THE MORAL MEANING OF WILDERNESS
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JUAN DAVILA

The ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
Griffith University Art Gallery
Monash University Museum of Art
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Cover: Albert Street, 2007 (detail)

Frontispiece: Wilderness, 2010 (detail)
It is a great honour to present *The moral meaning of wilderness*, an innovative and critically engaging exhibition of recent work by Juan Davila, one of Australia’s leading artists. The exhibition represents a radical shift in Davila’s practice, which makes a significant contribution to recent discourses concerning art’s relationship to nature, politics, identity and subjectivity in our post-industrial age.

Juan Davila was born in Chile in 1946 and moved to Melbourne in 1974. He soon established himself as a significant presence on the Australian and international art scene. His work was the subject of a survey exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery in 2002, a major retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 2006 and the National Gallery of Victoria in 2007. Davila’s work has featured in a wide range of significant group exhibitions nationally and internationally, including the prestigious *Documenta 12* in Kassel, Germany, in 2007.

In *The moral meaning of wilderness* Davila pursues his exploration of the role of art as a means of social, cultural and political analysis. While many contemporary artists turned away from representation of the landscape, due to its perceived allegiance to outmoded forms of national identity and representation, Davila has recently sought to revisit and reconsider our surroundings *au naturel*. His paintings are, at first view, striking representations of nature, at a time when the environment is as much a political as a cultural consideration. With technical virtuosity Davila has produced a body of work that depicts beauty and pictorial emotion while addressing modern society’s ambivalent link to nature and what he regards as increasing consumerism in art today that dulls our capacity to observe nature and reduces our ability to explore our inner selves. The paintings, created since 2003, are undertaken *en plein air*, a pre-modern technique based on speed of execution *in situ*, and the use of large scale canvases characteristic of history painting. He has also employed other techniques such as studio painting and representations of the landscape through the sublime, the historical, memory and modernity. They attest to the international reputation he has gained for his innovation in painting.
Juan Davila’s work is extensively represented in the collections of the Australian National University, Griffith University and Monash University, and we are especially pleased to collaborate as university art museums to present this major exhibition focusing on new developments in Juan Davila’s oeuvre.

The Australian National University Library is also the proud recipient of Juan Davila’s library. The Juan Davila Collection comprises 1046 monographs and 66 serials in several languages and covers the fields that have been influential in shaping his intellectual world view: art theory and criticism, art history, architecture, the decorative arts, photography, fashion, popular culture, radical and sexual politics.

In 2008 Davila was a contributing curator to the exhibition *Primary Views: Artists Curate the Monash University Collection*, presented by the Monash University Museum of Art and in 2009 the Griffith University Art Gallery presented *DAVILA: GRAPHIC*, a major survey of work on paper spanning four decades, and published new writing which examined the artist’s subtle inversion of values associated with the ‘panorama device’ and ‘registration’, in terms of a print-making project hinged on identity and mimicry.

The opening date at the Drill Hall Gallery was chosen to coincide with the conference *Independence! Two centuries of struggle*, organised by the Association of Iberian and Latin American Studies of Australia, hosted by the ANU Centre for Latin American Studies. The exhibition will be presented in 2011 at Griffith University Art Gallery in Brisbane and at Monash University Museum of Art in Melbourne, with related public programs and academic reflection.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to Juan Davila for agreeing to present this significant new body of work at the Drill Hall Gallery, Griffith University Art Gallery and Monash University Museum of Art. Equally, we acknowledge Dr Kate Briggs for her essays *Painting, an act of faith: moments in the work of Juan Davila* and *After Image*, which are scholarly additions to the literature of contemporary art.

We are indebted to Kalli Rolfe for her support of the exhibition, to Chong Wring-He for his design of the catalogue, and we acknowledge with gratitude our respective sponsors and staff for their significant contributions which have made the exhibition and tour possible.

Nancy Sever  
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Drill Hall Gallery  
The Australian National University

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Painting, an act of faith
In September 2006 a major retrospective of Juan Davila’s work opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney before traveling to Melbourne later that year. A number of the reviews of the retrospective made passing or quizzical reference to the apparition of beauty in Davila’s recent work, notably the portraits of women. These works indicated a new project, a new strategy, one that, while apparently in marked contrast, is to be understood in relation to some of the strategies he has previously employed. This project is materialized here in over twenty new works. At a time of impending ecological crisis, one that will draw in all possible forms and agencies of social life – political, economic and mythical – Davila presents a contemplation on the nature of experience threaded with the political commentary to which we are accustomed. Introduced with four previous works dealing with the representation of women and the gaze, and collected under a title, _The Moral Meaning of Wilderness_, a thesis is articulated in the agile virtuosity of someone who can actually paint. We find amid these landscapes, moments of extreme and luminous beauty. The question of the sublime is raised alongside the act of sublimation. Amid ravenous impressions of Australian landscapes, contemporary and astute, figures emerge to contemplate and complicate this question of our relation to the wild.

