

Artists unmask absurdities of everyday life

NANCY TOUSLEY
CALGARY HERALD

On the face of it, if you'll pardon the pun, hairy warts and defecating dogs might not seem like such palatable subjects for painting.

REVIEW

Sandra Meigs and Damian Moppett: New and Recent Work at Trepanier Baer Gallery, through Nov. 21

But both have been in the repertoire, at least since the Renaissance, as signs of idealized everyday life. And both are features of an inspired pairing that has brought two of the country's most interesting artists together in a show characterized by a combination of grotesquerie and black humour that is potent, judgment and perverse.

The pairing of Sandra Meigs and Damian Moppett, who are each represented in Calgary by Trepanier Baer Gallery, was Moppett's idea. The 29-year-old, Calgary-born artist, who's making a name from his Vancouver base, recognizes a kindred spirit in Meigs, a former Toronto painter in prime mid-career, who is 42 and now lives in Victoria. It's the shock of recognition that an artist feels, conveyed viscerally to viewers of this show by mixing Meigs' series *Reckless Days* (1977) with paintings from Moppett's series *The Mechanics of Everyday Life* (1998).

The unexpected mix is fresh, exhibiting even, in the brash visual ostentatiousness that bubbles up from the apparently incongruous match. Moppett's jargish works look like drawings but are precisely delineated paintings of line drawings in black or blue on stark white backgrounds. They are "cynical deceptions" in that



Reckless Days, 1977, by Sandra Meigs

artist's "handwriting" for which their precise crosshatching is most like that of 18th-century engravings of paintings.

In any event, the way the paintings are made is quite at odds with the figures they depict. These are humpy or gaug grotesques with fragmentary, deformed bodies and runaway bodily fluids, like something out of Salvador Dali crossed with Ed "Big Daddy" Roth's Rat Fink and American underground comic. They're both classically austere and as cartoonishly surreal as the doodles of a teenage boy.

The more knowing Meigs goes over the top in a different direction. The eight, small, intense paintings that make up *Reckless Days*, each of which represents an hour of the day, have a naive, thrown-together look and a holiday air. Loosely worked in rich saturated colours, they are studied with tiny glowing lights and surrounded by dancing auras that reflect off silver tinsel "balloons."

The paintings are occupied by Dis-

ness — stick out from their surfaces. Moppett's paintings make Meigs' look like the work of a romantic. But from underneath the aura of strange enchantment and the glamour of the lights, the humour of *Reckless Days* rises with brooding melancholy and high anxiety that threatens to erupt into sheer giddiness. This atmosphere of taut stillness is something both bottles of work share.

These pictures want to be looked at slowly. As they absorb attention, their emotional temperature rises. Both Meigs and Moppett focus on the body through struggles in their works only to push deeper into mental and emotional states. Both draw on childhood and adolescence, framed by mass culture, in order to probe the culture's psyche: what is the real tenor of everyday life in consumer societies of the information age? Their use of goofiness and vulgarity unmasks absurdities, shows up stress in the system and points the way to an escape hatch.

In one of Moppett's big black paintings, the sexually ambiguous figure is busy sucking in appendages into its own orifices and tying itself up in knots, as though trying to disappear from humiliation over its abject state. The image is hysterical, ridiculous and poignant all at the same time and its complexity is where its perverseness lies.

In Meigs' work, the location is diffused. It's in images like that of the little elephant, which it seems will never make it up the hill under the buzzing Christmas-tree lights of Noon. It's in the cave with the monkey and the cat playing with fire in Late Afternoon. It attends the elephant seen, again, lying green and desolate, perhaps cold and dead, on the riverbank in 2 A.M. It circulates through the blue Day After Tomorrow



Untitled, 1996, by Damian Moppett, acrylic on canvas, 96 inches x 56 inches.

403 242 2056

TREPANIER BAER

TUE, NOV-7-98 10:19AM

TOTAL P.02

11/1/1998 11:08 AM C:\PAPER\11/1/98

PAINTED EDITIONS

FILE 03