

Debra Dawes, 2004

Ross Gibson

clock wise, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, 2004

If you've kept an eye on Debra Dawes' paintings during the last twenty years or so, you'll be familiar with the way they fizz and flutter just a little. They never settle down. But it's pleasant, precise and *strengthening*, this disturbance.

Mmmn ... I haven't described them exactly right yet. Let's stay engaged and take another run at understanding. The paintings often seem to quiver. Well, perhaps it's better to say they resonate. Or maybe it's *you*, not the paintings. For the border between yourself and a Debra Dawes installation is not crisp. Astutely counter-posed colours and planes contend restlessly with each other and with your retina. Peripheral vision tugs at your consciousness as you focus on a single canvas even as the rest of the gallery stipples alluringly. Your interpretive faculties might waver as you scrutinise an image of a stretch of gingham, let's say, or of a concrete block wall, and in that wavering you see simultaneously a realist representation and an abstraction. Each Dawes painting tends to have a meaning but-equally important - it also has a sensuous impact which viewers often feel as a continuous nervous energy generated in them by the encounter with the optics, textures and scale-shifts within the frame. Dawes' painted surfaces are directly drawn from physical experience-like a rubbing taken indexically off a real surface or event-at the same time as they are distillations of psychic experience in the guise of painterly ideas about formal cohesion and social formation.



clock wise
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2004

Formal cohesion and social formation? Here's an example: many of the black-and-white paintings from the 1990s are concerned with racism, landscape, thirst, legislation, headaches, border definition, fear and excitement all at once. Real, felt experiences are seriously and endlessly at play with real, abstracted plans and propositions. All at once, Dawes' paintings are mimetic renditions of everyday experience-for example some of her abstractions can be interpreted as austere, salt-seared landscapes of her home-country in north-west New South Wales-and they are also unpreachy moral tracts urging endless engagement in

processes of system-making so we might perceive and accommodate all the conflicting elements that are *present* and *persistent* in our experience. Dawes' work is pragmatic, 'earthed' and sensuously attentive to embodied experience in place and time; but it is also refined, rigorously philosophical in the way it thinks *pictorially* about what is possible and necessary for maintaining some kind of political engagement in everyday life.

Let me say this again, in a different way: if there are history paintings, there must also be paradox paintings, and if the history all around you is contradictory and unsettled, well, you can see the good sense of Dawes' paintings. They are a means by which you can learn to be with paradox, apprehending it through your *nervous system*, through your *reasoning* and through *time*. The paintings are attuned to this present epoch.

The present can be measured in ordinary days ... in days of tedium plus responsibility plus frustration plus cunning plus momentary exhilaration ... in days of personal activity contending with political iniquity ... in days of detailed engagement with local concerns ... in days also punctuated by periods of reflection and analysis. (After all, the unexamined life is probably still not worth living.) So the present can be simultaneously material and ethereal, both sensual and cerebral. Therefore, paintings produced day by day might bear witness to these contradictions and this vigilance.



July 2004
Oil on Canvas
180 x 260cm

I get the feeling that Dawes' most recent paintings are historical like this. They are neither the retreat to the studio nor the self-sustaining shelter in personal ritual that some commentators believe to be most contemporary artists' response to the current lack of imagination in public life. Rather, Dawes works on the raw matter of experience, day by day, she works by remaining engaged - simultaneously immersed *and* analytical - in the passing of time made meaningful by remembering, by aspiring, by acting and reflecting all at once in order to paint something attuned to the present.

Not a retreat at all, such work makes us fitter, more nimble and primed with the stamina needed in these times. It lets us learn how to be in our contentious present, in our paradoxical, graceless epoch.

Learning to be with contradictions is different from accepting them or retreating from them. If myths prevail because they allow us to ignore or momentarily transcend paradoxes that might paralyse us, history prevails because it contends with myth so that we can refuse to be lulled into complacency or ignorance about the contradictions that define and bedevil us. We might crave to lose sight of our insufficiencies, but we ignore them at our peril. And with this paradox in mind, Dawes' history paintings offer luscious disturbance. They offer a nourishing way to dwell in complexity and contention. Not distracting or entertaining, they are *involving*. But they are *uplifting* too. They immerse and extract, they intensify and distil, they are engaged and engaging.

Knowing the tenor of the times, these paintings are a real help right now.