Jeffrey Dennis
Traces of Occupation
Paintings 2019
Close to the Edge, 2019
oil and charcoal on linen, 132 x 165 cm
Jeffrey Dennis
by
Sue Hubbard

“The object of art is not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity.”
Giacometti

As Giacometti suggests, art creates a parallel universe, one that mirrors reality obliquely, rather than reflecting it directly. The serious artist makes art to discover what he or she does not quite know but somehow senses. He digs into the dark recesses of the imagination hoping to uncover what is lurking there hidden: the tangled matrix of his own emotions, the substrata of a city, the remnants of another civilisation. At its best art is a palimpsest, a many layered thing that can be enjoyed briefly as a sensual visual experience but is able, when the layers are cleared away, to provide something much deeper. It can be understood as a series of Chinese boxes that, as they are opened, interlink the present with memory, history and the passage of time. Or it can be seen as a process of mapping that, rather than charting specific locations, gives a structure to our dreams and imaginings. As suggested by Freud’s theory of the uncanny, art can reveal things that are at one and the same time both familiar, yet strange. Things which seem ordinary but provoke an aura of mystery, even anxiety.

The use of the myth of Eurydice is a clue to Jeffrey Dennis’s preoccupations. In the painting of the same name a woman can be seen, embedded in the abstract aerated patterning, descending a flight of steps and crossing a bridge. Dennis takes as his starting point the stuff of the every day. A familiar looking
city street, an ordinary room. In Outside Agencies, we see, amid the abstract bubble-wrap surface of the canvas, the suggestion of a cracked pavement. There’s also a realistic section of floor boards and another hyper-real ‘window’ in which a man can be seen entering a tunnel or an enclosed room through a wooden door. Both door and floor boards imply hidden worlds, those below and beyond the familiar. The door might lead, like that into Narnia, to another realm where time follows different rules in a place of dreams. And who knows what treasures might lurk beneath those floor boards? For as Gaston Bachelard writes in his classic work The Poetics of Space: “The house, even more than the landscape, is a psychic state, and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy.”

In Traces of Occupation the canvas is filled with bits of wire and industrial tubing. If you live in London you will frequently see holes dug in the street by gas or telephone companies in order to lay pipes or fibre optic cables. Their muddy depths reveal intestinal wires and pipes trailing over crumbling Victorian architraves, knots of underground connective systems that hold the city together and mimic the neural pathways of the brain. Dennis’s paintings imply that similar synapses are paramount to our individual personalities and creativity, that they define who we are. In a small aperture on the right of the painting a woman stands on a stool. She appears to be an artist painting, highlighting the connection between thinking, making and existential investigation.

Figures appear on the edges of Jeffrey Dennis’s canvases like actors in Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author. In the Italian’s play their role is to demonstrate the artifice of writing, to illustrate the illusion of theatre. Here they establish something
similar, reminding us that painting is an artificial construct. Both inside and outside of the work they are, at one and same time, illusionary and real, subjects and objects.

In that sense Dennis is a postmodernist. There is no hierarchy to his spaces. Each area and element of his picture space is given equal weight. Yet in a world of fracture and cultural incoherence, of severance and loss, his implicit narratives, devoid of any preachy didacticism, reflect back to us the frailties of our contemporary lives.

When the ‘death of painting’ is still dragged out and regularly presented as a tired mantra, Dennis shows how the form can be endlessly reinvented to deal with current issues such as the complexity and disorientation of urban space, and the way in which public transport and digital systems impact on our sensibilities, as well as being a vehicle for deeper investigations into the psyche. He also engages in a discussion about the materiality of paint, one that touches on questions as to when a painting is not a painting but a sculpture. Constantly revivified by an awareness of art history, coupled with influences from film, TV and everyday metropolitan life, he is not afraid of narrative, which he uses in his own unique way to explore the microcosm within the macros in and, by so doing, create his own unique universe.

London, April 2019

Sue Hubbard is an award-winning poet, novelist and art critic. Her latest novel Rainsongs is published by Duckworth and Overlook Press, US. Her fourth poetry collection, Swimming to Albania, is due from Salmon Press in 2020.
Empty Store, 2018
oil and charcoal on linen, 30 × 20 cm

In a Town near the Border, 2018
oil and charcoal on linen, 30.3 × 40.2 cm

The Descent, 2016
oil and charcoal on linen, 107 × 168 cm
Outside Agencies (…dictate my movements in the Studio), 2018
oil and charcoal on linen, 70 × 100 cm

Under the Tree, on the Corner, 2016
oil and charcoal on linen, 25.5 × 30.7 cm
The Dowsers, 2019
oil and charcoal on linen, 148 × 178 cm
Selected Solo Exhibitions since 2000

2019  
Traces of Occupation, Art Space Gallery, London

2016  
Shadows Cast Stones, Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei

2015  
Ringbinder, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland

2008  
Extracts from the Log, Art Space Gallery, London

2006  
A Crisis of Connections, Art Space Gallery, London

2003  
Art Space Gallery, London

Selected Group Exhibitions since 2000

2019  
Made in Britain, National Gallery of Poland, Gdansk, Poland

2018-19  
C. R. McBerny, Zwinglistrasse 4, Berlin; Central Library, Manchester

2017-18  
Contemporary Masters from Britain, Yantai Art Museum; Artall Gallery, Nanjing; Jiangsu Art Museum, Nanjing; Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts Museum, China

2017  
Contemporary Masters from the East of England, The Cut, Halesworth

2016  
As You Change So Do I, Satis House, Belfast

2015  
Flashback: celebrating 25 years, Art Space Gallery, London

2010  
Misfits: 7 British Painters abroad, GalerieDS, Heusden-Zolder, Belgium

2009  
A Thousand Yard Stone, Art Space Gallery, London

2008  
Precious Things, Higharan Gallery, Drogheda, Ireland

2007  
Change at Crewe, The studio, Llandudno, Wales

2005  
The Street Confessionals, 2018  
oil and charcoal on linen, 30 × 40.5 cm

Jeffrey Dennis was born in Colchester, England, in 1958. He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, 1976 – 1980. He lives in London, and is a Senior Lecturer on the Fine Art Programme at Chelsea College of Arts.

His work is held in many public collections, including the Arts Council England; British Council; British Standards Institution, East; Contemporary Collection, Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris; Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei; Leeds Art Gallery; New School, New York City; Priseman Seabrook Collection, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Swindon Museum and Art Gallery and Tate.

Ringbinder, a monograph profiling his work and career, was published in 2017 by Slimvolume and Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art.

His first solo exhibition was at 5 Dryden Street Gallery, London in 1979.
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