These portraits, landscapes, and acts of commentary on the political landscape return to pre-modern techniques of painting as a mode of expression and experience, a critique of "the current multimedia approach which by definition erases any trace of the personal."\(^1\) Painted _plein air_ on large canvases in bays and national parks around Melbourne, the landscapes are tied to titles designating particular sites (such as _Albert St_, 2007) or issues (such as _Australia: Nuclear Waste Dumping Ground_, 2007) also pursued in smaller canvases depicting a nuclear power plant on the horizon (_Melbourne’s Nuclear Plant at Wattle Park_, 2008) or a grotesque modern architectural form in a reference to the proposed development of a pulp mill that would trash a river (_Pulp Mill on the River Tamar_, 2009). Alongside these expositions of the devastation wrought by capital appropriation, the question of the nature of experience is elaborated in variations on portraits of women, painted from life and dressed in

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Painting setup on Philip Island. Photographs courtesy Juan Davila.
Albert Street, 2007, oil on canvas 185 × 235 cm

Australia: Nuclear Waste Dumping Ground, 2007, oil on canvas 185 × 235 cm
capture moments where experience is inappropriable - a word, we might note, that is not recognized by the spell check function of Microsoft Word®™. In this essay I would like to consider what is happening in these moments, what allows for this apparition of beauty, and why the inappropriable is of importance, as more than a gesture, today.

To begin with, let us note a radical shift in the depiction of women within Davila’s work. To survey some of the recent pieces we might note the airy lucidity of the figures in the large panorama detailing the history and settlement of Melbourne, 2008, the portrait of Carmen Gallardo, Guacolda 2004, the painting of the young woman in The Edge of Melbourne 5pm: Keep Ithaka Always in Your Mind, 2005-6, and from this exhibition, the portrait of Nina Sers, 2008, and another portrait of Carmen Gallardo, this time before a starry night sky, Guacolda del Carmen Gallardo, 2007. In contrast, we might remember some of the earlier figures of the phallic woman contextualized in reference to the terrors of the Pinochet regime (for example, El Enamorado, 1974; Leda, 1975; Untitled, 1974; La Fuerza, 1975), the vexations of modernity (for example, the depiction of Marilyn in Miss Sigmund, 1981), and then the hybrid figures of the transsexual. The latter is emblematic of a series of cultural and symbolic connotations, not least the hybrid, the mestizaje, figure of the margin, born of two races to find a place in neither (for example, Flower Vendor, 1993). The transvestite
is one who dresses as the other gender, the transsexual one who has or takes on physical attributes of the other anatomical sex and who in the process of doing so, may have for a time attributes of both: breasts and a penis, for example. The profanation evident in Davila’s parody of various public figures in politics and the art world follows a particular logic, aimed at dislodging some of the narcissism of contemporary culture whether exemplified by those figures Davila targets or the people and systems that promote them. Its effectiveness is evident in the diplomatic crisis between Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela produced by the depiction of The Liberator Simon Bolívar, 1994 as a transsexual.

We might provisionally characterize a first period in Davila’s work from 1974 to 1978, and a second period of savage quotation featuring the comic strip and phallic figures from 1979 to 1982 and the years from 1982 through 1994 of which the transvestite and transsexual are emblematic. Then come the figures of the refugee - men and women who appear like us yet are subjected to conditions of the concentration camp, in images depicting or titled Women.

These women have to some degree already entered pictorial realism which allows us to engage with the extremity of their circumstance and the brutality of that circumstance – one that as Australians we have either failed to prevent or have conspired to create. It might be suggested that these women and their counterparts have ushered in a transformation in the depiction of women within Davila’s work. Evident from 2002 is a characteristic of these recent portraits: tranquil and airy, grazed by the light of soft and refined definition; elegant grace, images of faith. To describe these recent works in terms of grace and faith – is that not to risk manifest misunderstanding? How can I make this claim, why would I make this statement? To draw out what I see as the jouissance evident in these portraits, in these new works: A commemoration of something so often overlooked, erased, outmoded and moved beyond. The rational economy and obsessive endeavour have no room to give to the freedom of such grace which as an intimate extimacy can strangely constitute a threat.

