to separate from that.



Donald Moffett, Lot 062819 (nature cult, counterclockwise black), 2019. Epoxy resin, urethane paint, and UV clear coat on wood and urethane panel support, steel, 48 1/4 x 47 1/4 x 7 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Donald Moffett. Photo: Joseph Parra.

Moffett: Well, Gran Fury was overwhelming in terms of its demands and its activity and its opportunities

Rail: As was Bureau if I understand it.

Moffett: As was Bureau. But there was always a studio. Marlene [McCarty] had a studio, I had a studio, Bureau was frankly put together to support our studio practices but took on its own life and almost killed us you know but we would have never not done it.

Rail: But it seems like your show at Jay Gorney Modern Art was kind of a—

Moffett: It was the first of the extruded work which came out of that long retreat into the studio.

Rail: It was the first?

Moffett: He was the one, to Jay's credit. But looking at it now, Jay gave a lot of people their first show. I think, from Carroll Dunham to Tim Rollins to...

Rail: I know. It's an incredible history. But again, though my friendship with Tony Feher was in a different situation, because he almost died of AIDS, and then when he was sort of in the Lazarus phase, after the AIDS "cocktail" had been introduced, was when our friendship started.

Moffett: How did that happen?

Rail: Through someone named Lee Gordon, who you may not know. I did an exhibition, my first real exhibition in a contemporary art venue, at the New Museum in '82. It was called Extended Sensibilities.

Moffett: Oh yeah.

Rail: It was about gay and lesbian sensibility in art. I was a kid, Marcia [Tucker] just said, "You seem like you have good ideas." And then suddenly I found myself making the show, and Lee was one of the artists in the show.

Moffett: Really?

Rail: Yeah, he also lived near me which was convenient because I didn't know people. I mean I still have that feeling of not knowing people in the art world. So Tony had a show at Wooster Gardens when Brent Sikkema first ran it, and it was of all of the pennies on the floor and the jars, things like that.

Moffett: Walking up the stairs.

Rail: Yeah and I could not get that show out of my mind. I think Tricia Collins had put him in a group show at some point, and I saw the works and was like "What?!" and then I saw the show at Wooster Gardens and I think I was on the phone telling Lee about it and Lee said, "I know Tony, I can introduce you." And then Tony had a sort of a tag sale in his studio. We went over to his studio and certain pieces had like a \$10, a \$15, \$25 price tag on it and you could also barter.

Moffett: I'll give you anything.

Rail: So that was the beginning of our friendship.

Moffett: A very, very good beginning.

Rail: I was over there hanging out with him, and I think I spent three hours before I decided to get a little daisy in a paper cup with cement, you know. Tony was clearly finding a new beginning in objects where the discards

became something else. His work before was interesting but his work after—beginning in '92 or '93 forward—it was just amazing. It was so **tRailblazing**. I often thought about the idea that we all need to focus on an object and the capacity of an object to tell us things. If we keep our attention on the thing the thing will speak to us about ourselves. I mean it's all a conversation we're having with ourselves with the object being the medium.

Moffett: I feel what you're describing, maybe, to some degree. Or at least there's some sort of relationship between that.

Rail: I also think enabling the viewer to develop their own attentiveness towards nature is something that will happen through work like yours. That if people find the nature connection they will also maybe be more attentive towards that yearning inside of themselves, that hunger to feel like they're part of nature, and they belong within nature.

Moffett: Yes to that, but I do function in a gallery and in a contemporary discourse about art, and I think we might, if we're lucky, be in yet another expansive period of a new vocabulary and a new conversation. A new phase of a broader language that encompasses nature and its illnesses and the predicament we're in with nature, and transforms it into the conversations of art again. It's never left but it certainly gets sidetracked. It's been sidetracked for decades frankly in terms of my world and this political art that you were just referring too that was my art for a long time. But I hope we're in a broadening. There's no discourse that I currently think should be eliminated, but I think there needs to be added discourse that involves more politics, that includes climate change and our relationship to both.

Rail: It does seem like there's a public conversation that's happening.

Moffett: I think so.

