

In the Name of Painting

Post West No 16-2000

Keith Broadfoot

Lifting the Sky, Sherman Galleries Goodhope Sydney 1999

In the attempt to find words to describe the experience of viewing Debra Dawes' paintings, the enigmatic definition that Walter Benjamin offered for his conception of the aura of the artwork is irresistibly recalled: 'the unique apparition of a distance no matter how close it may be'. There is a strange weave of the near and the far in Dawes' work that produces a compelling presence. Standing in front of any one of Dawes' paintings your position is never fixed: lines and bands oscillate in and out of focus, what is figure and what is ground alternate, what is vertical and what is horizontal at times even change places. The effect of this, you could well imagine, might be sensory overload that could lead to the works collapse into the general confusion of a kind of optical noise. Or worse, it could be thought that the work, as part of the general fate of abstract's fall into the condition of modern décor, might be perceived as conforming just that little too closely to the sensory diversions offered by the media-saturated environment in which we live, blending in so well to its surroundings that it would be performing a visual equivalent to that of muzak - the artwork as just another accessory or addition to fill in those blank spaces in the background.

This, though, is not the case. There is neither noise nor muzak; what results is quite the opposite, a lasting silence. To develop upon my initial reference to Walter Benjamin, you could say that with Dawes' work the experience of contemplation overcomes the infiltrating demands of distraction. In Benjamin's famous analysis of the condition of modern art as it is subject to the impact of mechanical reproduction, he argued that painting, insofar as its *raison d'être* was dependent upon the value to be found in a period of sustained and uninterrupted viewing, was placed into a position of crisis by the kind of visual experiences that new technologies such as film introduce. Here you could think not only of the shock-effect of editing in film, the 'jump-cuts' from one locale to another, but the illusion on which film is arguably based, the so-called 'persistence of vision'. Although film runs at 24 frames per second, we do not of course see those 24 frames per second. The manner in which we 'persist' in seeing an image even when it is no longer there can allow for the illusion of movement to unfold. Now, although the physiological determinism of this argument can sound rather suspect, the point to be made here is how everything is being constructed upon the idea of the minimal unit or perception - the instant we see something there is already something else there to replace it.

Consider then, Op Art, an art movement to which Debra Dawes' work has some passing art historical reference. With the shimmers, vibrations and waves of Op Art it is as if the artwork has made a virtue out of distraction. The inadvertent attention, the superficial scanning, is taken account of in advance. Knowing, in a sense, that the meditative time for the slow release of a work's inner constituency is lacking, the moment one's look hits the surface of an Op Art work it is immediately deflected, and then immediately deflected again, with the deflection rebounding indefinitely. With the contradiction of this instantaneous endlessness - the immediate deflection that is never-ending - a rather intriguing paradox results: the painting is able to hold the viewer's attention only because the viewer's look is constantly directed elsewhere. From this perspective therefore, Op Art painting can be understood as painting that is attempting to negate the crisis that confronts its existence. There is a kind of 'neon light' attraction to Op Art which entices you by so many gimmicks and tricks. There is thus always an appealing novelty value to Op Art, always a new attraction to be experienced. But like all novelties, the interest that it provokes soon wanes.

This, however, is all by way of divergence, a way of describing Debra Dawes' work by means of what it is not. If I have been proceeding by the case of the negative, this is really only an attempt to acknowledge the quality and significance of Debra Dawes' painting. To shift sides then, to change focus, what is perhaps the quality in Debra Dawes' work that is the most opposed to what I have been discussing so far is its concern for a particular experience of duration. What characterises the nature of this duration is to be understood not simply in terms of the mode of contemplation that the paintings induce from the spectator, but equally the sense of time which is in some mysterious way the very subject matter of the paintings themselves.

