

Statements about my work

Richard Dunlop

I'm interested in second or filtered ideas of nature, and gardens are the perfect intersection of nature and culture. Gardens, I think, are a form of architecture posing as nature. I paint wreaths with a similar symbolic weight - they're a way of summarizing and ordering nature. Given the advanced state of our natural environment's degradation, it is justified to ask how nature can still be aesthetically experienced or whether it is nature at all that is being depicted.

Most of my paintings are somewhat autobiographical, and document objects and places, with which I'm familiar, although a couple of images may have had their origins elsewhere. They're often drawn from my backyard suburban surroundings or close surrounds anyway, sometimes with a dose of romanticism and eroticism thrown in as well.

Fred Williams, an artist whose work I admire, once said that he couldn't imagine ever painting something that he hadn't seen and seen very well, and I have a similar attitude. What ends up in paint has to be seen and filtered by my own eyes and I'm keen to draw deliberate attention sometimes to fairly mundane, even hackneyed subjects like flowers and gum trees. The aim is to try to bring freshness to them, so that people recognize that I have painted them.

After many trips to a large bush block at Maleny in the hinterland of Queensland's sunshine coast, I painted some large gums. I prefer to paint gum trees their actual size or even a bit larger than life, unlike the gum trees you might find in a supermarket show, and to etch the type of meanderings caused by worms working under the surface of actual trees. They're meant to be deliberately regional in flavour, but they're composed to also refer to Barnett Newman's strip paintings. The blurring of the edges between abstraction and figuration, or even "low" and "high" art is always part of the search for me, and where I find the most interesting images of other artists reside.

However, sometimes it's closer to the truth that I just like mucking around with colour. What I mean by that is that the actual process of painting remains my central concern. I often do not try to consciously pre-organize the composition of a painting (except if they are part of a distinctive small series). I usually prefer to allow the working of the paint, and the successes and failures en route to dictate the final arrangement of forms. Paintings then become the receptacles of experiment, and the result of the battle between the subject you're painting and the materials of painting itself.

Usually, earlier markings, smudges, erasures, changes of mind are all retained, reveal progression and digression. The value of the work is not necessarily in the finish, but in the evidence of process - how decisions about form, content and line were arrived at and revised, and found their eventual expression.

The paintings that work best, I think, is when they reveal a number of tensions that were sustained in their making. These might include the tension between self-consciousness and expressive license, tradition and innovation, style and nature, recognizable imagery and unintelligible blobs and squiggles, all of which might look familiar but are not real objects in the world. In the end one of the things about painting is that it is about paint, so I strive to test the bounds of the qualities of the substance itself to create paintings which are as mysterious and beautiful as I can make them. Once a painting starts for me, the process of painting tends to take charge.

In the final analysis, forms are things to hang paint on. Sometimes, I'm more interested in exploiting the various surfaces in order to wrench out the best possible result, and at other times, it's about trying to tame a familiar subject and nail it down to communicate something to other people. When I did a series of monumental-sized gum trees in the late 1990's, I was mainly interested in pursuing formal objectives. They weren't about making faithful copies of natural objects, but rather set out to be independent pictorial realities, other things. After taking cues from nature, I try to construct an autonomous pictorial world.

Some of my paintings are about light, about paint as light, object as light, the very atmosphere of the paintings, material and immaterial substance. Edges may be blurred to give the light of the painting a fuzziness, as if it were constantly contracting and expanding. Sometimes they are about the joy of pulling an image of light out of darkness.

Other paintings and works on paper of mine refer to eighteenth century botanical drawings and etchings, and the way in which they usually have some forms fully developed and others left as just pencil sketches and afterthoughts. The original purpose of the etchings in previous centuries, I guess, was primarily to document living things for classification in a pre-photography era. However, I think they stand up over time as interesting art, maybe in need of a bit of updating.

I've been etching into paintings for many years now (with a house nail, like Matisse used to do). There's not much room for error, but I tend to see very few things as mistakes, whether it's paint smudges, or finger marks, pencil lines, or other residues of the process of making the pictures. I'd generally prefer to leave it all on the surface, as evidence of how it was made, and for something to look at more closely in a painting. I tend to like looking at paintings that you don't "get" in one look, which reveal themselves more slowly over time. Therefore, I'm also striving to create paintings that seep deeply into a person's attention and slow the eye rather than be understood in one gaze.

The black grounds in some of my paintings probably had its origins in the cheap garden plastic that I used to use to line my studio from wind and rain. Or it might have come from looking at the collection of folkish eighteenth century portraits owned by a neighbour in Brisbane, which invariably have an inky black-ground. It's also a way of highlighting the type of transparent light that shines through or from within the fibre of plants, particularly under torchlight at night in a garden. These paintings are built up, sometimes painstakingly, over several weeks with many glazes.

There's a couple of paintings I did called "The Road to Berry (after Two Dead Greats)" which refer to a painting by Lloyd Rees and its companion by Brett Whiteley, both in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. You could learn everything you need to know about how to move paint around from the one by Lloyd Rees, even though it's tiny.

The intention is to express something new within the context of what I've so far created. Some pictures contain a network of references to other pictures of other people or mine.

Some of the interest comes from the manipulation of scale and the clusters and repetition of forms that imply interrelationships, usually improbable.

I get most ideas from things other than other art, because much contemporary painting is conformist to an extreme. There is a fear of anything recognizable in a painting, similar to the dogmatism of nineteenth century that all paintings had to have recognizable imagery. Robert Hughes, the leading American art critic, has described such artists as "sad victims of orthodox

modernist thinking" who tend to suppose that art has a single unbreakable body of rules, that an individual's art has to 'evolve' beyond its representational purposes toward abstraction, that certain materials are off-limits for art-making.

In an art world where cosmopolitanism sometimes wanders into placelessness, I strive towards grounding a vision in a particular place as a refreshing corrective. The idea is to evoke a sense of place or the particularity of a locale. Sometimes it's to create a place which doesn't exist but looks real enough, so that the eye of the viewer needs to go to work. I'm trying to paint "parallel to nature" rather than "after nature". The plant forms are generally illogical in terms of natural patterns of growth, but they look familiar to me and hopefully to other people.

There's not always a clear source or purpose or rationale for paintings at their time of execution, and sometimes they're just objects in the world. I prefer to change my mind all the time during a painting rather than have a clear image of the outcome from the outset. When I see them years later, it's difficult to think that I actually did them, but by that time I usually have a better idea of why I did them.

I enjoy thrashing an idea out for a while, and then it sometimes returns in a hybrid form years later in subsequent paintings, but the progress tends to be cyclic rather than linear. Sometimes this is because the things being painted are close at hand, and the interest lies in the variations suggested over time.

It's that blurring of the edges of classification which makes carnivorous plants fascinating to me - at once a plant and a predator. Carnivorous plants tend to recur in my paintings as a lurking presence. They remind me of my childhood days (and here is where it gets obviously autobiographical) where I grew up in Ashgrove, a suburb of Brisbane, which had a shop which exclusively sold carnivorous plants, now long gone. I used to frequently look through the shop window on a Sunday morning, when the shop was closed, and hundreds of live insects would be released so the plants could feed.