



clare davies

island life

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i s l a n d   l i f e

6 May - 3 June 2011



Moving between painting, printmaking, sculpture and animation, there is a restlessness to Clare Davies' assembling and picture making activities. Despite the assurance that she demonstrates through her striking use of colour and affinity for materials, her work exhibits an underlying tension that is often conveyed through the devices of suspension, oscillation and flotation. With movement constrained, there is a muffling of underlying anxieties, suggesting a distrust of anything too agreeable or too immediate.

Her latest body of work – a series of monoprints entitled *Island Life* – emerges from a yearning to be freed from the strictures of daily life. Davies has produced a magical space, a kind of Xanadu, in which expectations and obligations melt away and we are reunited with our more elemental and playful selves. Life on the island is moist and fecund. Davies' application of a single colour to her printing plate – whether flesh-toned or reminiscent of rotting undergrowth – is rather like agar in a petri dish. It provides a fertile base for the abundance of organisms that swim in the shadows beneath the palm trees and volcanoes. Her free-hand overlaying and rubbing back of painted detail brings the strands of mitochondria and bodily secretions within this micro-environment to the fore and draws attention to the mutations and irregularities of its ecology.

Davies' elongated figures inhabit a dream-like state that is closer to nature and exists in an indefinite place somewhere before recorded history. With their lithe torsos and taut buttocks they are reminiscent of Paleolithic hunters or mythical pearl divers. Their mark making and utterances – emanations of the body rather than discrete functions of the brain – are tasks performed in the most

involuntary fashion without the complications of gender, language and race. In this parallel universe, life's rituals are guided by the constellation of unpolished stones, geometric white shapes and colour flashes that rotates throughout the entire body of work. Davies' ribbons of fluorescent ink bring to mind the connection between light and heightened consciousness that is found across cave, fresco and altarpiece.

The figures, however, are adrift in the shallow pictorial space. They are depicted reaching out to, reclining on and crouching before obelisk-shaped smudges of paint as if in need of an anchor or point of orientation. Devoid of any individuality, on closer inspection these entities have distended heads and red, android eyes. Communication is crude and reliant on the discharge of a milky, opaque froth. Initially captured in a languid and dazed condition, Davies ultimately reduces these creatures to the most primitive level – to an amoeba-like form – in which nutrition, respiration and evacuation pass through the same orifice. All of the entities in the exhibition, no matter how configured, are isolated from one another, mute and without will. Davies conveyed this passivity in previous works by layering her liquidy figures so that one body penetrated or disappeared inside another. From this perspective, the torments of Hades seem preferable to the limbo of Purgatory.

Davies' rapid working method has given rise to a sequence of images in which the emptying out of the picture plane and the shifting spatial relationships generates a host of molecular, geological and heavenly associations. It is in the most recently completed, sparser works that her sensitivity to line, command of negative space, and unlikely juxtaposition of pastel, tertiary and fluorescent colour is most apparent. While these clustered prints share some of the sweetness of their predecessors, it is their scattered, awkward compositions that

bear most resemblance to the uneasiness of our inner lives and point to the artist's intention.

Davies cultivates an approach to art making that she has described as 'not being too mindful'. To not be 'too mindful' is to open oneself to the indirect and the unexplained. This attitude of mind has the effect of loosening the artist's focus and gesture and enables her to readily shift or change media. It engenders a sense that the work is disposable until selected for exhibition and permits the necessary distance between Davies and her work that she requires.

Davies keeps her work at a certain distance because she is wary of immediate disclosures. She is hesitant to communicate all her imaginings but acknowledges that image making is a compulsive activity. Her work shows signs of a necessity to reveal but also to retract. It has a dreamy sensibility – occupying a realm associated with fewer inhibitions – but at the same time, its visceral quality sets up an aversion to her imagery. Taking the material pleasures of paper and oil paint as her starting point, Davies has therefore created a body of work that both liberates and contains her desires while simultaneously elevating and debasing her pictorial worlds.

*Jasmin Stephens*

April 2011





● BIOGRAPHY

Clare Davies received a Bachelor of Fine Art (Print-making) and a Graduate Diploma in Film and TV (Animation) both from the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA). She has exhibited widely since 1998 and her work has featured in numerous group exhibitions including *Constellations*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, 2010; *Joondalup Invitation Art Award*, Perth, 2009/10 and *Better Places*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), Perth 2008/09. She also held solo exhibitions which recently include *a miraculous memory*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle, 2010 and *found horizons*, Free Range, Perth, 2009. Davies undertook a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2004 and was artist in residence in

2009 at the Bundanon Trust, Shoalhaven, New South Wales. In 2008 she had an animation selected as part of The Gertrude Association's *Digital Media Festival* in Melbourne and her work, *The Royal Tigress*, was televised as part of the *World Tales Project* on SBS Australia in 2003.

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- Cover      *Heads 6* 2011, monoprint, 56 x 38 cm.  
Inside Left      *Island Life (pink) 3* 2011, monoprint, 56 x 38 cm.  
Inside Right      *Island Life* 2011, monoprint, 90 x 69 cm.  
Leaf      *Lost Horizon* 2011, monoprint, 130 x 130 cm.

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