

The studio tradition

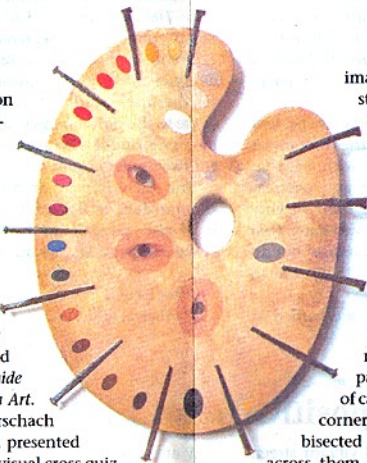
Daryl Austin
Greenaway Art Gallery

Reviewed by John Neylon

Daryl Austin belongs to a rare breed of artists that defines itself in terms of the studio. Think of the painting studio and time almost stands still. There's the canvas for starters, that bullring in which artistic temperaments will be tested on the horns of choice. Should the red be balanced by the blue-green? Should that gross statement be countered by delicate statement? Against the odds this tradition has survived. Artists around the world still get up, have breakfast and go the studio and there confront their demons or guardian angels. I wonder what happens when Daryl Austin opens the door? There would be the smell. Pure turps sucked as an aroma as seductive as any perfume. The canvases stretched and stacked against a wall. The pin-up board with a palimpsest of ideas, which may stretch back to art school days. The photographs and collages. The triumphs. The failures and the in-betweens where half-baked ideas live in a limbo of possible redemption. If Daryl Austin chooses to inhabit such a zone he is not alone and, as he would know, he's in distinguished company. It's hardly an exclusive club but it boasts some illustrious members: Durer, Rembrandt, Velasquez, Matisse, Cézanne and, if you want an Australian flavour, think of Brett Whiteley and more particularly Hugh Ramsay's intensely personal Paris studio essays. All artists who at various times in their careers wore their studios around them like an old

familiar blanket.

Reflecting on Austin's development it is remarkable that the work has changed so much in style but in essence has remained fixed on a single organising concept. His work was brought to the attention of a wider public when included in the 1992 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*. A work from his Rorschach Grid series, *Blind as*, presented something akin to a visual cross quiz with serialised silhouette units of a seeing eye dog and a pair of dark glasses counterposed with real images of forms which resembled classic Rorschach blots. Interpreting the artist's work at this time, David Broker commented that Austin was calling into doubt the tenuous relationship between abstraction and interpretation. His strategy of incorporating what appeared to be random (blot equivalent) forms alongside intense illusions of objects and spaces was intended to divide the viewer's attention between making sense through recognition of known items and desiring to make sense by inventing meanings for "meaningless" objects and situations. In the idea that the blind can see and the sighted fail to see lies the seeds of a project, which has continued to the present, always located in the confines and the culture of the studio tradition. By the late 1990s Austin's



imagery had evolved to a state of covert subversion.

His 1997 *Studio Painting* series set impeccably crafted, painted images of corners of his studio alongside the familiar paraphernalia, stacked canvases, sketches pinned and work in progress on an easel. But these images were represented as stuck or painted on to the reverse of canvases. Images of studio corners showed blank canvases bisected by shafts of light falling across them from an open window. The same painting carried the imprint of yet more daylight falling from a source behind the viewer's head. By 1998 the artist had perfected the full reverse with the double illusionist back flip. His *Easel and Stretcher Paintings* series offered the complete behind the scenes take on painting; *trompe l'oeil* representations of the reverse of stretched canvases along with nails, hammer, stretching blocks, pencil, hanging wire and glasses.

In this most recent exhibition the images revealed a closer fixation on the artist as some form of automaton with an artist's wooden manikin's hands being used to suggest the mechanistic nature of applying paint to flat surfaces.

Some fingers of the hand were equipped with paintbrush tips. There were in this exhibition any number of images which represented Austin at his virtuoso best, be it depicting someone peering through the closed (Monday) glass door of the Greenaway Gallery, playing the cute card with two entwined ties (*An older couple*) or continuing to explore visual paradoxes as in *Bouquet of Shadows* (what should be looked at, the shadows or the canvas even though it's only the back?). But the real action was to be found in the reverse canvases in which the nails asserted their authority as organising structures (*Painting Fetish*). The word "Fetish" appeared in the tiles and the imagery supported this idea with nails piercing the wooden canvas framing. The artist's palette, the logical development of the easel as symbolic device, also assumed a dominant role, adopting an anthropomorphic character when loaded with eyes (*Eye Palette*) instead of piles of pigment. But pierced with nails (*Palette Fetish #2*) this organic form offered obvious connections with Christian traditions of Sacred Heart veneration. But veneration (either for studio traditions or belief systems) is not something, which can confidently be applied when interpreting Austin's work. Like his man caught peering through the locked glass door of the Greenaway Gallery, *Looking (Monday)*, he's always looking for new angles. •