The bewildering spectacle

Peter Daverington adeptly makes use of a wide range of pictorial languages in his art. For him, it’s like looking at life from multiple viewpoints simultaneously and capturing the way being human and life itself is a natural struggle between viewpoints, opinions and perspectives. He talks to Philip Murray.

Portrait by Jason Wyche

Peter Daverington’s large paintings are large-scale canvases filled edge-to-edge with spectacular compositions that seamlessly integrate what should be clashing styles. In some, fantastical buildings painted in a popping bubble gum pink are set amongst extraneous architectural shapes covered in striking geometric patterns reminiscent of hard-edged abstraction. Other works depict an idiosyncratic melding of figures - in one, a pudgy pert, a giant squid and a howling wolf beside each other in a centrally-dynamic configuration. The compositions are set against lyrical landscapes redolent of the romantic tradition, and all are painted in Daverington’s finely detailed and highly proficient technique, evidencing a deft ability to move easily across artistic styles.

This un blending of styles and ideas is an ongoing preoccupation for the artist: “Mixing styles and technique interests me,” he states, “because I am looking at life from multiple viewpoints simultaneously - whether different points in history, different cultures, different perspectives and so on. I like the stark contrasts of life, the very natural struggle between viewpoints and opinions. The only way I can express this is by trying to compress a wide range of pictorial languages to capture the bewildering spectacle of being human and of life itself.”

Pictorial space and its illusionary potential have always haunted him. “I was drawing every day as a child, it’s what I lived to do,” he states. “My father taught me to shade with a pencil and draw perspectives. Ever since I have been cleverly fascinated by this illusionistic space and three-dimensional depth. It’s a simple pleasure that never abandoned me. I then became a graffiti artist when I was alone and developed a lot of techniques from using the spray can. Bright colour and finding new elements I had carried through in my work. I taught myself to use oil paints, they are so difficult and elusive, but that’s what I love about them.”

Daverington combines this love of image-making with a broad and deep knowledge of art history. Casting an eye across his canvases, the viewer sees a startling array of art-historical lines, which meld together in a nuanced and often surprising way: “I am interested in a kind of never-ending juxtaposition of visual languages,” he states. “My compositions rely on this tension between hard-edge geometric line work and representational painting. I am fascinated with painting a pictorial space that was invented through the history of painting.”

Yet this interest in the differing logics of pictorial space that have developed over centuries of art history is combined with a persistent interest in the contemporary: “The evolution of art and its gradual development in representing three-dimensional space is fascinating to me, which is why endlessly I am, however, interested in trying to make paintings that are truly of the 21st century, yet also reach a long way back into the past.” The logic
of the digital age, with its endless recreation of images, is devalued in his work. "The computer is so unique to our time that I feel it cannot be ignored in my work. The digital world we live in is so complex as a result of an endless stream of information available to us that it becomes complex is the logical way forward for me. By compressing a vast amount of imagery, styles and references I am pursuing a kind of maximalism that I feel is relevant to our time."

Daverington travelled widely in his twenties and has settled in America, currently living in Beacon, an hour’s drive from New York City. He was drawn to the city for its "very international art scene and great collectors" and has found support for his visual art as well as his musical pursuits. Daverington is an accomplished player of the tenor, a Middle Eastern instrument he studied for years while living in Turkey and Egypt. He recently performed at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and Lincoln Center. "This is also an important part of my artistic life and is a counterpoint to my visual arts," he states.

Both are vital parts of his artistic practice. "I don't think I would be anything but an artist. I think art is something you do because it's an inner need, an instinctive impulse."

His upcoming exhibition at Art One Gallery in Melbourne is, he states, "nearly a culmination of many years honing my craft as a painter. The best way I can describe it is a true celebration of my love for painting. The reason I continue to feel for the history of painting is so deep for me I really had no choice but to become a painter myself. ... I feel this show is an overexpansion of a true inner need to paint and to purge myself of desire. The desire to speak of how the desire to try out all that interests me such as very large scale work, figuration, the landscape, architecture, the medieval, the classical, socialist and religious art and so on. I want to do it all and I refuse to constraints and rules myself. Life is too short and my body's energy is finite. I needed to do these paintings and, therefore, the title of the show is "Presence Painting. What more can I say"." (Pop Phony)

Peter Daverington's new work is exhibited by Art One Gallery in Melbourne from 23 September to 25 October 2010.

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Peter Daverington
Fran Clark

FORMER DIRECTOR, ARCO GALLERY

Fran Clark, director of Arc One Gallery, says Peter Davenport in 2007 after winning an "extraordinary exhibition" of work by the artist on the subject of whistling devils. Since signing on, Davertington has had four "highly successful" solo exhibitions with Arc One, with his fifth scheduled for later this year. "The work for this exhibition is quite breathtaking," states Clark, "and we are very excited about what audiences will experience."

For Clark, Davertington is "a standout talent". She states: "Peter Davertington is a very dynamic and creative person who is successfully working in both the visual and the performing arts. He is an impressive high achiever in both mediums. He is an original thinker who often works way ahead of others in his ideas and he looks beyond the current trends in an ever-fickle market place."

Clark describes a broad collector base for Davertington's work, including public galleries and institutions as well as private collectors, particularly those involved in the fields of architecture and art. His audience is broadened through other projects, such as his work for the Archibald Prize, for which he has been shortlisted for the second time, and his public art projects, including a major commission from the Chinese government to create a 50-metre-long street art mural in Shanghai.

"He has an utter dedication to building knowledge in his artistic practice," states Clark, "and he stands out through his spectacular rendering of art history and his deep fascination with the evolution of painting. His work is wonderfully playful too. Davertington has an ability to deconstruct spatial architectural elements with a sense of the sublime and the awe of great landscapes. He collapses one tradition into the other, delighting himself and us with the great classic styles. He is a highly knowledgeable painter who can pick from the Italian Renaissance right through to the painting styles of the German and northern romantics. He is also a consummate painter - I don't think I know anyone who understands paint like Peter does."

Hepi Murray
Simon Gregg
CURATOR, GIPPSLAND ART GALLERY

Simon Gregg, Curator at Gippsland Art Gallery, has looked on Peter Daverington's career with enduring interest: "Peter Daverington is an enigma. Gifted with a unique talent of frightening proportions, his work draws on a multitude of periods and styles to form a blazing Baroque-punk fantasy. By plotting trajectories within his paintings that span centuries of art, he proposes a kind of cyber-romanticism unlike anything else in Australia. His works shun convention and mock tradition, and while they possibly shouldn't work as cohesive artworks, they somehow do."

Gregg has shown Daverington's work on a number of occasions and also acquired the major work The New Colony, 2008, for the Gippsland Art Gallery. During the development of Gregg's 2011 book New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art in which he wrote extensively about Daverington, Gregg found himself spellbound by the artist's ability to contribute to the lineage of romantic art while also interpreting it through a highly contemporary perspective.

Gregg anticipates Daverington's artistic future with interest: "In the decade that I have known Peter, he has risen from a cocky street artist to a figure of national importance, though whether the nation is quite ready for him is another matter. I can't imagine how his work will evolve in the future, but it will likely become the future of art itself."

Phil Murray