

*Davidia Allen:
In the Moment*

3 May - 30 June 2018

Exhibition
Labels

Davida Allen

In the Moment

Over more than four decades, Davida Allen has maintained her commitment to painting the moments of her life. Allen's work is concerned with the domestic realm: herself (as a mother, daughter, wife and grandmother), her family and the themes of love, sex, birth, life and death.

In the 1980s, her small children and her rich inner fantasy life were her subjects. More recently, encounters with the landscape as a bushwalker and her role as grandmother are explored. This survey exhibition examines these key themes in her works.

As a student, Allen studied under both Betty Churcher at Stuartholme School and Roy Churcher at Brisbane Technical College (now Queensland College of Art). Since the early 1980s, Allen has been consistent in her approach, working most often in oil paint, initially on canvas, and more recently on marine-grade plywood boards.

Stylistically, her raw simplification of figurative forms is combined with bright, often pure use of colour, and heavily impastoed and gestural paint surfaces.

Fellow artist William Robinson recently said: 'To examine Davida's images is to come into direct communion with her life.' Allen's works are powerfully eloquent; brimming with sharp, satirical humour and love, but also death, frustration and mess—both bodily and emotional.

In a 1999 interview she said: 'We've been singing the same song ever since I started painting pictures; it's just that the instruments are different, the words are different, but the philosophy is the same. Who am I? What are women? Where is our role in humanity?'



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F-111 Series 1978

Oil and collage on composite board (13 parts)

Collection: Queensland University of Technology

Purchased 1981

Allen's children, family and rich fantasy life were her primary subjects in the late 1970s and 1980s. Sometimes her subjects extended outside the home, as when she documented the powerful F-111 fighter jets from the nearby RAAF Base Amberley, cleaving the air over the landscape. These precision aircrafts, loud, and built for war, disturbed the atmosphere of daily life.

In Allen's paintings, the aircraft forms are emptied of extraneous detail and become abstracted devices, allowing her to incise, wrap, warp and stretch these symbols of external threat to the refuge of home.

Anna and Crows 1981

Oil on canvas

Collection: Varro Clarke, Tamborine Mountain

Here and elsewhere, the bodies of Allen's children and grandchildren are often portrayed naked, as vulnerable presences.

Allen's daughter Anna is surrounded by the ominous black figures of crows. Allen has said that these metaphorical crows represent the demands, worries and challenges of motherhood beyond a mother's control. The baby herself is seemingly unperturbed by the crows.

These works could also be seen to visually relate to the scene of crows attacking children in *The Birds*, a 1963 American psychological horror-thriller film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, loosely based on the 1952 story of the same name by Daphne du Maurier.

Figures with Crows 1981

Oil on canvas

Collection: Annette Hughes

Priest 1981

Oil on canvas

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Gift of Ray Hughes through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation 2016. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

Allen's relationship to Catholicism and confessional approach form a distinct thematic strand throughout her practice. *Priest* 1981, from a series of paintings examining Allen's Catholic upbringing, depicts a fleshy pink figure clinging to a head, against a turbulent, murky darkness.

Allen returned to the subject in her 1991 novel *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers: Close to the Bone*, in which the protagonist falls in love with a priest. In an interview recorded at the 1999 Venice Film Festival, Allen spoke candidly with popular priest and film reviewer Fr Peter Malone. She explained: "While it's a sexual thing, she's actually fallen in love with the priest's power and his imagination that he believes in God. So she's questioning, in fact, whether he has an imagination."

Drawing #1 1982

Pastel, charcoal, graphite, gouache and pen on paper

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2017

The pure colour and gestural plasticity of oil paint make it Allen's natural *métier*, but occasionally she departs from her usual medium, making and exhibiting print suites and drawings.

In a group of four pastel drawings from 1983, shown for the first time in *Davida Allen: In the Moment*, figures are splayed across vertical lengths of paper in bright pinks and reds, with powerful black silhouettes and outlines. The figures approach life size, vibrating with colour and graphic energy—vivid depictions of Allen, her husband, three small children and one in-utero, tumbling around the flat picture plane in various configurations.

Drawing #2 1982

Pastel, charcoal, graphite, gouache and pen on paper

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2017

Drawing #3 1982

Pastel, charcoal, graphite, gouache and pen on paper

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2017

Drawing #4 1982

Pastel, charcoal, graphite, gouache and pen on paper

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2017

Balletrina Painting no.5 1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Suzy Bosznay, Brisbane

This excellent example of Allen's gestural style is one of a series of works titled with her idiosyncratic spelling, capturing Allen's daughter engaged in ballet class.

