Measure:
Debra Dawes

8 April - 3 June 2017

Tamworth Regional Gallery, installation view: *After Blind faith, Cover up, Abstract Painting, Gray Spectra*
Debra Dawes

Measure

In the course of her career, Debra Dawes has succeeded in producing a consistent and coherent body of abstract painting, exploring the nature and form of the image in painting as an extended field of geometric and colour coded and reproducible systems. Within the context of this selected survey of Dawes’ work, the scope and scale of her artistic pursuits and her concerns as an artist within a complex cultural environment embodies a compelling sense of agency, both for the aesthetic effects and arresting visual impact of her work, and, crucially, the role and voice and conscience of the artist within the highly contested and tenuous social spaces we inhabit. Dawes work is finely honed to negotiate the dialogue and ambiguity between aesthetics and responsibility, between the making of an image and the meaning of that image within the real world, the external world beyond the codified parameters of art.

In almost all her works, language operates as a critical index, identifying and amplifying issues endemic to her thinking as an artist, yet formally invisible in any casual reading of the image. However, using text within the image of a small number of her works, and more readily through the critical and poetic nomenclature of titling individual works and series of works, Dawes has discreetly articulated specific concerns within the social and cultural realm that extend far beyond the dominant effects of her colour-shifted, metronomically varied multiple images or her extensive, large-scale fields of interlocking pattern and precisely re-configured symmetries. There is a lightly nuanced, lyrical element in Debra Dawes’ way of inscribing the titles of her work that both accentuates and belies the institutional frameworks of power. Dawes’ present acknowledgement of an habitual and dangerous authoritarianism pervasive in civic life is subtly evident in her use of emblematic titles, which in turn mark her precise approach to aligning form and content. The titles of her exhibitions, artwork in series, or individual works, can be remarkably specific, inferring something vaguely sinister or untoward, an unspoken or unseen nefarious intent: Unfinished Business, Gray Spectra, Cover up, At Her Majesty’s Pleasure, Double-dealing, Blind faith.

The intense rhythm of repetitive abstract form in Dawes images are not simply open fields that accept an infinite array of readings, an extensive set of interpretations, rather her work indicates specific aesthetic strategies, programmes, or investigations through painting, that are deeply social, cultural or psychological, and may allude to the rituals, rules, and habits of institutions or authority as sites of concealment and control. Pattern, repetition, or colour coding are all availed to emphasise her work’s formal relationships or references to social and political contexts.

While the nature of painting and form of expression has been at the center of her strategies, Dawes has consistently engaged the real and real politik as both the underlying framework and the key driver in her production. In addition various components of political and art theory have been vital to her conception of seriality, both through the modular repetition and precisely calibrated optical shifts of form within individual works, in concert with the elaborating process of producing series of works that form coherent exhibitions. In particular the nexus amongst fields Feminism, Post-Colonial Theory, and Post-Modernism.

The goal of this new survey exhibition, Measure, is to explore the nature of a selected series of conceptual works, the transitions and links between series of works, and the relationship of various iterations of motif and theme embedded or emergent within these series and individual works.

Immeasurable

We are clearly unable to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don’t know their real definition, but because there is no real definition."


What if? What if there are no real definitions, for what we do, who we are, how we communicate, how we remember; then everything is negotiable, contestable, debatable. Everything is in a constant state of becoming, of being defined and turned into a new cryptocurrency of knowledge, in which the keys to understanding are constantly being revised and updated, sometimes in secret, as some conspiricists would suggest, out of sight or out of reach, but more often than not in plain view. In this scenario, generating keys is crucial to knowledge, authority, and power. The entire research knowledge industry is devoted to this pursuit of control and leverage, as are global corporations, the media, and national states. The least likely pockets of thoughtful and effective resistance could rest with artists and writers who redefine imaginary space and conjure revised and renewable definitions of history and knowledge. Across the entire cultural and psychological spectrum, from the spiritual to the instrumental, it has never been too much of stretch to infer that artists frequently hold the keys to the future.

In this scenario, *Measure,* a selected survey of Debra Dawes’ artworks drawn from 1991 through to the present, is a profound and poignant statement of definition and a ceaseless refinement of meaning and purpose. The title of the exhibition, a critically important cue, like many of her titles is inherently and pliably durable, implying both the act of definition and the result of definition, the process of measuring against a given standard coupled with the qualitative results of that process. Dawes’ impulse is to measure
Tamworth Regional Gallery, installation view: *Gray Spectra, Unfinished Business, Starlite*
Tamworth Regional Gallery, installation view: *Starlite, Houndstooth, Double - dealing*
herself, her artistic goals and achievements, and to measure the world, to reference it in context, to call it to account against her processes, her programmes, her values.