The apparition of beauty, a state of grace

The portrait of Guacolda del Carmen Gallardo, 2007, one of the first in the new series of works, was followed by two landscapes, Australia: Nuclear Waste Dumping Ground, 2007 and Albert St, 2007, titles that were added later, then another Albert St, 2007 that moves from pictorial landscape...
to the plain, pristine white of an empty canvas within the same frame. A passage by Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector, seems to me relevant here:

State of Grace (extract)

Anyone who has experienced a state of grace will know what I am talking about. I am not referring to inspiration, which is a special grace that comes to those who struggle with art.

The state of grace to which I refer cannot be used for anything. It would appear to come just to let us know it really exists. When in this state, the tranquil light which radiates from people and things is enhanced by a lucidity which can only be described as light because in a state of grace everything is so very, very bright. It is the lucidity of those who are no longer suffering; they simply know. Just that: they know. Do not ask me what they know, for I can only reply in the same childish manner: they simply know.

And there is the physical bliss which cannot be compared to anything. The body is transformed into a gift. And one feels it is a gift because one is experiencing at source the unmistakable good fortune of material existence.

In a state of grace, one sometimes perceives the deep beauty, hitherto unattainable, of another person. As if encountering a kind of halo which is not imaginary: it comes from the splendor of the almost mathematical light emanating from people and things. One starts to feel that everything in existence – whether people or things – breathes and exhales the subtle light of energy. The world’s truth is impalpable. It bears no relation to what I vaguely imagine the state of grace of saints to be. For that is a state of grace I myself have never experienced and cannot even envisage.

No, this is simply the state of grace of an ordinary person who suddenly becomes totally real since he is ordinary, human, and recognizable. The discoveries made in this state of grace cannot be described or conveyed. So when I find myself in a state of grace, I sit quietly without uttering a word. As if awaiting an announcement. But unheralded by those angels who presumably preceded the state of grace of the saints. As if the angel of life were coming to announce the world. 4

This passage beautifully articulates what French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, referred to as feminins jouissance, an experience that may be described within religious discourse, but is by no means confined to that domain though rather perhaps co-opted by it. Lispector describes a state of grace as if awaiting an announcement, as if the angel of life were coming. As if demarcates a space between the experience and a discourse that might be taken up to describe it, as even to ratify or to prove it, but this is not the grace of saints but of an ordinary person, “an ordinary person who suddenly becomes… real”; “ordinary, human, recognizable.” Lispector goes on to warn that it “is better if the state of grace is short-lived as it would disappear if we were to start demanding answers,” it could also become addictive, and such happiness could be dangerous and make one less sensitive to human suffering. Indeed “We must not forget that the state of grace is only a tiny aperture which allows us to glimpse a sort of tranquil Paradise, but it is not an entrance, nor does it give us the right to eat the fruits of the orchard.” A glimpse but not an entrance.

We might think here also of Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the halo as a supplement, a transcendence imminent in the perception of the irreparability of the world: “This imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever, is the tiny displacement that every thing must accomplish in the existential world. Its beatitude is that of a potentiality that comes only after the act, of matter that does not remain beneath the form, but surrounds it with a halo.”5

This beatitude, “a potentiality that comes only after the act” is reminiscent of Lacan’s comment that a “notion as precise and articulate as grace is irreplaceable where the psychology of the act is concerned, and we don’t find anything equivalent in classic academic psychology.”6 After the imaginary plays of composition and attribution, the subject momentarily steps outside the orb of the Other; it is in this temporary dislocation that an act addresses the real and thus changes the subject’s relation to and place in the symbolic. The passage by Lispector continues:

To have known grace is to have experienced something which appears to redeem the human condition while accentuating the strict limitations of that condition. After experiencing grace, the human condition is revealed in all its wretched poverty, thereby teaching us to love more, to forgive more, and show greater faith. One begins to have a certain confidence in suffering and its ways, which can so often become unbearable. Some days are arid and empty I would give years of my life in exchange for a few minutes’ grace. 5

This passage was first published on April 6, 1968 in Lispector’s weekly column for a Brazilian newspaper, and ends with a “P.S. – I am united, body and soul, with the students of Brazil in their tragic plight.”7 I would like to consider this convergence of grace, critique and activism, and the threatening extremity of grace, (from the three angles of Lacan, Lispector and Agamben) in order to articulate what I think Davila points to with these recent works. For it is in this convergence that I see the project of this exhibition: a thesis concerning desire and the unconscious, a meditation on different forms and manifestations of jouissance, driven by a will “to imagine a universe beyond the surface of our perceptions.”8

