

Daryl Austin

“Optical illusion” is not the most helpful term to describe these astonishingly skillful painted collages of fragmented realism. Optical *delusion* seems to be a more accurate description of what Daryl Austin’s paintings are about.

They certainly involve the playful mischief of *trompe l’oeil* painting - transcribing bits of the world onto a canvas with perfect accuracy, so that gullible viewers feel compelled to take a closer look to make sure of what is an illusion (everything) and what is real (nothing). Mischief and play are indeed part of what he is up to here, but the reason these paintings are so compelling is because of the sardonic wit with which he dismantles any trusting view of the world as a sensible place. Because the painted deception is so good and so convincing, we can easily interpret the works as simply being virtuoso displays of what painters can do. This is just Daryl Austin’s starting point, however. Far more interesting is the way he confronts what painters cannot do. They cannot escape the morbidly irrational nature of embedding souvenirs of their vision in a bit of woven flax and putting a frame around it. The careful process of preserving experience (visual experience, emotional experience, whatever) which is fleeting, temporary and constantly changing, is an odd thing to do. Paintings are very strange things. He paints them as very strange objects.

These works are quite literally paintings of paintings, often viewed from behind. They reveal the fidgety corner keys that keep the painted surface taut and the loose return margins of canvas that are supposed to be hidden. It is a behind the scenes view of what happens behind the scene that is painted on the other side. The idea of seeing through what a painter does is taken further in paintings in which a rectangular opening has been painted, through which the viewer looks to a scene beyond. Among other (perhaps more important) things, this provides a beautiful depiction, in almost clinically pure light, of the studio where Daryl Austin produces these works. Realities within realities are meticulously described, and all of them, of course, total lies. Nothing is real.

There are many more straightforward ways of representing the alienating strangeness of the world, but most of them are either so melodramatic (like expressionism) or so mystically poetic (like surrealism) that the viewer is distracted from seeing them in terms of normal daily experience. Daryl Austin paints very ordinary things in an exquisitely accurate, but otherwise very plain way.

His work ultimately has less in common with the 19th-century *trompe l'oeil* painters with whom he must inevitably be compared, than it does with the 17th-century still life painters who constructed elaborate allegories of life and death out of the bits and pieces left over after a meal. The broken goblets and blemished fruits that symbolised mortality for the Dutch old masters are the antecedents of the photographer's colour bars and pairs of glasses in Austin's paintings. Rather than being about eating (which equalled the pleasures of the flesh and therefore – to good Christians three centuries ago – the inevitability of the grave), his recurring objects are about viewing. Just as good living, luxury and consumption cannot alter the fact that people will always die, scientifically precise vision cannot alter the fact that people will never really see. There is too much to take in. Austin implies this with his mildly sinister pairs of spectacles, their usefulness for viewing cancelled by thick black crosses of tape over the lenses.

Symbolism changes with all the cultural changes that occur over time, and it is misleading to suggest that the objects Austin paints can be interpreted according to the basic $X = Y$ logic of simple symbols. Since the invention of photography we have questioned the very idea of making a painting, in a way that no one did centuries ago. The nature of representation is much more of an issue now than the representation of nature. Austin is a deeply thoughtful participant in the ongoing investigation of this issue. There may be many reasons why he makes paintings rather than photographs, but the obvious one is the fact that for his own kind of symbolism to work, these have to be paintings of paintings.

This group of works sustains the value and interest of illusionistic painting at a time when very few artists are able to find ways of bringing it to life. Daryl Austin gives a completely convincing justification for artists retaining this almost vanished skill, and in the process makes a strong case for why artists in this day and age should produce paintings at all. His paintings are like allegories of representation and perception. They recreate as an experience for the viewer what they explore as an idea. The uncertainty about what is real is not just an ontological proposition in these works. The viewer is brought right into the artist's studio to gain a sense of the puzzling mood and atmosphere there, while learning that nothing is as it seems.

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