To pursue something this ambitious she must first establish a baseline for evaluation, a definition. In art, this relates to art history and technique. In Dawes’ case she predominantly opts for the repetition of form and the use of pattern, often locked into the grid, a hallmark of late Modern intellectual and conceptual discipline and control, her preferred antecedents being Mondrian or Malevich, although little of her work bears a close resemblance. Geometric abstraction, balanced and ordered, elegant and lyrical, is a system, or style, that lends itself to precision and a concise conceptual range. Not a limited range, but a compact, taut accretion of information that can be sprung with gentle triggering. It is easy to accommodate Dawes’ sense of order and form, her incipient control over her media and imagery in her earlier work here represented by *Houndstooth* (small verticals), 1991, with *Starlite*, 1993, and the equally massive and even more intricate, *Gray Spectra*, 1996, giving way to the more overt yet slightly wistful, slightly menacing, *Unfinished Business*, 1998, a patterned scrim-like surface shrouding the still resonant politically charged admission “Sorry” embedded in the canvas like a blemished or self-effacing, concealed sign.

If *Houndstooth* stakes out a disciplined abstract art credential, through a beautifully balanced dissection, splitting the centre of the intimately-scaled and subdued grey-scaled canvas, then *Starlite* is an astonishing inflation of that precision to a full-field of vision, a statement of compelling painterly intent, a powerful geometry of pattern, replicating the architectural template of a commercial concrete block, pictured in unlikely, or perhaps entirely likely suburban, verdant green. The conceptual and aesthetic power of Dawes’ rapid transition from *Houndstooth* to *Starlite* cannot be underestimated. Searching for pivotal moments in content and technique or conceptual breakthroughs in form, *Starlite* demonstrates Dawes’ capacity to jettison the constraints of easel painting and reimagine painting beyond the image, or rather as the image ameliorated beyond recognition, an immersive critical space. A space that vibrates and pulses as areas of the work aligns with our field of vision and our viewing distance, *Starlite*, eschews the imagistic wonders of the night sky, its twinkling seduction and sublime sense of distance, in favour of a fully-frontal modular form taken from a building site or a terrace wall, to conjure the imaginary space of a systematic, ordered universe flooded with cosmic radiation.

**Measured**

In an era when big-art, museum-scale art is currently more standard procedure than ever before, more amiliar and less imposing to the viewer, it is thrillingly disarming to witness scale used with such precise intent in terms of an artist dialogue with painting and image. Like the massive canvases of Turner or Pollock or Rothko, the unavoidable statement of scale is integral to the production of the image, specially perhaps the abstract, painted image and to meaning within painting in general. Dawes’ large-scale paintings, as monumental artefacts, are more seamlessly integrated into the spatial schemes and architectonic frames of the exhibition gallery, merging with the space rather than existing within it. In Dawes’ painterly construct, the white cube no longer shrouds the work, encasing it, sanctifying it, presenting it; but is surreptitiously fused into her work, operating more akin to the integral, inseparable role of a projector to a digital image.

The resonant exchange amongst the works in *Measure* is activated by the open plan design of the installation, reinforcing the singular trajectory of Dawes’ concerns around painting, the image constructed from modular or component parts, and abstraction and geometric progression and optical effects, but it also presents clear evidence of the definitive ruptures and conversely the seamless sutures of form and content introduced into her work to redefine the nature of painting, as well as the artists voice, the artist responsibility in activating those.

*Gray Spectra*, operates in the field of painting in much the same vein as *Starlite*, but takes on a more ominous tone. Whatever sense of considered objectivity is suggested by geometric abstraction, and there is a considerable sense of architectonic rigour embedded in the structure and repetition of this form of art, an artist retains considerable scope to genetically imprint their work. In fact it is part of pursuit for authenticity that characterises much of the inflation in the art market. The foreboding sensibility implied by *Gray Spectra* introduces the psychic dimension in to the presumably un-emotive, quasi-objectivity of geometric abstraction. Subjectivity is at the heart of artistic expression, and painting, with its close relationship to the visceral gesture, the arm extended by the brush, coupled with the easel painter’s comfort zone in their scope of reach, mean that large-scale work requires an enhanced production technique, or even a battery of assistants, or a factory of production workers to produce results. The net effect of these strategies is not inherently negative, or anti-aesthetic, or not closely allied with subjectivity of the artist, and their defining conceptual presence, rather it has a distanciation effect that shears the artist from the contemplative and meditative impulse in the distillation and production of ideas that drive the work. For all its mechanistic structure, evident labour and meditative control, Dawes’ work is deeply personal. In an ambitious, highly structured painting like *Gray Spectra*, Dawes discovers ways to expand the range and scope of her work through a hint of darkness, an inference of disquiet, while retaining complete control of it’s production and finish is central to the aesthetic and
technical goals of Dawes’ artistic project, expressed primarily through large-scale or repeated systems of abstract painting.

