

Restless, Abstract and Realist
The paintings of Debra Dawes

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Gray Spectra, Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney, 1996

For ten years now, Debra Dawes has been producing series after series of exquisitely sparse paintings. They are almost always concerned with the basic elements of visual perception: whiteness, blackness, rectilinear form, repetition and difference. The paintings are as rewarding as they are austere and rigorous. They require you to work with them, to observe yourself looking, as you accept the pleasures of light and texture and as you sense the patterns of feelings and provisional meanings that the paintings can generate. Inevitably, such work has been seen as minimalist, grid-governed and therefore high-modernist. This impression has been helped along by some of the titles Dawes has accorded her exhibitions: 'Psychedelia and Other States' (1987), 'Abstract Paintings' (1988) and 'On the Edge' (1992). Impeccably avant-garde.

Given that these works calmly claimed their place amid the arising jangle of postmodernism, Dawes seemed to be applying her sly sense of irony and self-consciousness to a meditation on the vagaries of the artworld. The paintings seemed to transcend the topical brouhaha, to be making a statement in their quietness. But as I've continued to look, I've felt the ever-strengthening inkling that somewhere in this refined, aesthetic process, the politics of everyday life are also generating their charge.

And with her latest exhibition -- 'Gray Spectra' at the Sherman Goodhope gallery in Sydney -- Dawes has made this inkling plain. She has supplied subtle cues -- visual, material and textual -- to help you see that, complementary to the canny self-awareness, her paintings also reach past the artworld and refer, arrestingly, to the world of everyday life. Each time you think you have their measure, they offer a new, worldly way to think and feel with them. They are invigorating and restless that way. It's why her work continues to be so resonant and moving.

I'll respond to the cues presently. But first we need to address the paintings themselves, for they seize your attention as soon as you walk into their space.

Almost everyone who has admired and studied Dawes' paintings over the years can recall a startling moment of revelation when this ascetic and explicitly abstract work suddenly also offers itself as richly figurative and deeply personal and affecting. In recent exhibitions, Dawes has guided her viewers toward this realisation, giving her installations titles like 'Houndstooth' (1991) and 'Starlite' (1993). The names are right there in front of you, fixing your attention on mundane, domestic matter -- fabric that is sure to be somewhere in your house, or concrete brickwork that you can encounter on any day in any suburb or town. While viewing the latter two shows, as always I was delighted immediately by the optical vivacity of the black and white patterning, and then I was suddenly astonished to realise the simple fact that these uncompromising abstractions were also ultra-realist representations of worldly

goods. Moreover, I recall being puzzled by the depth of feeling that the pictured goods -- this banal fabric, that cheap architectural formwork -- provoked in me as I remembered their place in my world. How strange, these backyard epiphanies. How unsettling to feel these things from the past insist that they are not past.

In the 'Gray Spectra' show, Dawes has presented two enormous paintings of gingham fabric, one with blackness at all its edges, the other bounded by whiteness. Paintings of gingham, not on gingham, each a celebration of technique and discipline, each differing from the other in tone and 'chromatic liveliness', but each one serially related to the other and formally minimalist also. Yes, the modernist cues are all there: the grid, the black square, the white square, the brushwork, the determined avoidance of perspectival depth. Yes, if you rest with these concerns, you'll doubtless have a fine minimalist time. But you will also have ignored most of the guidance and a large portion of the pleasure and self-examination that Dawes offers.

Firstly, once you look past the abstraction, you see that these are unequivocally pictures of gingham, realist 'homages' to that material which has been a flag to every Australian's growing-up, that chequered signal which sends you racing through summer remembrances of mother, sister, teacher, shopkeeper, restaurateur, picnicker. Who can truly claim not to have at least one 'gingham emotion' zinging around in their nervous system? These paintings are quite deliberate, scattershot memory-prompts. They run your past and present across you in sudden, private warps and wefts.

But this exhibition called 'Gray Spectra' is not only the paintings. Nor is it as scattershot as it first seems. Dawes has designed and installed 'Gray Spectra' like a slow-release reservoir seeping with interpretive and memorial cues. And with each cue that you encounter, the show keeps bringing you back, offering you fresh layers of meaning and emotional charge. For example, a little while after entering the gallery, you notice that there are two tiny photographs lingering near the enormous canvasses. The first photo is dated 1963 and shows a group of white women standing in front of a train. One of the women holds a small girl who is wearing a gingham dress and looking directly at the camera. Amidst all these women, the child appears paradoxically constrained and displayed, yet also supported. In the background of the scene, there's a railway station sign: MOREE. The second photograph shows an old woman, white-skinned but cast darkly in profound shadow, quite stern of countenance and demeanour, standing in featureless space. A caption names her as 'Granny Rainbow' and informs that she was born in County Clare, Ireland, and that she died in Australia in 1963.

