

Jo Dennis – Absent without Leave

Sid Motion Gallery

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Text by Sara Thorsen Fredborg

In her 5th project with Sid Motion Gallery, Jo Dennis presents paintings and installations from her AWOL series. Having recently graduated from the Royal College of Art's painting programme, this exhibition marks an expansion of Dennis' practice, moving from photography to painting with compelling detours into installation, using found materials as her starting point.

Dennis paints on surplus army tents, repurposed, cut up, some shaped around a stretcher and some unstretched. The technical fabric recalls its former function; handles, guy lines, button holes, eyelets and wood toggles spring from the surface, partially concealed beneath thick layers of paint, but insistently protruding from the picture plain to hold claim to its origin.

Undoubtedly, a repurposed army tent speaks of an aftermath, a scenario, or a lost narrative. The term AWOL is used to describe the disappearance of military personnel without the permission of senior officers. One imagines soldiers gone missing, dead, captured or deserted, but also humanitarian crises, refugee camps, people on the run, homelessness, the displaced or disappearing. The tent is a thin barrier between the outside and inside. It shields us under precarious circumstances, or, looking from the outside, it blocks our view, leaving us to wonder what transpired behind the discarded tarpaulin.

Dennis' work is largely abstract, but some pieces insinuate landscape, or an architecture beyond that of the tent, shapes such as window panes and doors, fences and widow walks, bridges and barriers. Lasting constructions painted on functional material of impermanent nature. The established is grieving the transient, and the transient is posing as solid.

Tacoma Narrows (2022) vaguely outlines the silhouette of the famous suspension bridge that ran between Tacoma and the Kitsap Peninsula, in the state of Washington, US. Collapsing on November 7th 1940, only a few months after officially opening to traffic, its demise has been studied rigorously by engineers, mathematicians and physicists. In the lower left corner of the work hangs a lone wood toggle in a thin fabric rope, delicate and released from duty. The silhouette depicts the bridge after its collapse, the carriageway dramatically dropping to the waters. A shrewd reminder that scale is no guarantee for eternity.

Dennis uses the existing features of the tents to shape her compositions. Wide horizontal lines of dark green or cobalt blue follow the sewn spacing that once held the tent poles in place, now used to define barriers, and cutting the pictures plane into segments. The darker colours are deepened by contrasting millennial pink, soft peach, vibrant orange and deep red or mauve; a lush and inviting palate, turned urgent through assertive and evocative brush strokes.

Throughout the series, the relationship between material and abstractions remains central. In *Zuma* (2022), thin dark vertical strokes impersonate the guy lines found in many of the paintings. While tactile and physical, literally springing from the picture plane, the lines also double as suggestion of motive, appearing as fences or wood trunks in abstracted landscapes.

The exhibition is tied together by two installations, *Home Front* (2022) and *Beast of Burden* (2022), comprising found objects, the same army surplus tents used in the paintings, and other recycled fabrics. In *Home Front*, the painted army tent is installed on a ceiling high structure of reclaimed wood. *Beast of Burden* consists of ropes, pieces of tent, painted flags and a fabric bag with unknown contents, hanging from a metal clothing rail. Both installations echo and emphasize the materiality of the paintings, mindfully grounding the exhibition in the gallery space.