A thesis concerning modernity, the depiction of women and sexual difference

Let’s recall that the pathos founding the psychoanalytic experience is the suffering we experience “because words disrupt nature.” Rather than inhabiting an instinctual world of rapport with the environment, we are born so prematurely that experiences with our primary others are utterly formative, for we can’t survive without them and from their responses to us, we take our bearings in the expanding and mythical worlds of infancy. Words said impact with the eroticism of life bringing disharmony and a flawed knowledge about our sexuality and our mortality, our Being-onto-sex and our being mortal. “So we are divided and burdened: to many effects of this rift, for which jouissance is the name.”9 Jouissance is the term Lacan used to orient his reading of Freud. And in the course of this work an initial and broadly Freudian account gave way to a second theory of sexuation which relies on the supposition of an Other or “feminine” jouissance supplementary to the field of phallic sexuation with which children, men and women are all involved. While Freud introduced the question of feminine desire, at times he provided an answer to that question in the form of heterosexual women such as Dora or the young female homosexual as to what they did or should desire. Lacan looked at this by questioning Freud’s complicity with the hysterical demand for an impotent master and opened the question of what lies outside or beyond the phallic term of the Oedipus complex in the dimensions of both feminine jouissance and the end of analysis. To term this Other jouissance “feminine” is rather misleading in that it is not presumed to be the domain only

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[1] in memory of José Afonso, a Brazilian poet.
[3] The phrase “limbs indeterminate” is taken from Lacan’s concept of the body as a supplement, a transcendence imminent in the perception of the irreparability of the world.
[4] The phrase “limits indeterminate” is taken from Lacan’s concept of the body as a supplement, a transcendence imminent in the perception of the irreparability of the world.
[5] The phrase “limits indeterminate” is taken from Lacan’s concept of the body as a supplement, a transcendence imminent in the perception of the irreparability of the world.
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[8] The phrase “limits indeterminate” is taken from Lacan’s concept of the body as a supplement, a transcendence imminent in the perception of the irreparability of the world.
[9] The phrase “limits indeterminate” is taken from Lacan’s concept of the body as a supplement, a transcendence imminent in the perception of the irreparability of the world.
of women; it is an experience both men and women may be open to. Lacan locates mystical experiences within the domain of feminine jouissance. He describes it as a phenomenon induced by the lack of signification in the Other, by that which escapes representation. Jacques-Alain Miller has noted that the question of femininity disrupts, marking the difference between the “modern subjectivity” evoked by Lacan at the beginning of his teaching and the contemporary subject. He states that it is “from feminine sexuality and from nowhere else that we can situate jouissance, properly speaking, in so far as it exceeds the phallus and the all-signifier.”16 Germán García similarly comments that Lacan was “able to posit a critique of Freud’s Oedipus by disassembling its mantle dream structure ruled by the master discourse. He then introduces division and the object a to convey, from the feminine side, the key to the onset of the analyst’s social invention.”17 This object is a semblant, it does not exist as such, it exists as a designation around which the drive turns, an absence which causes desire. To name it is a means of bringing its effects into play as part of a discourse, and if painting is a language, we see it written often enough in Davila’s work. Despite the grounding of psychoanalysis in recognition of the effects of sexual difference, this claim – linking the association of femininity with the recognition of jouissance per se – is contentious as many seek to minimize the specificity of this development with regards to feminine sexuality. Some persist, monastically so, in minimizing the legacy of sexual difference, thus restricting the radical nature of Lacan’s invention, by erasing the sexual difference he articulated on the field of Freud’s foundering.

In the medieval period, belief or credo was a matter of the heart, of one’s allegiance rather than cognitive agreement with a term of propositional logic. With modernity, we see it written often enough in Davila’s work. Despite the grounding of psychoanalysis in recognition of the effects of sexual difference, this claim – linking the association of femininity with the recognition of jouissance per se – is contentious as many seek to minimize the specificity of this development with regards to feminine sexuality. Some persist, monastically so, in minimizing the legacy of sexual difference, thus restricting the radical nature of Lacan’s invention, by erasing the sexual difference he articulated on the field of Freud’s foundering.

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Two Women on the Banks of the Yarra, 2003, oil and collage on canvas 175 × 260 cm

John Batman, 2007, oil on canvas 185 × 235 cm
we are drawn to consider their contemplation whatever that might be. In these works, Davila was reworking modernist masters such as Manet and Courbet, producing a visual disturbance with the slippage of gaze and pose, no longer in perspective. His response to Courbet’s Woman with a Parrot, 1866, is to adjust the nude: by “repositioning the body I have disrupted the gaze that can have sole possession of the woman. She is now with someone else, possibly an analyst, with a series of caricatures. Malévitch once noted that “the strange posture of the woman on the left in Las Meninas, from the back so that we can see what he is painting. Foucault, writing about this painting, assumes there is only one mirror and that we as spectators take the place of the mother and father, the King and Queen, whose portrait, he thought, was being recorded for eternity. Davila uses his canvas to contest this version by illustrating that the painter, like the one in Las Meninas, was painting an image reflected in a mirror. Vélázquez wasn’t looking directly at the Princess, but referring to her reflection. The double reference of this statement is something Davila goes on to explore. In Davila’s version we see two figures in the distant door frame, and a sparkling enigmatic object demarcating an imaginary point at the axis of all these figures, as if to reference the crosswise visual axes Foucault refers to in establishing his thesis. Painted over yellow, the undercoat comes through in places, marking something about the gaze and presence.

