

Performance Peace

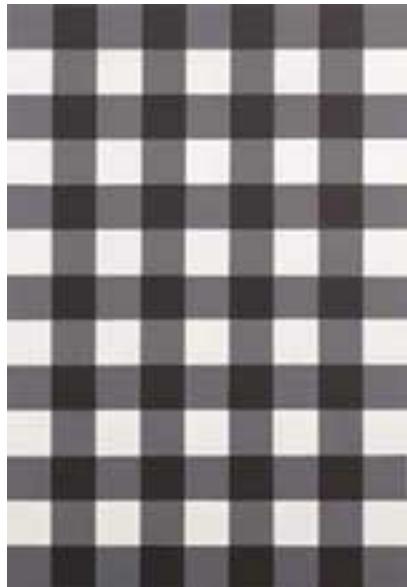
Gingham catalogue

Candice Bruce, Curator, Australian Art, Queensland Art Gallery
Gingham - Robert Lindsay Gallery Melbourne 1995

I think Vicki Kirby had it right when she remarked that Debra Dawes' work 'performs'¹; they do turn visual tricks, but quietly, so that in the end it is the observer who is ambushed.

Most discussions of the work of Debra Dawes have emphasised the phenomenological aspects of what Natalie King has termed, 'the optical pleasure of painting'². Indeed, Dawes' consistent choice of the grid would at first almost seem to defy any other kind of analysis. Ross Gibson's account of the physical sensation of looking at a Dawes work - of the 'cinematic shift of subjective scale', wherein the spectator is swept along in a swirl of lines and blocks into a vertiginous spin - is hard to eclipse³. And Eloise Lindsay has earlier written of the 'pulses and rhythms [which] mobilise our perception'⁴ when viewing a painting by Dawes.

Any discussion also produces some attempt to context Dawes' work within a history of abstract painting, which, as Victoria Lynn has described, is now being so challenged by contemporary practice that the 'infinity of variations' and the profoundly different meanings to be extracted, is producing instead a sense of the indefinable⁵.



Gingham Horizontal
Acrylic on Canvas
240 x 165cm

It is this that allows Debra Dawes the space in which to stretch the boundaries of possibility with abstract form - to play with the grid in diminishing and enlarging lines and blocks; to alter colour and tone in a barely susceptible way; to slightly change the pattern of the grid as it progresses from one canvas to the next. 'Our gaze is trapped running between figure and ground, caught up in the multiple flicker of colour lines'⁶. It also allows her, however, the opportunity to explore the lyrical, that is, to express her own thoughts and sentiments, with great economy. Perhaps the most insistent of these is Dawes' determination to achieve balance in her paintings - a moment of reconciliation - wherein the poles of the grid and the space between them are in harmony.

...however it is given to us, balance must be present in a work of art, it seems, before we can respond to it. We know that balance has been achieved once we see that opposites are interdependent. Out of this interdependence arises a concord that makes alternatives unimaginable. Once we have reached this point, we have arrived at the moment of reconciliation - the blank page. This is the moment in which the half that we have been given unites with the half that we can project, the question and answer become one⁷.

In her story 'The Blank Page', Isak Dinesen illustrates 'how women's image of herself as text and artefact has affected her attitudes toward her physicality and how these attitudes in turn shape the metaphors through which she imagines her creativity'⁸. The story concerns the sisters at the convent in Portugal who grow their own flax to make the finest linen in the land. This linen is used for the bridal sheets of the noble families in the area. After the wedding night the sheets, stained with the blood which describes the bride's virginity, are publicly displayed before being hung in the a gallery at the convent, framed and named. Every one tells a story, like so many inkblots in a Rorschach test, and are visited by female pilgrims to the site. But none have the same ability to mesmerise as the framed piece of line that is the blank canvas or page of the title. The mystery of the blank canvas or page then is produced in the questions asked of it. Was the bride not a virgin? Or did she perhaps remain a virgin? But instead of representing a lack, a void, a tabula rasa, the blank page becomes all stories in no story and, as a consequence, subversive.

