

A Constellation of Options

Starlite - Art Gallery of New South Wales & Wollongong City Gallery 1993

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If you stand in front of Debra Dawes' *Starlite* for a few seconds, long enough to give it some play, it starts to play *you*. Try to watch yourself watching it If you focus on the black, the white will persist with a crisp and undeniable claim for attention, after which the black will ooze back to offer solace for your retina even as the white pulses hotly again. If you look for a foreground, then a background shunts up promptly, only to be displaced quickly by a contesting plane. Should you home in on a square, a diamond presently insists itself. Focus on a diamond, and your peripheral vision is stippled with a starburst of protuberant rings. Try to see all these circles at once ... now a square presses its claim. Shift your scrutiny out from the singular dimensions of one component block, and attempt to hold the complete grid-pattern in your purview: the huge rectangle engulfs you in a cinematic shift of subjective scale wherein you feel yourself become minute. Lost momentarily in the stars' pulsing expanse, you puzzle over your exact placement in the space the painting offers for involvement. The instant you feel this vertigo, you can cast your attention back to one particular block in the wall, where an illusion of solidity and stability might reside. But straightaway, lest you begin to feel in charge of your own looking, the pulses, shimmers and scale-shifts of the complete configuration all surge again to swirl you some more.

Such is the pitch and yaw of the painting. Although *Starlite* is stationary on a wall, you see quickly that the installation will not hang still like a 'composed' picture.

Try another approach. Let the painting 'unfold' like time-based art, like a story or a musical sequence. Pick out an 'optical tune' by flitting your focus from panel to incrementally different panel, as if you were plinking individual notes on a piano keyboard. Momentarily this appears to work, inasmuch as the painting seems to settle into a sparse, ambling kind of melody (like a Kraftwerk ditty, perhaps). But suddenly the entire symphonic grid strums chordally through your picky notational focus. No, even with time, *Starlite* never settles. You can't rest with it. It doesn't empty out like something with content. Rather, it works out like a training regime or an exercise in dynamics.

Indeed, *Starlite* provides exercise for the eyes. You could say it is a pretext for optical calisthenics. Or more accurately, it arranges a set of exercises for the faculties of visual perception and apprehension. This is to say that in the process of meditating on *Starlite*, you sense yourself not only looking very actively but also developing a better understanding of the habits of selection, prioritisation and presumption that seeing tends to involve. The installation becomes an occasion for checking on the status of oneself as a perceptive subject -- what do you choose to include and exclude, how will you segregate and aggregate the various components of the picture, to what extent are you marshalling your interpretive vision and to what extent is it marshalled for you by habit and by the patterns of the picture itself?

Because the act of looking at paintings can still prompt interrogative ruminations such as these, it is still easy enough to argue that painting really matters. Moreover painting can be proclaimed to be psychologically and politically vital, precisely because it can move a viewer in a never-ending process of engagement with the changeable worlds of appearance, sentience and meaning. It could even be argued that a vital painting clarifies a subject's options-in-the-world as much as it clarifies an object's status-in-the-world.

When you look at a painting you exercise options. Yet this is not always obvious. Unless you are prompted to change your habits, the choices involved in viewing can seem automatic. Take the question of generic options, for example. When you walk up to a gallery wall, your first operation is usually to decide whether the painting you're encountering is abstract or figurative. Either you surmise immediately that you're looking at a principally formalist exercise wherein the artwork is concerned mainly with the integration of its materials. Or you quickly come to regard the painting as definitively a representational system in which the image refers you to an object or event outside the frame so that you have a chance to reassess your received comprehension of that external phenomenon.

Of course, no painting is entirely one genre or another. Every formalist exercise refers outside itself, at least to other formalist exercises and to shapes, colours, gestures, materials or textures that exist in the habitable world. And every representational picture is engaging in formalist terms at least to the extent that you assess the painting's technique and substance whenever you appraise the 'fit' between the artist's image and your own vision of the actual object or referent. Generally, however, habit dictates that we promptly regard a painting as clearly one kind and not the other, as either formalist or referential.