Foucault’s account of Las Meninas opened The Order of Things which concludes with some comments on psychoanalysis, noting that by following the same path as the human sciences, but with its gaze turned the other way, psychoanalysis moves towards the moment – by definition inaccessible to any theoretical knowledge of man, to any continuous apprehension in terms of signification, conflict, or function – at which the contents of consciousness articulate themselves, or rather stand gaping, upon man’s finitude. This means that, unlike the human sciences, …[psychoanalysis reveals a] region where representation remains in suspense, on the edge of itself, open, in a sense, to the closed boundary of finitude … an existence at once real and impossible, thought that we cannot think, an object for our knowledge that always eludes it.” Foucault’s error was to overlook the materiality of the structure of the gaze in the staging of Vélázquez’ painting, projecting instead his fantasy onto the frame. Caught between “the master who is representing and the sovereign who is being represented”, he overlooked the girl whose portrait was being staged. In a rather uncanny way, we find this situation, as a condition of modernity, parodied in the portrait of a robed woman with a caricature of a man looking over her shoulder inUntitled, 2008. Between them is the ghosted image of a woman’s reflection in a scene evocative of Manet’s A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, 1881-82, revisited. Davila’s thesis regarding modernism, femininity and the gaze, artfully elaborated in the field of painting, is also a broader political and social commentary. Where contemporary artists choose abstraction as something that is not supposed to be subjective, an avoidance of the figure is mistaken for criticism. Davila has taken issue with this for some time; noting, for example, in 2001 that in “retrospect we can see that modernism, which cut painting’s narratives and created a new language of forms, has operated as a utopian field but also as a censorship of anything that is uncertain. Today, modernism is a neo-capitalist language.” In “Courbet’s Curtains”, he also notes that with modernism, artists resorted to splitting and cropping the image and its pictorial space in order to say something about emotional life. The anxiety produced by the attempt was too great to allow the traditional formulae of representation to remain. Today we see the outcome of that process: total foreclosure and the emergent language of power and tyranny. There is no place for depiction of emotional life once this has happened….Restoring erased names and representing marginalized places and cultures are among the devices that I have used to remind the Australian viewer that art is more than money. This is my answer to the manipulation of modernism as a means to impose social control.”

From mirror to gaze: redressing erasure

An early portrait, of Tove Lindholm Tomic, 1979, is present in Davila’s more recent portrait while illustrating the distinctions between them. A rule is given to the work to anchor it to a precise reality, here the woman portrayed. Her image in the photograph taped to a mirror covers the image that would be her reflection in the mirror. While the photograph seems to capture a private moment, the mirror depicted is in a public rather than a private space. The lipstick left open on the shelf also points to the difference between the softer image in the photograph and the accomplishments of masquerade evident in the reflection, whose subject is obscured from view, except in the form, overlaid, of the photograph from a different time. Temporal disjunction is part of a violence which is somehow marked in three lipsticked lines in the top right corner of the mirror frame. The woman, as Davila notes, “seems to be at an edge, in a spatial gap. And we certainly cannot have her gaze or ‘truth’”; “her actual body, in the flesh is not there. We have a reflection in the mirror and her semblance in a photo. Did I paint her from life? If so I would have painted her through her reflection in a mirror, something I do as many painters did in the past. Did I paint her from a photo? Then the background would be a fantasy of the artist.” If the woman’s gaze here appears lost in itself, the woman doesn’t find herself in the
The Painter’s Studio, 2006, oil on canvas 175 × 260 cm

The Studio of the Painter, 2006, oil and collage on canvas 175 × 260 cm
mirror, there being no simple reflection, no single signification or representation with which she might identify in order that she might know what it is to be a woman. The response to that spatial and logical gap, different in different psychic structures, can be related to the subject’s relation to the Other and the question of whether the Other continues to hold omnipotence and thus the potential to disrupt the subject’s stability in a menacing way.

A key distinction between the portrait of Tove and the more recent portraits is the difference between working in the presence of the body as distinct from the semblance of a photo. The presence conferred to the women in these recent portraits is striking. The contemporary paintings articulate something about the individuality, the singularity that is seen and witnessed there. Davila notes pondering about what happens with the woman posing for the painter. It is a silent session where she is observed and depicted in a canvas. I wonder if she must invent herself for the pose - I do not direct this - and if it is here that the unconscious is political. Does the subject’s structure stage the pose? Would the pose be the effect of truth and *jouissance*? This session is not [that of] the collective demand to the subject to invent itself but appears to be, within the Arts, one of the last spaces of radical ambiguity left.

