

The New York Times

Arts

ART IN REVIEW; Donald Moffett -- 'The Extravagant Vein'

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: Friday, February 21, 2003

Marianne Boesky Gallery

535 West 22th Street

Chelsea

Through March 15

Since the 1980's Donald Moffett has been making some of the quietest, subtlest political art around, and he continues to do so in his first solo at Boesky. The main part of the show is made up of a series of impressionistic-looking landscapes of bridges, trees and leafy glades. From a distance they have the flickering iridescence of Monet's Giverny paintings, though a sustained look reveals actual movement, branches rustled by a breeze, a distant figure moving.

The "paintings" are, in fact, films projected onto pigment-covered canvases. All the images are of the Rambles, a hilly, secluded portion of Central Park crisscrossed by a network of winding paths, the "extravagant vein" of the show's title. The area is known both as a prime bird-watching territory and, since the 19th century, as a cruising spot for gay sex. Like the Rambles itself, Mr. Moffett's landscape paintings are both real and artificial, idyllic and psychologically loaded. They add implications of surveillance to a traditional art genre. And they convey the tension of narrative suspense, of not knowing what will happen next, felt in different ways by birders and cruisers alike.

Mr. Moffett also assumes the role of a mute recording witness in a series of pencil drawings titled "Mr. Gay in the U.S.A.," in Boesky's second gallery. The title refers to Ronald Gay, a Vietnam veteran so tormented by people making fun of his name that he took a gun to a gay bar in Virginia, and opened fire on the clients, killing one man and wounding six others. Mr. Moffett attended Mr. Gay's sentencing; the series is made up of his quick, courtroom drawings and scribbled quotes, which add up to another oblique document in this artist's continuing study of the shifting positions of normality and strangeness, in which he lets the facts speak for themselves. HOLLAND COTTER

A version of this review appeared in print on Friday, February 21, 2003, on section E page 45 of the New York edition.