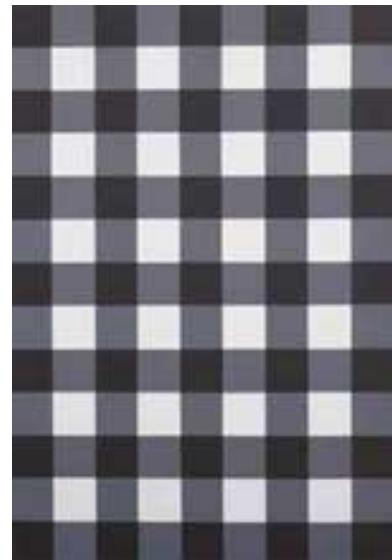
Dinesen's point is that female creativity almost always, as Susan Gubar has put it 'results in forms of expression devalued or totally invisible to eyes trained by traditional aesthetic standards'⁹

Dawes does something similar to this with her paintings. Here she defies the spectator to read these works outside of the usual constraints of art historical theory - to defy formalism, Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism and almost all previous interpretations of abstraction - and to instead approach these works from the inside out.

The analogy of her paintings to tapestry or weaving have been made before¹⁰ and can be used again with this body of work, 'Gingham'¹¹. Every woman has a story in her past about gingham¹². As a material object, it is present in our collective and individual memories. And it is this that Dawes realises as she stains the canvas with the paint. In the seductive 'embrace of their silence'¹³ all women's' stories, and no stories, are told. In disrupting any linear narrative by the use of both a disordered sequence and a progressive one - canvas to canvas, but so quietly as to be almost imperceptible - the meaning is shattered and recoded, interpretation once again thrown back on itself, and the viewer challenged to question their impositions on the work.

But, above all, it is Dawes' attention to 'facture' - the quality of the execution of the surface of the painting (sadly lost in reproduction) - which empowers her work with a sensuality that is, confoundingly, also meditative. Facture, too, which connects the paintings to the artistic process and physical labour involved in the creative process. As she herself has stated, the tangibility of the painterly process engages the artist in a corporeal struggle, the results of which are never certain until the final outcome.

And the outcome is a moment of reconciliation.



Gingham Centripetal
Acrylic on Canvas
240 x 165cm

1 - Interview between Debra Dawes and Vicky Kirby, *West*, vol. 2, no. 1. 1990,p. 13; 'It's the performative quality in their sheer physicality which pulls you in.'

2 - Natalie King, *The Subversive Stitch*, Monash University Gallery, 1991, p.7

3 - Ross Gibson, 'A Constellation of Optics', *Debra Dawes Starlite*, AGNSW exhibition catalogue, Sydney, 1993.

4 - Eloise Lindsay, Debra Dawes, *Perspecta*, AGNSW exhibition catalogue, 1989, p.25.

5 - Victoria Lynn, *Abstraction*, AGNSW exhibition catalogue, 1989, p.25.

6 - Eloise Lindsay, op cit.

7 - Thomas R. Whissen, *Isak Dinesen's Aesthetics*, Kennikat Press, 1973, p.120. It was Dawes who drew my attention to Dinesen's story of 'The Blank Page' as a way of interpreting some aspects of her work.

8 - Susan Gubar, 'The Blank Page and Issues of Female Creativity', in *The New Feminist Criticism, Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, (ed) Elaine Showalter, Virago, London, 1985, p. 296.

9 - Gubar, op. Cit., p. 296.

10 - See Eloise Lindsay, op. Cit. 'like coloured tapestries enfolding us';and Natalie King, op. cit., 'each square is meticulously laboured, like hand-stitching'.

11 - From the Dutch / Malay word 'ginggang', meaning 'striped'; OED

12 - Thank you to Lynne Seear for this insight.

13 - Interview between Debra Dawes and Vicki Kirby, op. cit.