This consideration of the effects of truth and *jouissance* allows the artist’s studio to be a site “for the construction of a politi-cised vision,” a point to which we shall return. Here let us note that the difference in singularity is ambiguous and mysterious, and it is that which calls us. For the unintelligible can be felt and acknowledged but not easily known and the idea of expertise may not be appropriate here. Though philosophy may well articulate the difficulty of thinking the experience of exteriority, psychoanalysis works with “the woman’s subjective property of bearing the Other within herself,” which accounts for the key role of feminine *jouissance* in the recognition and theory of *jouissance* more generally. For there are different forms of *jouissance* and it is the threads and ties woven between them that create the universe we imagine we inhabit.

We can with Agamben remember that *ek-statism is “the gift that singularity gathers from the empty hands of humanity.” Yet rather than speak of transcendence let us think of impermanence, rather than speak of ecstasy, let us exist in joy. Small distinctions perhaps, yet shifts in direction, subtle enough to leave for a moment the tenuous hold of the mind with its devouring demand for accumulation and prestige. As Benjamin concluded: “The idea that happiness could have a share in beauty would be too much of a good thing, something that their resentment would never get over.” He distinguishes two forms of happiness, the hymnic and the elegiac, noting there is “a dual will to happiness, a dialectics of happiness... The one is the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss; the other, the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, the first happiness. It is this elegiac idea of happiness – it could also be called Eleatic – which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory... the bridge to the dream.” Freud related these two moments, commenting that “No one who has seen a baby sinking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of sexual satisfaction in later life.” Yet the oceanic feeling remained a mystery to him, perhaps foreclosed by his pain and his fear of death. While Proust wrote to “the incurable imperfection in the very essence of the present moment”, Freud had his collection of artifacts packed to go with him when he went away on vacation. Two portraits of a woman in a red dress sitting in a courtyard garden, serene and still, apparently content, evoke a kind of radical immateriality that rests on the acceptance of loss, while that of the nymph and her echo in *Woman by the River Yarra*, 2008, oil on canvas 206 × 210 cm.
landscape of childhood reverie, returns us to the mythical and the question of memory, the bridge to the dream.

These later portraits of women in the solitude of their existing proffer images of an identity in separation, a singularity that allows one to exist. Many of the women are also named. The woman under the night sky is Guacolda del Carmen Gallardo; the young woman standing is Nina Sers, 2008; the portrait of a young girl, articulating the presence of desire, is Maria, 2009, while the painting of the beast-man, also evocative of the childhood reveries of picture books, is anchored with the title of a place, 761 Wattletree Road, 2008. The incredibly beautiful graphic and colours in these works, the movement of the lines and paint profile a new engagement with the sensual joy of painting and the integrity of the body in its emotional candor. It is tempting to attribute a move from privation to joy in the rendering of these paintings which cannot be dismissed as an idealism or ephemeral daydream, as the visual wit in the painting of the house called 331 Wattletree Road, 2008, so clearly displays. The image of the suburban house, iconic in the Australian landscape and psyche, here appears threatened by a force from the right hand side of the frame. Temporality has entered the frame in the snapshot of a moment. With inordinate prescience this image was painted in 2008, before the global financial crisis, before the Black Saturday fires, catastrophes both incarnated in this image in a compact way. The house, signifying dreams of prosperity, development, and independence, an economic ideal of safety and status, is burnt from within and thrown by the storm of an economic hurricane. These two elements of the economy and the environment interlaced in a moment of catastrophe, where everything you believe is stable can be swept away. It is, as always, the dialectic between these elements with which we must engage.

As with his previous works, our personal associations are called forth and projected onto the images, yet these recent works (with the exception of the portrait of Kevin Andrews) no longer engage profanation in the same way, either as critique or as a mode of protection. To the extent that profanation “neutralizes what it profanes” Agamben distinguishes it from secularization which, as “a form of repression”, leaves “intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another.” Eric Laurent has commented that “Lacan stresses that the desire of the neurotic is what takes place when there is no God on the horizon. The neurotic tries to be an atheist, to evade the problem of God. But he has the father, it is true.” One legacy of the modernist aversion to religion and ‘the problem of God’, the secularization apparent in the major theorists of modernity (Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Weber, and possibly Durkheim), is the resurgence of religious discourse we are witnessing today, particularly religious fundamentalism as a response to
331 Wattletree Road, 2008, oil on canvas 185 × 235 cm

761 Wattletree Road, 2008, oil on canvas 185 × 235 cm
The Greek and Latin roots of the word given condition or a volitional act made possible by such who or what to attribute this agency to. Is faith a grace-action happening to a subject; the religious question is be acquired in either days or weeks” (like brief cognitive behaviors), and in a later work, under the name Johannes Climacus, describes faith as something that occurs when the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the thing in which this occurs...is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name....We shall call it faith. This passion, then, must be that above-mentioned condition that the paradox provides.

