

Transitional Style

Christine Dean by Ian Milliss

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The concept behind VisualBind, of artists writing on artists, would be worthless if artists just wrote with the spurious detachment of reviewers. Hopefully they will write with more emotion than calculation and with some openness about their own relationship to the artist and any influence the work may have had on them – critics after all are not influenced by artists but other artists are. Another artist may change your life, for better or worse, although I suppose it would be hoping for too much to one day see an article written with all the bile we know some artists harbour for others. I've been pleased to find myself assigned to write about Christine Dean, an artist that I can write about with genuine affection, whose work I admire even though it is in many ways distant from my own concerns.

It is hard to disagree with Charles Harrison's [comment](#) on the beginning of conceptual art, that it grew out of a need to return content to art that had been reduced to flat patterns by the logic of formalism.

“The next move, in the wake of [Jasper] John’s work is to make the text pictorial – as people like On Kawara did – finding ways to make textual subjects into pictures; the text as picture.”

Over the following thirty years pictorial text became a genre in itself, as unremarkable as landscape, portraiture or still life, but also as variable in appearance and meaning as more ancient genre. This is one of the rare occasions where using the terms “conceptual” and “painting” in the same sentence is not proof of feeble mindedness, there is a logical consistency in the practice of painting text that leads beyond the manufacture of art market fodder. There is enormous room to manoeuvre in painted text, room for revelation and concealment, room for ambiguity, room for intimacy or public dramatisation, for sincerity and irony.

All this was in the background of my initial reaction to Christine Dean's text paintings when I first saw them about fifteen years ago. Looking back on the work it all seems so obvious what was happening but at the time it seemed less personal than it became, more of an intellectual game. The first works I had seen from the mid 1990s were textured fabrics such as lace doilies and chenille bedspreads glued to canvas then painted in monochrome pastel house paint. They had a glossy opaqueness reminiscent of prosthetics and dentures that induced a sort of queasiness in me, but they had an individualism that was not common in the nineties scene. They seemed to be an ironic take on gender and second wave feminism's identity politics, an impression confirmed when I heard of the pink painted engine block, at 383 cubic inches the biggest production car engine ever available in Australia, the ultimate suburban macho statement of size mattering.

And Christine was historically aware, unlike many other young artists of the time. Her 2001 painted homage to the 1970s hard edge painters of Central Street Gallery, one painting per artist, reduced their heroically oversized formalist paintings to A4 sized logos that nonetheless captured their essential imagery without ever reproducing it exactly. They were artists I had been closely associated with, the first gallery where I had shown. Notoriously, they had been unselfconsciously masculinist in a Mad Men sort of way, not surprising given that many of them made their living in advertising. Domesticating their work with such cruel clarity was powerful feminising magic, you could see that Christine's great respect for these artists did not preclude boiling them down into something like a collection of shrunken heads.

Unfortunately, given the Australian art world's wilful historical ignorance it was a crushing gesture

that remained incomprehensible to most people, but it may have been the first serious step down the path of Christine becoming a very different person or, rather, becoming herself. It needs to be said for those who don't know, that Christine was at that time Christopher, and the work that was to follow increasingly revealed the psychological processes underlying what was to happen. I think Christopher saw those paintings as a tribute to the Central Street group. He had met the surviving members, had learned the lessons of their formalist skill but soon knew they had to be overcome, that it was necessary to add meaning to formalism. This too had been my experience 20 years earlier when they had supported and mentored me and so it became my first point of real connection with Christopher.

The text paintings that followed seemed to break through into a way of working that could accommodate concerns beyond the art world. The technique developed from earlier paintings where prior to doilies he had used the cutout shapes of carburettor gaskets. Now the felt lettering was over-painted with geometric shapes that sometimes referenced other artists and sometimes formed a symbolic link to the text. The art world was still there of course as many of the texts quoted artists but The Adventure Island Series of 2006 was based on an ABC children's series which Christopher described with adult hindsight as filled with "non-traditional gender stereotypes such as drag and left wing politics that emphasised that the baddies were always in charge." The cheerfully gaudy paintings quoted fragments of the script, such as *If you hadn't rushed off to be a princess none of this would have happened.*

I suppose that in a sense Christopher's ruminations were becoming a game we could all join in. When I was married in late 2009 I asked Christopher to be my best man, as an art historical joke I told him, and later presented him with a painting with the words "Best man" repeated in a fluffy air brushed pink in recognition of his ongoing PhD thesis on pink paintings. The thesis culminated in the Pink Room Exhibition at Gallery 9 in 2011 where a series of paintings in shades of pink spelt out the whole art and sex and gender conundrum: *Middle age hard edge abstractionist from St Marys seeking same* or *The best part of my job at the University of Western Sydney Kingswood Campus was giving an annual lecture on Rock Hudson & Doris Day*. But above all the painting that encapsulated the whole situation was a quote from Sydney gay scene bon viveur Phil Scott *I pretended to be straight but knew he knew and I knew he knew and he knew I knew he knew remember that feeling.*

It was around this time that Christopher visited the Gender Centre and the transition to Christine began. The painting Show Girl, begun in 2012, quotes from former Les Girls performer Ayesha: *I don't miss being a full time show girl because how many times can you keep painting the Mona Lisa*. It remained unfinished until late 2014 when its delayed completion and exhibition at Galerie pompom represented the eventual completion of Christine's own transition.

This journey as I have mapped it out is of course far too simplistic, imposing a narrative in retrospect that ignores the reason these paintings are so appealing. It's not the story they obliquely tell of personal understanding and regeneration but rather the complex visuality that accompanies the text. Show Girl is a tour de force of technique where the negative areas cut out of the letter stencils are scattered all over the text as visual punctuation and decoration. The text in fact exists twice on the painting in both positive and negative form. The negative form is almost unrecognisable and could never be described as the "dark side", in fact it is the other bright side, its brilliant colour and apparently abstract shapes providing nuance, decoration and distraction, like art itself.

Personally I love the paintings both as paintings and for the role they obviously played in helping a friend resolve a tumultuous part of her life. That's what distinguishes good artists from bad, an ability to externalise things that may not make complete sense until a long time later. Those things

can only be found by reaching deep inside beyond what is clear or safe, by exposing vulnerabilities and ambivalences that even the artist may not comprehend. Yet self exposure does not necessarily make good art, in fact it often makes bad art, and what is also required are the visual skills and invention that formalism mistook as the only element of art. The last word and the new beginning is probably found in a recent drawing that quotes the American cubist painter Stuart Davis, an artist who also used text in many of his works. The drawing in Q&A form refers to a collector who told Davis that he had misspelt the name of the country Yugoslavia in a painting. Davis replied “It's a painting madam, not a geography lesson”.