One way of approaching the elusive quality of this particular sense of duration which Debra Dawes' work embodies is to say, in returning to Benjamin's definition of the aura of the artwork, that aura is a temporal as much as spatial phenomenon. This is in line with Benjamin's own thought, because Benjamin himself does in fact argue exactly this in suggesting an association between the experience of aura and Proust's conception of an involuntary memory - the *memoire involontaire*.

At the beginning of *A Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Proust relates how for many years his attempts willingly recalling memories of the town of Combray in which he spent so many of his childhood years constantly failed. It was only, quite by chance, with the tasting of the now famous madeleine that he was transported back to the past. What Benjamin draws from this is that what constitutes voluntary memory - the conscious efforts at recalling - is that 'the information which it gives about the past retains no trace of it (the past).' With involuntary memory, on the other hand, there is a trace, though maybe an unconscious trace, of the past. Benjamin quotes Proust's conclusion that the past is 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for the object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it.'

What, however, is of particular relevance to us here is how Benjamin utilises these proposals of Proust on voluntary and involuntary memory to present an understanding of the functioning of the trace in modern art. With the distracted sensibility that arises with the coming of the mass media, Benjamin writes how information replaces a form of communication based on narrative: 'Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds in it the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand'.¹ Or, we could add, much as a painting bears the marks of the painter's hand. Benjamin's argument is that Proust's 'eight-volume work conveys an idea of the efforts it took to restore the figure of the story-teller to the present generation.' What I would propose is that it is possible to think of the development of abstraction in modern painting in similar terms, with the efforts of some abstract painters being at least as exhaustive as those of Proust's weighty tome. It is within this context that I would also want to place Debra Dawes' practice because what, ultimately, touches us in her work is the movement of the gesture. To use the comparison with Op Art again, you could say that Op Art is information in Benjamin's terms, what it conveys is just 'happening', whilst with Debra Dawes' work there is an experience of duration in the unfolding of the gesture.

Debra Dawes' recent series of paintings, collectively *Lifting the Sky*, may appear on initial viewing to be nothing more than an extended modernist exercise. The simplicity of the formal elements in these paintings, the multiplication of stripes, would seem to be a means of repeatedly affirming what Clement Greenberg famously proposed the project of modernist painting to be - the demonstration of an essential flatness. There is, though, something else going on, and to approach what this is we perhaps need to say something else about the quality of flatness that Greenberg proposed so much abstract modernist painting should tend towards.

Leo Steinberg offers a remarkable reassessment of Greenberg's notion of flatness in his ground-breaking article, 'Other Criteria'. Written in the early 1970s, this was one of the first articles to put forward what a conception of a postmodernist form of painting might consist of. Beginning with the idea that rather than describing any literal flatness, what Greenberg was actually about was an ideated flatness, that is, the sensation of flatness as experienced in the imagination, Steinberg proceeded to give an account of how during the 1950s and 1960s the picture plane in painting began to tilt until it was imagined in the spectator's mind to be a horizontal rather than vertical position. With reference to the idea of a horizontal printing surface, Steinberg used the term 'flatbed picture plane' to name this new tilted picture plane. The most dramatic appearance of this new flatbed picture was, for Steinberg, to be found in the work of Rauschenberg and Dubuffet, but once perceiving it in their work Steinberg was also drawn into realising how the preliminary signs of this shift from the vertical to the horizontal could be read back into so much abstract art of the twentieth century. It is into this history of the alternating emphasis between the vertical and horizontal picture plane that I would suggest Debra Dawes' work enters.