The Greek and Latin roots of the word passion denote an action happening to a subject; the religious questions is who or what to attribute this agency to. Is faith a grace-given condition or a volitional act made possible by such a condition? Vaccination over the role and position of the Other with regard to the subject’s agency and intent, contrasts with the state of knowing, which in itself is an acceptance of not knowing, of faith. While sometimes described as a certitude of knowing, this is quite different from the certainty of fundamentalist conviction where no dialectic can be entertained. Indeed faith is to be distinguished from the creeds and theories of the religious question surrounding it for the “word of faith manifests itself as the effective experience of a pure power of saying. …There is no such thing as a content of faith, and to profess the word of faith does not mean formulating true propositions on God and the world.”

The potentiality which exceeds the performative power of language, Agamben notes, cannot be accumulated in any form of knowledge or dogma, and if it cannot impose itself as a law, it does not follow that is it passive or inert. To the contrary, it acts in its own weakness…. That this potentiality finds its telos in weakness means that it does not simply remain suspended in infinite deferral; rather, turning back towards itself, it fulfills and deactivates the very excess of signification over every signified, it extinguishes languages …. In this way, it bears witness to what, unexpressed and insignificant, remains in use forever near the word. This movement of turning back to fulfill and deactivate ‘the very excess of signification over every signified” is a movement of sublimation, described by Lacan where he speaks of (and designates feminine jouissance in terms of) sublimation love, as a means of returning jouissance to desire. We know that a precipitation in the symbolic opens a place where the body can be experienced as such and that as people who speak, we speak with our bodies: “The speaking/being is the subject become duration … inscribing itself as One of the body.” The One of the body, described by Lacan as “the unimitable good fortune of material existence”, the very movement of which turning back towards itself, for a moment, extinguishes language. In a rather autobiographical paper titled “Writing begins in terms of psychoanalysis ends”, Serge André argues that “against semblance, writing aims at ‘the Eternal’.” Certain writers, he notes, equate the eternal with a manifestation of the divine. They are free to do so. But, for my part, I believe that “the Eternal” or “God” are still only signifiers (names for the “being of the signifying process”), vain signifiers that attempt to designate the void, the original hole where the real disappeared for us, but which they are incapable of making present. Nonetheless, it is the presentation, the making present of the real outside of language that the writer tries to attain.

André likens this to paintings by Morandi which succeed in allowing the simplest objects, those most often overlooked, to come into focus, to “impose themselves with a presence that we never knew.” He notes that the writer’s challenge is to “try to give body to the real presence of language, at the risk of only being able to manifest the obtuse force of a silence.” To give body to a real presence: this is an apt description of Davila’s work, animated as it is in transmission, by the faith necessary to any social act, be in speech, writing or painting.

This fleeting light

Touched by the sublime, we leave lighter for having witnessed and perhaps entered into an engagement with these debates. Ethics is a matter of our relation to the real, it is matter of how we engage with the moral meanings we live in attribution to the feelings, thoughts and experiences that pervade us and our others. The moral meaning of wellness is a telos contesting the equation of Woman and Nature by presenting variations on the singularity of each, while addressing that which animates our sense of being. To counter such an equation as an essentialist reduction is not to deny the imperative of politics or the issue of sustainability. It is an investigation seeking to separate the threads, redress the erasures on which appropriation and exploitation are founded. It does this by questioning the projections and mechanisms we inhabit. I have argued that in recent times Davila has worked to transmit something of the jouissance Lacan referred to as feminine and that his depictions stand as a valuable commentary on the importance of recognising such experience. Let us now return to the political and ethical threads articulated in social scenes where the move from jouissance to desire is noted as the nature of work. I would like to refer again to the succession of works, following one another in the moment and then returned to from earlier works. Considering the chronology of the works in this exhibition, the unfolding of this thesis in the sequence of its construction, we see the manner in which the arguments have been have been tied together, the way in which the thesis, developed in transmission, aims to address us.