So, we can turn and look at the paintings again. That year 1963 and that place Moree both help us now to see each painting as a profusion of intersections. The photographs thus help us monitor our meditations in front of the paintings. 1963. Timelines crossing and momentarily connecting. The future for Granny Rainbow, the past for the woman who must be grown now and was present then as the gingham

girl. These timelines, these generations of women bound together by circumstance and possibly by family. Historical time jittering with interconnection and presence.

And what of the town of Moree? Street-grids laid out in huge rectangular expanses. Farm plantations sectioned off by fences. Cottonfields trimmed by irrigation channels. You can take these impressions back to the paintings. Now you see the black and the white side by side yet also blending to barely perceptible gray, this colour ghostly or spectral in the way it is perceived only fleetingly and in our peripheral vision as we scan the huge, contrasty canvas. Despite the fact that we see it, it's as if the gray is never explicitly present on the surface. If you look even more intently, you see black and white clashing also, rather than blending, when you look unblinkingly. The town of Moree. Black and white causing a giddy kind of stipple on the chequered surface of each painting. If you stand in front of them for long enough, the surfaces swim with a strange, active dapple, like the surface of water in a municipal swimming pool. The town of Moree. The town where, in the 1960s, there was so much contention about blackness and whiteness and their interrelation, so much contention staged in and around the town's swimming pool. So, once you've accepted the prompting of the photographs, these paintings (which you already know to be much more than mere abstraction) cease to be solely figurative depictions of gingham.

Then, just as all these references and remembrances begin to pull you under, you notice that Dawes has provided yet another way into the exhibition. A sheet of paper offers two quotes. One from Greg Denning, a contemporary ethnographic historian: 'There is no past that I describe that is not joined to my present. There is no other that I describe that is not joined to myself.' The second is from William Wordsworth, a voice from history:

Yet in the midst
Of these vagaries, with an eye so rich
As mine was -- through the chance, on me not wasted,
Of having been brought up in such a grand
And lovely region -- I had forms distinct
To steady me.

Now, if we take these cues to the paintings, the show deepens again. Denning writes of the necessity to understand oneself as inseparable from the very things that estrange us: the past and other people. Wordsworth writes of childhood and the heritage of one's homeland. Even if it is strange or grievously estranged, the homeland gives you many of the forms that will enable you to be well-formed in the larger world, even if you have come from a place as contentiously formed as Moree. So the paintings become autobiographical somehow. But they do not become arcane. For the other thing that the quotes do is focus your thinking on the world history that produced Australian culture. Wordsworth was writing in the age of Romanticism -- that fervid period of nature and European culture interrelated-- which was also the time of Australian colonialism -- that tumultuous time of Europeans' culture related ever so profitably to mercantile ideas of nature and

commodity. And given that we are living in an Australian culture now that is an ever-altering system that has survived collisions involving timelines, other people and differentiated forms of land-occupancy and self-definition, it is evident now that Dawes' black-and-white paintings -- so domestic and 'feminine' at first glance, so modernist rather than Romanticist at first glance -- must also be re-viewed as epic, national-history pictures. If the sullied ground of colonialism and agribusiness is the place you have come from, if it is the place where you must look for the forms to steady you, is it any wonder that the paintings you produce in reference to such a 'grand and lovely region' are so productively unsettled? Is it any wonder that, the more you scrutinise them, the more your paintings are 'ghosted' uneasily with retinal burns of gray spectra pushing into your perception like something that ought to be concealed but will not be kept down?

Meanwhile, all the time these questions are keeping you so restlessly engaged with 'Gray Spectra', you notice one more cue cradled in the wall: a small black heart of Irish bog-oak, etched with shamrocks. A nineteenth-century memorial trinket ... black, heavy, and still present in a world seemingly so estranged from such an other world past. So the cues prompt more enquiry. Who was in that second photo? Granny Rainbow. All that colour in her name. All that obscurity and age in her face and her stance. Where was she from? County Clare, Ireland. How did she get here, in this blank gray field, in Australia? Who did she give her heart to? Who lives on now with her legacy, known or unknown? Who was just beginning to live in 1963, when Granny Rainbow passed away and faded, seemingly, into the background?

The 'Gray Spectra' installation offers such questions. The answers? Well, by now you must know that they are up to you. And by now you know, also, that these kinds of questions and revelations and interconnections will never stop emerging, so long as you stay in the exhibition. Dawes' work is restless and invigorating that way.