Unfinished Business, introduces another compelling shift in the informational capacity in her approach to geometric abstraction and pattern painting. If Starlite attempts to make sense of the mundane qualities of everyday form and experience in high contrast to the random, evocative appearance of the night sky or deep-space, and Gray Spectra vibrates with labour-intense repetition in making a painting, then Unfinished Business is a study in specificity. The plaintive, whispery text is less an invocation, a demand, an instruction to act, than a way of encoding action into image, inscribing it in practice, in performance, in behaviour, in painting. The text emerges from this painting as an underlying patterned imprint, like an inerasable tattoo, indelibly dyeing the surface of the skin. The political urgency and the national ambivalence towards admissions of guilt for a flawed colonial past have made public promulgation or representation of this word, ‘Sorry’, a touchstone of moral ambiguity, flawed justice, and endemic racial tension. Yet, through this dark-toned, nuanced, and repetitively layered painting, Dawes successfully masks the inflammatory rhetorical edge associated with this debate, and normalizes the apology as, more simply, ‘unfinished business,’ something to be done, another item on the cultural, psychic agenda to be accomplished. Not necessarily an easy state of affairs, but a necessary one.

Made to Measure

Understanding that art is a powerful vehicle for reiterating belief and shared values, Dawes has continually explored ways to breach topics that resonant with some of the most palpable experiences of civic life. In a radical departure in technique, eschewing painting, but not in form, adhering to her quasi-monochromatic systems, huge scale, and repetition across a surface, in her dramatic, visceral work, Cover up, Dawes creates a massive quasi-painting, a sculptural screen in fact, produced from a found-object, a huge expanse of camouflage fabric. Presented as a huge white curtain or massive veil, draped from the ceiling to the floor, this work is a towering, involving and evanescent object that captivates through its soft, ambient presence and its tremendous silhouette, a study in specificity.

To allude to the disdainful cover up with an article designed to conceal and protect, an aircraft camouflage fabric, a ‘cover up’ with seemingly good intentions, is a nuanced inversion, a double negative, and suggests that even the best intentions are at risk from bad actors and unruly contaminants. A similar discussion may be framed around her optically active, large-scale pulsating images, Double-dealing, an extended series of works that serve as a colourful reminder of rapacious, two-faced politics, and the circulation of self-serving lies through an acquiescent, commercially-dependent media. And then there is Dawes’ exhibition project, Blind faith, a collection of works that reinforce the profound redundancy of public knowledge in an elegant doubling of the title, as faith is, of course, by definition, blind. If we could see, we would have no need of faith, and certainly, even in the face of ubiquitous transmission and endless analysis, Dawes implies civic blindness, accounting for so little faith in contemporary public discourse. Blind faith 2008 serves as conceptual model for reframing and reconsidering work in a revised context for the more recent work in exhibition After Blind faith 2017.

Dawes’ intentions with Cover up become even clearer when we discover, installed behind this seductive drapery, in a kind of corridor space, less accessible and perhaps not as brightly light, her extended dialogical work, At Her Majesty’s Pleasure, a text work that reframes the voice of an incarcerated relative within the context of a fragmentary, highly edited narrative exchange from within and without the justice system and penal code. The work, an oblique and poetic recognition of the productive process of reiterative self-expression, compounds an unrelenting sense of the mundane and ordinary in the face of the execution of law and justice.