Rail: And that's moving very much in that direction.

Moffett: I don't know what kind of art to make frankly, and you can quote me on that.

Rail: That's a beautiful phrase: "I don't know what kind of art to make."

Moffett: But I don't know what kind of art to make to broaden this very thing that I'm pointing out, that I'm referring to. But we try, you know. You make a stab at it.

Rail: Also the broadening is happening to you. In your relationship to objects, art.

Moffett: Definitely.

Rail: People less, nature more.

Moffett: Definitely. As I say, when you're skipping down the road, it's about birds, bees, and butterflies. Now it's really all about birds, bees, and butterflies, and I really mean it.

Rail: I believe that you mean it. And I even get that, viscerally, I mean, I get that through my pores. I want to bring up a piece of yours that doesn't get mentioned very much from your early days. It's the Allen Schindler piece, In Honor of Allen R. Schindler [1993].

Moffett: That's a Bureau piece, you know.

Rail: Then we don't have to talk about it. I came across that in reference today and I remember how I felt about that piece.

Moffett: How did you feel about it?

Rail: I didn't have a place to grieve over what had happened to Allen Schindler. It seems the references to what happened to him were all about the crime and about the meaning of the crime, the murder. And I thought what that piece did was allow me to feel that he wasn't a statistic, he wasn't somebody whose death was a turning point. I mean yes, that's all true, but he was a man, he was a son, he was a friend, he was a brother, he was loved. I felt like suddenly in the public sphere you gave me—

Moffett: A sense that, my name—meaning, Schindler's name—will not be discounted here.

Rail: Exactly. You gave me a place to feel, "I have the right to mourn Allen Schindler as a fellow human being who was butchered through hatred but deserves to be remembered with love as well." And that's kind of about his place in nature not his place in a social history.

Moffett: Well that's it, what're you gonna do? Bring me back to people? Cause now I'm thinking "oh I used to like people." You're gonna make me revisit people I would not have otherwise wanted to see.



Donald Moffett, Lot 072419 (the new pippin), 2019. Urethane paint and UV clear coat on wood and urethane panel support, steel, 29 1/2 x 29 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Donald Moffett. Photo: Joseph Parra.

Rail: Okay, enough of the past. Let's talk about your upcoming show. Can you tell me about the genesis of the imagery in some of the new works? I'm particularly interested in some of your botanical references.

Moffett: It all starts in the natural world. Last summer, my studio crew and I toured an extraordinary exhibit called Field Notes: Seed Stories and the Power of Plants at the Staten Island Museum. The museum has a deep natural history collection including a gorgeous specimen sheet collected in the 19th century by the noted paleobotanist Arthur Hollick. In a flash, this specimen rather straightforwardly became Lot 091819 (the pentagonal oak) which is a central piece in my upcoming show ILL (nature paintings). Likewise, Lot 072419 (the new pippin) is the title that has settled on a work that could (by a flimsy rationale) be described as a deformed green apple, a Pippin apple. And to add a tangle, I live with an extraordinary painting by Horace Pippin which has nothing to do with an apple but much to do with nature, and our place in it. It is sometimes an ambrosia that feeds into the works, but never more ambrosial than nature itself.

Rail: How did you arrive at the decision to make the textures of these new paintings so glossy and tactilely sensual? It's been a gradual transition from the earlier, more roughly-textured paintings, but these seem to be an apotheosis of something.

Moffett: No, no. No apotheosis. The extruded paintings are still squirting out of me, so they're still in the mix. As for the gloss surfaces that make up some of the ILL (nature paintings), we like 'em. However, in addition to the resin that yields one hard gloss surface, we're working with a visually velvet matte coating that confuses

the exact location of the surface in space and is completely different from the glassy precision of the gloss. So, there are multiple ambitions that we pursue at once, and that's the way I like it. Why limit any material avenue in the studio? With nobody watching, we live it up out here. And, for the record, the "we" is a skilled studio crew that's been fundamental to the making of this show and includes Shaun Krupa, Joseph Parra, Rob Polidoro, Andre Yvon, and Elexa Jefferson.