

Grave Architecture: Jo Dennis' A.W.O.L. Series

John Slyce

Materiality, as expressed through works of art, reaches well beyond the atomic fact of the art object and the physical matter that comprises its make up and connects to as well as frames—in a broad sense—content, meaning, conditions of production, alongside an artist's location and personal history as well as those locations and histories pertaining to viewers. All of this contains a residue of time, if not indeed history, and continues to evolve in and over time. Materiality is the platform on which we begin to build if not locate the corporal and intellectual—surely even the emotive and libidinal—aesthetic response to a work of art. That sounds heavy, perhaps too much so particularly at the start of a short piece of writing on work and an artist I am close to. But there you go. I have come to understand Jo Dennis the artist as a collector of materialities. Previously Jo would have gleefully admitted to bordering on being a hoarder of 'stuff'. She is certainly 'at home' in the interstitial spaces of a city at its post-industrial margins, but all this places emphasis on the stuff of items or things over and above a powerfully magnetic attraction that both animates and structures aesthetic experience of exactly those spaces, situations and places and the materialities so palpably present in her work.

Take a look, if you can, at Jo Dennis' book *I touched this with my hand, I touched that with my eye*—a pandemic publication from 2020 that could easily be misrecognized as a photo-book. As I hold the monograph now in my hands, I am of course aware I am looking at photographic images but what these convey and primarily connote to me comes forward as an archive of exuberant painterly materialities grounded in a charged experience of a particular type of urban—I want to say 'situation' here instead of 'space'—where the all-too-familiar late-Capitalist forces of decline that leads to regeneration and ultimately gentrification have stalled, if only temporarily, and a city's physical landscape comes forward as a patchwork of painterly surfaces created in turns by the patina of use, ad hoc mending, wilful neglect and productive entropy. This archive of images cum structures, surfaces and fecund materialities is a powerful entry into the paintings that comprise and circulate around Dennis' A.W.O.L. (Absent Without Leave) series, which explores what a painting might be in our here and now while acknowledging the legacies painting and painters have left and draw upon still.

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As an acronym, A.W.O.L. was born of the Great War and then still communicated by the sound of each isolated letter. By WWII, the acronym had entered general parlance amongst

the English-speaking peoples as a word sounding as if 'A-wall'. When one is 'absent without leave' they have left behind the official agenda and proscribed schedule and order of the day and things. They have gone 'into town' and left their tent, comrades or the front behind. If noticed, this can be a forgivable breach of protocol, but so too a capital offence if chosen and pursued by commanders and officials with an escalating menu of implications. In a civilian sense and context, we have all been A.W.O.L. Some of us are perpetually—even gloriously so. Other's absence is felt and has lasting impact. Duties, not only a military matter, are always already hybrid—parents, carers, teachers count here too. One may be absent from a role while fulfilling another. Again, the level of infraction is variable but always felt by those it impacts on, even if tangentially but particularly so psychologically. I will not betray Jo's trust by saying she was raised in a military family and subsequently moved a good bit. I was raised by anti-war hippies and did so as well. I lived then in a tent for a long summer (the period lasted longer than the season). The materiality of tents—I say materiality but could easily have written context, connotation, metaphor or signifier there—is hugely important to this work. A great innovation in the history of tents, especially those military, came when someone stopped using leather as the Romans did and opted for linen and canvas. This was lighter, more suitable to withstand weather and given to speedy erecting and transport. The same certainly holds for the materials offering support for a painting surface.

I do like the contradiction that Jo Dennis paints on a support meant to repel liquid. To make a painting is to chase a moving target and to do so on a support that avoids the dart of material, brush and mark is a great challenge indeed. Some of her paintings—be them stretched, or stretched but still proposing disruptions to the flat picture plane, or un-stretched and inhabiting space as installation or sculpture—come forward with a lightness of touch where the structure given by the support suggests moves and planes to be negotiated by colour and mark. Others are 'hard-won' or 'struggled over'—forgive me for using those phrases, painting people tend to do so, though I am still uncomfortable with them, even though they may convey the sometimes history of the encounter for painter if hopefully not a viewer. A painting may be hard work, but if making one is not fun, then I feel one should do something else. A great accomplishment of Jo Dennis's paintings—be them stretched, or not—is that, while much work has transpired in their making, they are never laboured. Habits are the enemy of good art. This is something an artist needs to consider. Struggle, or the valorisation of labour in a painting, rarely if ever results in work that really holds water, or offers a viewer a meaningful experience of what a painting can do or be in our moment of culture and economy. Painting needs to consider ethics and sustainability now more than ever—as we all must do given the crises we have created. Art presented in such a situation that ignores as much could be said to have gone properly A.W.O.L. and be elsewhere, which is something an intelligent, or ideal viewer would and should notice and feel immediately. Consider this alongside the upcycled products of Jo Dennis' painterly labours.

If I may offer a few programme notes to consider while viewing these works: tents are used by the nomadic, the military, for recreational purposes, those in emergency, the homeless, and by protest movements. For all those, they are favoured for their speed and rapid deployment. All this and

then something else is at play here in Jo Dennis' work. The upcycled tent offers a material metaphor and loaded substrate to support a painting that can at once reach back and push forward into one's life and painting's history. There is a line marked and teased out in a good number of these works that suggests tent, house, roofline and even sail. Follow it. Not unlike Ellsworth Kelly's majestically monochromatic work, the paintings Jo Dennis makes are grounded in the world, its direct experience and observation. What may at first appear abstract should only serve to remind us that we deal with such things and their appearance in our everyday too often without recognition or challenge. We should challenge this where and when appropriate, ideally through the concrete interruption of material realities.

I want to close with a close description, which will inevitably be a reading of one work before you. I do not generally write programme notes—you are not, after all, at the opera but in a commercial gallery showing art that is for sale. I would hope you expect to have an experience of the work—bodily, visceral, and intellectual—and will create your own stories and readings. Those who want to buy work tend to buy stories and neglect that which they could make their own over and above the art work. Such is the case with art in our moment. Consider the support—what is painted on. Think about what information, context, colour and form this arrived with already before any paint was applied. What was its previous life and context? What meanings did this hold? Look at the edges first—where does the work start and stop materially, physically—and then go on to consider the same socially and politically. What were the first marks made by the painter Jo Dennis? What was the last? There is a painting, a self-portrait even, I would like you to consider as a way in here. The title of the work I want to linger on is *Beast of Burden*. The support for this three-dimensional painting—embrace what seems a contradiction—is in turns upcycled off-cuts from tent material belonging to other paintings, now arriving here as bunting, or pennants; a pillowcase, long slept on and before becoming a painting rag and then a modular part of a this whole; a dress both oft worn in an art world context now no longer worn, a blue silk blouse, cherished for its quality of blue so not let go when too worn; a painter's brush adjusted and extended, all here used but now retired and preserved supported and hanging from a found clothes hanging rack that carries just enough paint to be integrated into the whole: a self-portrait of Jo Dennis, the artist mother, brother, sister, lover, both at home and away with and perhaps without leave from orders, conventions, media, or discipline but always indelibly present.

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