

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

Dolly Thompsett

Dolly Thompsett's paintings begin life as amalgamations of images from other times and other places. Her works are built from "documentary source materials such as stills from the TV news or photographs from magazines and books, and 19th century imperial archives of colourised black and white photographs."

Whilst containing activity, Thompsett's paintings are based around "vistas or environments" in which figurative elements are invariably set into the middleground or background. Human beings, in Thompsett's painterly world, are rarely focal points over which we linger. Rather, they provide 'stations' on our imaginative travel into and around each image, ensuring that our attention is not diverted from the luxuriant atmospheres with which each landscape is imbued. As she has noted, "I see my paintings as having a relationship to the tradition of epic landscape painting, in which 'backgrounds' articulate sentiment." In Thompsett's imaginative worlds, inanimate objects carry the heightened charge normally attributed to human subjects. She has recalled that the care and attention lavished by Northern European Renaissance painters such as Grünewald and Albrecht Altdorfer on rocks and foliage meant that they become an 'objective correlative' for states of mind, rather than merely descriptive. Each of Thompsett's works requires our full imaginative immersion into a complete world. Such an engagement requires a slowed down, patient form of attention on the viewer's part, just as the paintings require a painstaking process of construction over several months on the artist's part.

The artist's most recent body of work began by mixing photographs of modern-day open-cast mining with images of hell and torment from 16th and 17th century paintings by Bosch and Brueghel, and with their cinematic updates in epic Hollywood movies like 'Lord of the Rings'. In Thompsett's work, vortex-like compositions subsume the individuals into a modern sublime. Human beings become ant-like creatures, engaged in extraordinary toil on a heroic scale. Eliding the theatrical and the tragic into a single tableau allows the artist to "seduce the viewer into my sentimental, romanticising worldview" whilst acknowledging the inherent contradictions in such an enterprise. At a more complex level,

the artist has described her paintings as aspiring to the condition of cinema, condensing “the time of an entire film” – in duration, intensity and drama – into a single object. Each detail in Thompsett’s work operates cumulatively, as though a scene in a sequential whole. Indeed the most notable feature of an extended engagement with her work is the way that she slows down the pace of, and controls the trajectory of our gaze. Naturally enough we are required to ‘sift’ each work by reading left to right across the parallel planes on which image is built. But unexpectedly, Thompsett adds hemispherical globules of clear, gelatinous resin onto the surface of certain works. They act as magnifying lenses, so that our eyes undertake what cinematographers call a ‘crash zoom’ between the panoramic, broad sweep of history – the global economic forces which coerce us as subjects – and the beautifully observed close-up detail. It is as though different shots and different focal lengths were encompassed within the same frame.

Each canvas is built up in a sedimentary fashion, as numerous thin translucent glazes alternate with layers of resin so that the painting becomes sculptural. Moreover, each painting also contains small objects and collaged elements which are seen as if petrified within the resin. This sense of both real and represented objects being submerged makes the paintings seem like archaeological relics which we attempt to uncover. Whilst an initial scan reveals that the different layers of each work reside on different strata, over time we realise that these strata do not sit in the expected or ‘proper’ order. Accordingly, our eyes struggle to reconcile the different spatial structures implied, and we are forced to shuttle between the various surfaces and into imaginary depth. Thompsett’s complex technique is a means to various ends: like all good painting, hers manages to create new ways of conjuring both space and time from two dimensions. Each picture becomes akin to a puzzle, and our ability to resolve their spatial complexities and contradictions slows down our reading. Thompsett’s use of resin, glitter, and other reflective or light-refractive materials gives the impression that her scenes have been crystallized and frozen. As her colours are built up in thinned-down translucent glazes, the white of the canvas ground also illuminates them from behind. We have a sense not only of light enveloping the objects, but emanating out of them; the entire scene is suffused with luminosity, and the glass-like surface intensifies the colour to an almost jewel-like pitch. The result is that we shift between haptic and optic modes of viewing, between perceiving the tactility and plasticity of the object and the illusion of an infinitely deep space. Each work appears both like a lightbox or projection, but also densely sculptural.

On one level, such a technique makes us attend to how the artist intends her work to be a meditation upon the nature of fantasy – whether experienced in painting or in modern media – and its gravitational pull over our imagination. Thompsett’s transformation of her source material, as she has remarked, “convey my feelings towards my subject – feelings which are at once both deeply felt and knowingly naïve, idealistic, indulgent.” Creating a push-pull of sensations echoes our response to cinema’s aestheticisation of the exotic, and its ability to give shape to other times and other places. Though based in historical events, Thompsett’s works seem to inhabit their own chronologies, possessing what Benjamin called a “palpable knowledge”. Hers are places where, to adapt Craigie Horsfield’s words, “history exists in the most visceral, and sensational of ways.”