F-111 Series 1983

Oil on canvas (4 parts)

Collection: Queensland University of Technology

Purchased 1984

Mother and Child 1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Evan Hughes, Sydney

Concept Painting

From the series 'Death of My Father' c.1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 1999

The works from Allen's extended series relating to the death of her father Joe are the most compositionally spare and subdued of her oeuvre. She learned of his cancer diagnosis while pregnant with her fourth child in 1981. Untethered figures float through grounds of grey, white and black, with occasional flashes of colour, charting the convergence of joy and sorrow.

In January 1982, her father died. The series was accompanied by a set of drawings which were later published in an artist's book.

As art critic Elwyn Lynn described: "The sketches, disturbing, direct and unequivocal, repeat the phrase 'My father is dead: I weep for him.'" Several paintings from this series in Griffith University's collection track the grief of the artist, their turbulent painterly surfaces and wrought figures are palpable, ritualistic expressions of sorrow.

Death of My Father with Halo

Little Green Figure

Red Figure

From the series 'Death of My Father' c.1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 1999

My Father is Dead

From the series 'Death of My Father' c.1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 1999

Pink Figure is Josephine, The Grey Figure is Joe

From the series 'Death of My Father' c.1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 1999

Study One

Second Study

Third Study

From the series 'Death of My Father II' 1983

Oil on canvas

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 1999

Anna, Josephine and Peta (My Life Now) 1984

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane

Allen's children and family are consistent subjects in her work. Twenty paintings from her series 'My Life Now' were included in the 1984 Biennale of Sydney, depicting Allen's children singly or together against fields of flat colour.

No matter what the medium, Allen's project is always autobiographical. In 1991, Allen published her novel *The Autobiography of Vicki Myers: Close to the Bone*, accompanied by an artist book of drawings *What is Portrait: The Images of Vicki Myers*. A thinly veiled pseudonym for the artist, Vicki is trapped by children and home life, trying to fulfil her artistic ambition as well as be a good mother and wife.

In the late 1990s, Allen went on to write and direct a film based loosely on the novel. *Feeling Sexy* was screened at the 1999 Venice Film Festival to acclaim.

Untitled (Four Girls) c.1985

Oil on Belgian linen

Courtesy of the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane

Lovely Sam

On Movie Set at Coffs Harbour

An Actor

From the series 'Sam Neill Suite' 1986

Oil on linen

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2007

Portrait of Sam Neill

From the series 'Sam Neill Suite' 1986

Oil on linen

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2007

Woman with Her Dreams, Peta with Her Horse *Domestic Woman*

From the series 'Sam Neill Suite' 1986

Oil on linen

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2007

Allen's 'Sam Neill Suite' demonstrates the artist's adroit use of repeated personal motifs and symbols in concert with written thoughts and notes. Aware of her sensuous response to Sam Neill's onscreen character in an ABC television series, Allen began painting her burgeoning interest:

I was a perfectly normal mother with four children who enjoyed a program on the ABC called *Reilly, Ace of Spies*. I adored the story, and fell in love with the main actor, Sam Neill. I was doing what Hollywood hoped every woman watching the program would do—fall in love with this man and turn the TV on at 8:30pm every Sunday. I'd make sure that the children were fed, bathed and in bed, story told no matter what. I think I might have even slammed the door on one of the adolescent children, saying: 'No, this is my time'. Then I heard Ray Hughes knew the actor through the gallery and suddenly this wasn't just a TV show, this was a tangible man called Sam Neill, who was acting in *Reilly, Ace of Spies* and who liked art. Ray organised for me to visit the set of a movie Sam was shooting. I did a series of drawings, and then Sam allowed me to do his portrait.

My Father-in-law Hosing His Celtis Trees 1986

Oil on linen

Collection: Ipswich Art Gallery

Purchased with funds donated by the Ipswich Arts Foundation, 2000

In Allen's 1986 Archibald Prize-winning portrait of her father-in-law, Dr John Arthur McKelvie Shera, he is depicted dressed only in shorts and glares at the viewer in a confronting manner, as if irritated at the interruption. In media interviews, Allen described the moment where her father-in-law felt relaxed enough in her presence to not wear a shirt, her realisation that she had been accepted into the family, and her feeling that she needed to capture this new intimacy in a major work. She said:

“John was a very private man. If anyone knocked on the door, he would never answer without going and putting a shirt on, even if he was in the garden on a hot summer day. One day I arrived unannounced with the children and he was watering his celtis trees, and he didn't put his shirt on. It dawned on me he wasn't threatened. It meant a lot to me, so it was that image I did as his portrait.”

