

DEBRA DAWES

A LIFE EXAMINED

*'Because of its camouflaged appearance in life and art, there is the danger of accepting oppression; oppression does not always cause revolt [...] art is an abstract, a free domain of life [...] It does not tolerate oppression and can resist it, for art is not bound by material or physical conditions.'*¹

Debra Dawes expertly walks the line defining reductive abstraction and an experiential reflection of a particular time and place. Employing the formal structures of the grid, colour fields, planes, volume, space and line, Dawes's work continues the abstract discourse which began with the advent of modernism. Her work, however, is best assessed by considering not only its formal properties but also the social and political conditions which have inevitably informed her production since the mid 1980s.

Dawes eradicates the figure in her work, removing any fixed representation with which to orientate oneself. Over the years, she has employed a diverse range of visual trajectories which invite varied physical responses. Her early work depicted condensed vertical and horizontal grids which later incorporated a fracturing or schism along the 'horizon' of the work, as in *Lifting the Sky* (1999) and *Glare* (2001). The rhythm of repetition in these works is both seductive and destabilising, and reflects some of the ways in which Dawes has conceptualised the influence of landscape on her practice. Having grown up on the Western Plains of New South Wales, a sense of depth and distance is evident in the enveloping planes of her canvases. But there is also a sense of division, of barriers and resistance, as light vibrates uncomfortably against dark counterparts.

In *Starlite* (1993) Dawes adopted the decorative suburban concrete brick motif, 'Bessa Brick', while in the *Gingham* series (1995), the artist depicted the cross-hatching associated with fabric design. Through the use of recognisable motifs reconstituted in repetitive edge-to-edge abstracted form, Dawes undermines their representation, creating an amorphous optical ruse. We enter a space in which the barrier of a wall or the regimented strata of domestic fabric is compromised and played with, creating an active space which subtly critiques parochial attitudes. Scale shifts, and we are led into a physical environment which pulses and defies its own apparent order.

The concept of space as social commentary is articulated most directly in Dawes's recent series *Cover up* (2006). Comprised of a large-scale Arctic camouflage net which festooned the gallery space, the work was realised at a time when Australian political

leaders presented policies, reforms and rhetoric that did not appear to reflect democratic or humanitarian values. An evocative and astute metaphor for the blanket distrust of the power structures that govern us, *Cover up* also signified an aesthetic and material shift in Dawes' practice. Through the conceptual associations of camouflage she has continued to disrupt and fracture the pictorial plane, a process culminating in the *Doubling—dealing* (2007) series on display in this exhibition.

Life, it seems, is out of balance. The war, it emerges, should not have taken place. We are surrounded by conflicting political sentiments and by a pervasive atmosphere encouraging fear and racism. Dawes's surreptitious approach to painting draws us in to her own revolt at these unfolding events as she explores this climate of uncertainty and flux. These paintings command our attention, their aggressive palette jars and shifts. The concertina zigzags both recede and advance, forward, backward and forward again. The regimented segments are slipping; we can see a pencil grid 'insisting' on disrupting the order, while the neat regularity of the shapes collapses in places. If we allow ourselves to be orchestrated by these works, momentarily, we enter a space which dissuades apathy; one which attempts to reflect a climate of questioning we should always be participants in.

Clare Lewis

Clare Lewis is a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art and co-founder of Terminus Projects, a site-specific art organisation.

1. Piet Mondrian, 'Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life' (1939-40), in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (eds), Thames and Hudson, London, 1987 p. 323