This is an habitual trap in binary thinking. It may well be true that a profusion of yes/no decisions are the basis of all rational thought and verbal communication, but this does not necessarily mean that within the techniques of

binary thinking an exclusivist trope of 'either ... or' is the only way to proceed. One can lapse into the habit of presuming that the temporary, contingent choice of one option over another serves to relegate the other option to a permanent, 'type-cast' status of failure, or impotence, or insignificance. This habit leads to the establishment of a 'triumphalist' system of non-negotiable primacies: principal vanquishes secondary, major rules minor, powerful over-rides impotent, included shuts out excluded, central banishes marginal, white expunges black, referential precludes formalist. One falls easily into a habit of accepting dyads of dominance over passivity or primacy over alterity. And given that a system of dominance works to keep itself in power, one can fall into a conservative habit when one ceases to challenge or doubt an habitual ordering of social experience.

In its quiet way, Starlite works to unsettle anyone habituated to thinking in 'either/or' dualities. The painting stimulates the viewer to make choices which must be acknowledged to be provisional, mutable and negotiable. For example, if one looks to prioritise the whiteness of the painting as if it were clearly the cardinal feature among colour-options on offer, one finds instantaneously that blackness -- the other chromatic option -- is arraigned so that it cannot be ignored, discounted or deemed subsidiary.

Again and again when looking at Starlite, you find dualities of choice at the same time as you find you cannot accord one option a permanent functional primacy over another. Rather than thinking 'either this or that', you become aware of yourself continuously thinking (and seeing) 'this for now and yet the other presently'.

The painting unsettles rather than banishes binary thinking. (In this sense it is best understood as 'reformist' rather than 'revolutionary'.) At any one instant, the viewer of Starlite stands amidst a twinkling constellation of yes/no options concerning focus and scan. You make your choices within a dualist regime, but they are inclusive choices, inclusive of the immediate, burgeoning prospects of all other options. In this way the painting is dynamic and restless rather than conservative. An extraordinary equivalence of possibility is accorded all features and interpretive options in the painting. You can't ignore the insistence of the alternatives. For as long as you look at Starlite, you find yourself engaged in a decision-making process which is explicitly dynamic. Moreover, you soon start to enjoy such mutability.

At this stage it might occur to you that the painting is somehow utopian. In the absence of a stabilising structure of primacies, the picture arrays as glittering grid full of subtle differences which are all equal in value and valency. The painting presents a template of endless negotiation. Its elements don't pan out into stratifications of hierarchical worth. Its skyful of options are paradoxically valueless and valuable all over. Everything is up there, for grabs.

Indeed I would argue that value is one of the things this highly formalist picture represents. Starlite is an image of something of unsettled worth: a mundane cement-block wall. What makes the painting something more than a dazzling exercise in op-art is the referent that continuously presents itself for the viewer's consideration. It is a picture of a wall, something so banal that you are prompted to speculate about its value as you stand in front of it in this wrong place, in this art gallery.

In a system of exclusivist, conservative dualities, banality would lie in a secondary, ordinary or valueless realm. On the other side of a conservative dyad, in the primary realm, you would expect to find the rare, the extraordinary, the valuable. But if you chose not to deploy a conservative dualism, if you chose to unsettle the array of options, you might find yourself actually assessing the limits or boundaries by which value, primacy and authority are customarily sequestered from everything that gets exclusively classified as valueless. You might find yourself assaying the quality of banality itself. And this would mean you were weighing up the worth of your everyday, habitual experience. In this respect -- in the way you stand a chance of confronting the bounds of the ordinary -- this starlit wall begins to grow in value as it continues to unsettle and prompt.

In its construction and its reference, therefore, Starlite is a meditation on the negotiability, and thus the permeability, of the limits that are set for us in secular experience. This in part is what the picture is 'about'. The wall represented in the painting is shot through with space and filigree; there are ways through this barrier. This thing which generically ought to be blank, appears as a constellation of shifting, differentiated detail. It is a picture of dynamics and boundlessness.

In conclusion, therefore, let me reiterate the sly politics of this work which might first appear 'merely decorative': Starlite is cunningly set up to dramatise conditions of possibility for an unpredictable slew of outcomes. Repeatedly, the activity of disregarding boundaries pays dividends in this valuable picture.

As a final example of the invigorating quality of Starlite's visual exercises, let's watch what happens when we choose to break down the hold of the frame around each of the 104 individual panels: it is at this moment of 'disregard' that the optically thrilling sieve-system of circles appears all over the rectilinear wall-surface. The circles arise out of a readiness to look past the obvious limits. If we rest with the accommodation offered by each

frame-block -- if we kowtow to the incumbent, containing system of straightline ratio -- we don't gain access to many of the active, 'fugitive' pleasures latent in this wall, this specious impediment.

This is something to be going on with.