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Instead, blindness becomes a term that forms its own pairing with the pole of opticality by constructing another paradigm- vision/blindness-on the body of the perceiver, in all his or her physical, material existence. In so doing, the work of the heterological becomes obvious, because it forces one to see that it was always on, in, and through the body of the perceiver that the aesthetic paradigm operated; ...The paradigm vision/ blindness returns sight to its seat in the affective, erotic ground of the body...

Rosalind Krauss, "Antivision"¹

The effects Debra Dawes creates through her canvases rely upon the most duplicitous optical strategy. That is, to seduce and at the same time resist our gaze. You will find there are pulses and rhythms animating these works that catch your eyes even as these same rhythms dissolve the coherence of form upon which visuality is thought to depend. Dawes' works never simply arrest our attention, they mobilise our perception. Looking at Dawes' meticulously painted, coloured grids is an active, sensual, destabilising experience. The act of looking - and so our concept of vision - is regrounded in the body. The body of the viewer who walks up close, moves away and returns in an attempt to fix and define the visual input.

Dawes uses everything at her disposal: light, shade, colour, repetition rhythm and texture to direct our attention simultaneously towards opposing poles of visual signification. The effects are vibrant and immediate - like coloured tapestries enfolding us; her canvases draw the viewer into ambiguous depths. The very depth that perspectival grids generally stabilise thus becomes in her canvases a quality without an object, an effluorescence of colours and rhythms that Dawes manipulates to tease our impulse to visually define space.

The traditional grid form, symbolic of detached mastery through visual possession is mobilised by Dawes in a perverse way. For she uses its repetitions, one of the strongest elements of order in our visual field to thwart the establishment of stable forms and meanings. Far from celebrating sight as the sovereign sense via the abstraction of vision and rationalisation of form, Dawes' works displace the cherished dualisms of modernist aesthetics. Certainly these works recall the pursuit by modernists such as Mondrian of a pure opticality, but in Dawes' work the essentialist categories of Neo-Plasticism come unstuck. Neat distinctions between percept and concept, sight and touch, visual truth and bodily pleasure break down.

Dawes' work celebrate the relations between things, they rely upon confusing the intellect physiologically, upon holding opposed terms in suspension. The canvases are large, closely worked creations in which visual elements are operating at even the most intimate level, events that crucially affect our overall engagement with the canvas. You discover for example a minute gestural detail, blobs of bleeding colour at the edges of the grid lines, which in the ordered context of the overall work achieve an impact akin to the grandiose gestures of abstract expressionism. Even so these blobs continue to register as simply traces of the work process. Neither one thing nor the other, this painterly detail effectively confuses those hierarchies of structure and detail through which we mentally organise visual data.

A similar strategy is discernible in the harmonic colour progressions that never fully resolve. The colours are graded so that they pass into one another instead of stopping at some definite mid point. Colour is thus exploited for its rhythmic potential instead of being used as a spatial indicator, in the same way as the grid repetitions are used to open up the rhythms of visual events, not fix them. Our gaze is trapped running between figure and ground, caught up in the multiple flicker of colour lines. Emergent forms appear and disappear, always just evading full visual definition.

In their resistance to a rational aesthetic gaze, Dawes' works produce another sort of knowledge, a 'betweenness' or interstitial sensuality. This is not a visual experience that refers or corresponds to anything external to the observer. It is rather a knowledge that refigures the body of the viewer as a productive body with a range of capacities to generate visual experiences. Dawes' work has thus been described as 'a reaction against narrative', as against informing someone about something in the world. The order here is not a simple sequence, but one which floats around you, and which can be pieced together in many different ways.²

Dawes' canvases force us to be aware of the opacity of vision. An opacity that is not a function of the richness of visual language, but is rather a function of the mobile sense that no image or visual sign can enclose.

1 - R. Krauss, "Antivision", October No.36, (Spring 1986) pp.147-154.

2 - P. Hansford, Debra Dawes, Abstract Paintings, July 1988. Catalogue essay for Mori Gallery, Sydney and George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, 1988.

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