

'Painting can be a conversation with oneself and at the same time, it can be a conversation with other paintings. What one does, triggers thoughts of what others have done or might do... This introduces a degree of play between the possible and the necessary, which can allow one to learn from other artists' work that might seem otherwise unrelated or irrelevant.'¹

Richly detailed and highly personal, exuding a sense of stillness, Daryl Austin's realist paintings quietly, yet resoundingly articulate the world of the painter. Eschewing the illusion of real space which characterised the *Studio Paintings* series of 1998, in the shallow pictorial space of this new body of work, Austin directs the viewer into the nucleus of the painter's studio, selectively framing his pictures within a picture, as little is revealed and much concealed.

In a 1996 interview, Richard Serra described Jasper Johns (and his work) as 'a feast of colliding thoughts, a huge continual, revolving process, picking up the pieces and dovetailing as it moves along... a person who hasn't closed the sequence.'² Similarly, Austin has yet to 'close the sequence' and this latest body of work continues an enduring and evolving dialogue - resonant with art-historical references - concerning the act, the condition of painting.

Etched with the legend 'heart to hand' and 'eye to mind,' *Painter's Credo* - a pair of antique spectacles from Austin's 2003 solo exhibition *Here then, now there* - provides an insight into the contrary impulses of reason and emotion that are central to his narrative. This duality is succinctly encapsulated in the work *Painting Fetish/Self Portrait*, wherein the artist is glimpsed in sober reflection and the artist's palette is bestrewn with hair in lieu of paint. In his idiosyncratic world of paradoxes and perversities, a painting, which is already hidden is further swathed with camouflage netting, an assortment of spectacles intended to facilitate sight is secreted at the back of a picture frame, a representation of a leafy shadow enigmatically appears on a reversed painting and any illusion of logical progression has been expunged from (deconstructed) sections of measuring tape.

Austin's work is deliberated, measured, calculated. However, in a reversal of this sublimation of emotion, possibly signified by the disruption of sequential measurement in his realigned tape measures, there emerges in the work of the last two years a growing viscerality, apparent in the accelerating profusion of nails, the strands of human hair, the advancing/creeping weeds. It is underscored by an emphasis on process, exemplified by the inclusion of the palette, the paintbrushes, the tools of the painter's trade. Significantly, Austin's ever-emblematic spectacles are now sequestered at the rear of the picture frame.

'Hairiness' observes Marina Warner, 'indicates animal nature: it is the distinctive sign of the wilderness and its inhabitants, and bears the freight of Judaeo-Christian ambivalence about the place of instinct and nature, fertility and sexuality.'³ In many cultures a source of magic power or *mana*, the potency of hair becomes intensified when it is removed from the head (*Painting Fetish/Hair Palette*) in the form of fetishistic hair tokens or *memento mori*.

With a deft and witty deployment of twists and inversions and trompe l'oeil effects, Austin says that he strives for a 'casual clarity' and a 'matter of fact realism.' The pristine and carefully positioned nails of *Painting Fetish #2* (2003) make way in this latest body of work for a proliferation of nails which - like the marked and pitted easels - betray the ravages of time. Indicating a darker, more driven aspect to the life of an artist, the palette/object of *Painting Fetish (Nail Palette)* (2004) has unequivocally become a bed of nails.

A quality of abandonment pervades these works, as the tendrils of ivy in *Easel Fetish/Nature Morte* begin to obscure the name of the artist, as well as the easel on which it is inscribed. Furthermore, a sense that the paraphernalia of the painter - the easel, brushes, stretchers and palette - may be assuming the fossil-like quality of a relic, a *memento mori* is reinforced by the work *Peintre Mort*, in which paintbrushes wrapped in rabbit fur - inevitably recalling Chardin - rest with a solemn and eloquent finality on an empty frame that allusively bristles with nails.

Wendy Walker
August 2004

Notes

Jasper Johns, quoted in Ann Hindry, 'Conversation with Jasper Johns,' *Artstudio*, Paris, 1989, no. 12, p.13
Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996: p.111
Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London: Random House, 1995: p.359

Front Cover: Left: Sheel, Oil on Linen, 61 x 51cm
Right: Easel/Palette Fetish, Oil on Linen, 60 x 50cm

Stella Downer Fine Art

2 Danks Street, Waterloo NSW 2017 t:02 9319 1006



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