To give an idea of the profound change that the tilting of the picture plane effects, Steinberg, making initial reference to the key examples of Rauschenberg and Dubuffet, suggests that we can still hang their pictures,' just as we tack up maps and architectural plans, or nail a horseshoe to the wall for good luck. Yet these pictures no longer stimulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with the human posture than a newspaper does. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards - any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed - whether coherently or in confusion. The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.²

After Benjamin, what is quite striking in Steinberg's commentary is the significance given to information: the new flatbed picture plane is one on which data is entered, the painted surface is now the outcome of a series of

operational processes, the painting is conceived of as a receptor surface which is open to receiving information of any kind. In the particular case of Rauschenberg, these new qualities of the flatbed picture plane lead to a kind of informational overload that causes the cancelling out of any content. As Steinberg's account of what happened when Rauschenberg began to use photographic transfers in the early 1960s suggests: 'the images - each in itself illusionistic - kept interfering with one another; intimations of spatial meaning forever cancelling out to subside in a kind of optical noise. The waste and detritus of communication - like radio transmission with interference; noise and meaning on the same wavelength, visually on the same flatbed plane'.³ It is in the reading of such a description that one can also begin to glimpse the arrival of Op Art.

With Op Art it is as though the cancelling out of content is complete, what you are left with is just the optical noise itself, just the waves of transmission. Further ahead in time, you could also begin to establish the connections here with the work of Debra Dawes. Could her works not be the abstract rendering of data, a kind of diagrammatic code visualising some complex computational logic, or a painted surface produced by following the dictates of a series of operational processes? There is indeed this initial suggestion, but again there is something else as well. The effects of the flatbed picture plane can undoubtedly be registered in Dawes' work, but it is the resistance to those effects that produces the particular compelling presence one experiences when viewing her work.

Each painting in the *Lifting the Sky* series is divided vertically in half, with there being in each half a sequence of alternating stripes that seem to be oddly out of sync with the stripes of corresponding tone and colour in the adjoining half. As one's eye's naturally try to override the mismatching of two halves, with the stripes of similar colour or tone being drawn to each other, a zone of optical uncertainty is created. With the back and forth shifting of the stripes in each half, a wavering, spectral-like horizontal line - what could even be read as a horizon line - appears. The remarkable effect of this horizon line is that at first it seems to dematerialise the painting's surface - one is left with the kind of mirage-like optical flicker that you associate with Op Art - but then at the same time it also heightens your awareness of the textural presence of the painting's surface. How there can be such a paradoxical co-existence is due, I think, to how this horizon line is able to reassert the verticality of the painting, that is, it is as though this immaterial horizon line is symbolically realigning the painting with that history of painting since the Renaissance - the fundamental feature of which is the head-to-toe correspondence with the human-posture - of which Steinberg speaks.

Without the division between the two halves of the painting there would be a tendency for the idea of the flatbed picture plane to dominate. The implication of this dominance would be that the artist's 'impression', the brush in contact with the surface of the canvas, would be overtaken by both the effect and the logic of reproduction. It would be, as Steinberg perceived with colourfield painters such as Noland, Stella and Kelly, that whenever their works suggest a reproducible image, then it is the flatbed picture plane with which they are working. In this move between the horizontal and vertical picture plane, the contradictory nature of how each painting in the *Lifting the Sky* series is split again becomes evident: there is the virtual vaporisation of the painting's surface in conjunction with the bringing forth of its material tactility. With this play between absence and presence it is as if these paintings stage the disappearance of painting - for that is what the flatbed picture plane is, presenting the possibility of painting to be something other than painting - only to then at the same time insistently recall the memory of painting within this disappearance. These are paintings that in a sense want to bear witness to the dignity of painting - it is painting undertaken in the name of painting. What reveals itself as you move from canvas to canvas is perhaps nothing more than the artist's love of painting itself. This is a series of paintings that seems to be without beginning or end. Fourteen canvases, with some eighty stripes on each, and each stripe itself made of so many delicate and restrained brushstrokes: it is evident for all to see that this is a labour of love. In each individual gesture recorded on the canvas one senses the determination to not let painting simply fade away - its existence matters, the works seems to be declaring, and the artist's love of painting will not allow for any successful mourning of its passing.

Keith Broadfoot is a lecturer in Art History and Theory at Sydney University

1 - Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, London, Fontana Press, 1973, p.155

2 - Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria', in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.84

3 - Steinberg, p.87