The painting's surface, a thick swirling field of lush subtropical green, was beaten with tree branches from John Shera's garden.

Swimming Lessons 1988

Oil on Belgian linen (6 parts)

Courtesy of the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane

In a group of six paintings entitled *Swimming Lessons* 1988, Allen sets the rounded pink bodies of her children and other figures against the geometric lines and brilliant blues of the swimming pool. The children's play animates the compositions, which echo the repetitive nature of activities at the pool with variations of colour, geometry and movement.

Domestic Landscape 1989

Oil on Belgian linen

Courtesy of the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane

The frustrations of life with children are often rawly depicted in Allen's works. In *Domestic Landscape* 1989 squabbles between Allen's four children are exchanged across the table in speech bubbles with Allen as the hapless mother figure.

Conversation on Zilzie Beach 2000

Oil on marine ply

Collection: Griffith University

Donated by Jenny Wong through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2004

Landscape has been a consistent theme in Allen's works since her early career. Her landscapes are almost always contoured by human presence, whether by the inclusion of trucks, F-111 fighter planes, or human figures. These are inflected with a personal perspective—Allen will often introduce pictorial devices or frames, such as windows or semi-aerial perspectives, in order to more accurately express how she apprehends them.

In *Conversation on Zilzie Beach* 2000 silhouettes of two figures are traced delicately against the scribbly beach landscape. Still and calm presences, they appear to integrate into their surroundings.

Sunset: Tasmanian Walk 2003

Oil on medium-density fibreboard

Collection: The University of Queensland

Gift of the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2008

From the early 1990s, Allen's subjects changed as her children grew up and became independent, as did Allen's time with her husband also changed. Family holidays on the beach at Zilzie, near Rockhampton, transitioned to bushwalking treks with just the two of them. They share a passion for Tasmania and the Scenic Rim landscapes of Southern Queensland.

In *Sunset: Tasmania Walk* 2003 Allen captures the textures of the bush by gouging the fibreboard support in the centre of the painting. A reclining female figure is placed across the lower half, the horizon and mountains above her. The pink of her supine body is echoed in the sunset hues above. Colossal and singular, she stares resolutely at the viewer, bathed in glowing tones.

Grandmother Painting 2013

Oil on marine ply

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Gift of the artist through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation 2016. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

In recent years, as Allen's daughters began having children of their own, grandchildren feature in her works. Allen's joy is reflected in *Grandmother Painting* 2013. The artist situates herself against a verdant green background, not dissimilar to that behind her 1986 portrait of John Shera, encircled by the plump bodies of two grandchildren. She states:

I am a grand-mother now, and am extremely involved in the pleasure and responsibility of babysitting and teaching my young family...The painting is a self-portrait portraying love and wisdom, with the baby in my arms, and an older one demanding my attention.

Allen's grandchildren are often depicted in the landscape, indistinct rather than identifiable, but delightful, often unclothed, rounded and tumbling presences at play. Allen says:

Forty years ago I was painting pictures of my children and they were taking up my time: I had no time to paint. Now they're grandchildren and I've got all the time for them, and still plenty of time to paint. It's much more of a celebration.

The Orange Flowering Tree 2016

Oil on marine ply

Collection: Griffith University

Purchased 2016

Allen's recent works have reflected on myriad small moments with her family, often set within spectacular richly coloured landscape environments. In *The Orange Flowering Tree* 2016, the natural forms and blossoming flowers of a diamond laurel tree (*Auranticarpa rhombifolia*) give the opportunity to play with a wide field of fragmented colour. Two small grandchildren and their grandmother lounge under the tree's protective branches.

Allen's paintings of her experiences embrace the depth and richness of human subjectivity. Fellow artist William Robinson recently stated: "To examine Davida's images is to come into direct communion with her life."

Whether her medium is oil paint, pastel, print, celluloid, or words on the page, Allen's enduring project has been autobiographical; she has upended and examined her life as it has unfolded with all its attendant emotions, impulses and reactions.

Cleaning Teeth 2017

Oil on marine ply

Courtesy of the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane

A finalist in the 2017 National Self-Portrait Prize at University of Queensland Art Museum, *Cleaning Teeth 2017* is unerringly candid in capturing a daily routine. The artist's reflected and disembodied head wobbles over the wallpaper, and the multiple viewpoints convey the intimacy and controlled unruliness of the scene. With ever-present frankness and levity, Allen said: "this Ritual is full of love, good intention; frustration and toothpaste!"