While Director of the Graduate School at Sydney College of the Arts, Dawes responded to an invitation to participate in curatorial research project at the University of Sydney, a group thematic exhibition emerging from the research work of artists and theorists, Art and the Document. An exhibition project titled Tactical Imaginary provided Dawes with an opportunity to explore new territory, both literally, in terms of engaging with landscape and, technically, in terms of media. Having recently relocated to the Upper Hunter region of NSW, her home and studio is now located in a relatively small and quiet town of Murrurundi, set in a small vale surrounded by a perimeter of horizon-elevating and horizon-compressing hills. The work she developed for Tactical Imaginary depicts a perfunctory approach to survey work on her property; titled Squaring off the Mountain [2016] it refers to staking out the dimensions of the landscape. It is a simple survey-like action, documented through a two-channel
Tamworth Regional Gallery, installation view: *At Her Majesty's Pleasure, Abstract Painting, Cover up, Gray Spectra, Unfinished Business*
Tamworth Regional Gallery, installation view: *Houndstooth, Double-dealing, After Blind faith, Cover up, At Her Majesty’s Pleasure*
video that includes the naturalistic unedited sound of the echoing wind in valley. When installed the work is a diptych, one panel shot at ground level and a second shot from an overhead point-of-view via a drone-mounted video camera. It is strangely disorienting work, tracking the artist pacing out the landscape measurements through traditional single point perspective in a video, juxtaposed with an overhead shot of the same event. It conveys the tension between the public event, a working process and its documentation, and a sense of surveillance, secret observation or monitoring. As performative and personal as this project is, featuring the artist pacing, measuring her steps, mapping her environment, its deliberative process and function is a startling reimagining of her artistic concerns in constructing images. Like some of her works, it has a reticent quality, in which movement is nondescript, perceptibly slow and deliberate, reemphasising the labour-intensive qualities required to produce the work, but it also articulates one of the defining aspects of her work, the relationships of size and scale in space that produces measurement, that produces tangible, interpretable effects, results, and readings.

Measure Up

While frequently at risk of being subsumed by a deluge of visual misinformation or facile images masquerading as credible facts, highly stylish, yet irrelevant and mundane, contemporary art remains a critical and volatile site for generating and encoding value and meaning into the world of artefacts and images and subsequently into history.

In a fragile global moment when truth is being genuinely contested, or not always insightfully debated but deceitfully concealed and elided for sometimes debasing ideological purposes, it is essential we remember the elastic scope of art to evoke meaning and provoke critical engagement, to reflect on our understanding of ourselves and our individual and collective humanity. Despite its electrifying currency, contemporary art is not only a nascent, inarticulate form of visuality, sometimes therapeutic with a deep capacity to console and placate, or sometimes provocative, able to tease and excite or inflame. More importantly, it is a social and visual mechanism to produce understanding and aid in constructing identity through reflecting, repackaging, and recording our experience in uniquely structured and institutionally resonant forms.

Art’s inherently dialectical purpose is both conservative and radical; to retain and reiterate contemporary values and to forge intellectual and cultural space for emergent, perhaps entirely new or different values that will guide our future. Significant moments in art demonstrate the tension endemic to this contest and produce art that is more extensive, more relevant, and more prescient. Formed and triggered by history, art that matters now, and that matters for the future, is critical.

With this sense of self-consciousness and responsibility, art has for several decades increasingly embraced a didactic, unambiguous strategy that strives to invest art with and articulate clearly a renewed political acumen and sense of responsibility.

As an artist of her time and a product of a high level of Modernist training as a painter, Debra Dawes, in response to this diverse, mutable cycle of engaging artistic perspectives, has maintained her focus on painting, devising ways in which social and political content can be captured, considered, and disseminated through pronounced aesthetic means and deliberate artistic strategies. At the same time, Dawes has sought to re-invigorate painting, in particular geometric abstract painting with a renewed sense of purpose and spatial engagement that extends beyond the conceptual framework of redefining representation through the construction of highly edited and refined optical effects based geometric precision or lyrical abstraction.

The scope of Debra Dawes’ range as an artist is defined by her ambitious engagement between Modernist aesthetic traditions and techniques and a sense of responsibility and conscience, demanding a response to the public infractions of contemporary experience which are compacted, codified, and projected through her different bodies of work. In addition, Dawes’ considered developments in form and technique, especially in painting, but also through experiments in other media, is critical in understanding the extensive latitude her work encompasses through weighing the possibilities of abstraction, figuring the effects of scale and space into her work, and refining selected new materials and media to be included into her measured lexicon of art.

Gary Sangster, 2017
Drawing Projects UK
UNSW Art & Design
Squaring off the Mountain, 2016 2 channel video, duration 11.37 minutes.
Top image Debra Dawes. Bottom image Julian van den Berg
Published by Tamworth Regional Gallery to accompany the exhibition Measure: Debra Dawes.
Exhibition dates: 8 April - 3 June 2017
Image front: Tamworth Regional Gallery, installation view: At Her Majesty’s Pleasure, (detail) 2010, 2011 Indian ink, gesso, paper, 448 x 988 cm, 52 works selected from 191, each work 112 x 76 cm. Cover Up, 2006, synthetic fabric, 1020 x 550 cm. All images Debra Dawes.
Photography, Lou Farina, Farina Fotographics, Tamworth, unless otherwise stated.
Debra Dawes is represented by Sandra McMahon, Weswal Gallery
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