Four previous works, two bearing the title Two Women on the Banks of the Yarra, 2003, The Painter’s Studio, 2006 and The Studio of the Painter, 2006 frame the recent work as an introduction picked up again with Two Women in Melbourne, 2008, a study of a psychoanalytic scene, with the analyst in the quietude of listening, pregnant and naked, and the analysand lying on what seems like a beautician’s table, her body disappearing into abstract marks and coloured forms. It is the hysteric perhaps, contemplating some impossible object, a fetus like object, denoting not simply a desire for completion through a baby but envy of the other woman and what the unborn child presents on the side of having. On the other side of the frame, the stillness of the scene is evident in the flowers on the table. Themes of catastrophe, the trauma of jouissance, the force of the gaze are reworked in an image of alchemical intensity such as Reverie, 2009. Like a seventeenth century alchemical engraving come to life in Technicolor, the woman’s gaze and smile is directed over her shoulder into the golden yellow spot of
Two Women in Melbourne, 2008, oil on canvas 175 × 260 cm

Reverie, 2009, oil on canvas 210 × 280 cm
an exploring maraudatory pleasure. This image, a man’s rendition of a woman’s retrieve, paints her clothed in fantasy. Let us distinguish, however, between fantasy and reverie, for while not mutually exclusive, there is a different relation to the object in each. Whereas in reverie one becomes for a moment absent to oneself, fantasy as a realm of “reappraisal and appropriation at once elevates the object and the divided self.” The ur-deployment of a synthetic view of landscapes as tropes, as symbols of abundance, very maximalism, coral cushions are caught in the movement created by the hair-swirling sweep of the drive as marked in her gaze directed past that egomaniacal dish flushing in space. Fantasies of posses-
sion as a phallic claim seem alluded to here, in this “Homage to reverie”, the solipsic refuge. From here we can disappear or come back into the world, the object falling back into circulation as a cause of desire, that allows for a link with another.

Together these works, Reverie and Two Women in Melbourne, articulate the space of analytic discourse, an examination of the constellation of one’s interior, something particular and unknown, and while spoken to an other, this sharing is also an exploration of one’s solitude. In the analyst’s presence, the woman lying on the couch may enter vision as a phallic claim seem alluded to here, in this ‘homage to reverie’, the solipsic refuge. From here we can disappear or come back into the world, the object falling back into circulation as a cause of desire, that allows for a link with another.

leaving over one hundred and seventy people dead. The translucent orange of new growth highlight the debris, including crumpled beer cans left since the fires in the senti-
moment of ‘since God has burnt, we can trash it’. Over the debris is the shadow of a man cast in an ominous outline, like an arsonist surveying his work. In Primus Highway, Melbourne, 2009, on the other hand, a woman is standing between fire and air, an iridescent sense of the movement of the water, ripping in concentric circles around her as the stands seeming still, hands crossed over her abdomen, naked below the waist, shrouded in a feathery shroud like a primeval person. Stand-
ing calmly lit, in her beauty and somber expression, by the explosion behind her. What else can we say? That she is reminiscent of Rembrandt’s Savoù or that she appears akin to the recent portrait of Carmen Gallardo, depicted as elderly, her face aged and weathered as someone who has endured. The brightness of a constellation in the starry sky above sheds light on Gallardo’s face and shoulders as her arms and torso vanish into the air. Both these images are conveyed in the calligraphic flow of the brushstroke, breaking the classical framing of each scene. To evoke, perhaps, notions of the finished and the unfinished, Ruskin’s bustard of impressionism, a famous case with Whistler.

Commenting on the pictorial structure for this exhibition, Davila notes that: 

The argument proposes to gaze at nature and woman as the two great mysteries in terms of jouissance. Charles Taylor in a general discussion about the moral meaning of the sublime says: “The idea that is brought in touch with (the wilderness), being open to it awakens or strengthens something in us which enables us to live proper lives, which perforce will be lead almost entirely in ‘civilization’”. He also thinks that wilderness is not the locus of an alternative life to the city. Rather it communicates or imparts something to us which awakens a power in us of living better where we are. This is the meaning of Thoreau’s dictum: “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.” These statements, in my view, are an expression of denial and control. What is “important is the way that our natural world figures in our moral imagination,” says Taylor, stating that it has become one of the crucial underpin-
ing of much contemporary ecological consciousness and concern.

We find an earlier discussion of this in Ruskin with his notion of the sublime in nature as a moral force, later denied by Proust who sought to capture early memories through evocations of nature. But jouissance in principle is not moral, it is traumatic because it lacks meaning. It is enigmatic, beyond pleasure or pain, it does not only reside in the body (also in thinking and language) and as an utterance we cannot understand jouissance. These are not moral matters as [they are for] Ruskin, who proposes the destruction of the symbolic world by expressing pleasure through conformation. In a peculiar way they seem to equate “woman” to “nature”.

Transgression is forgotten, corporate conformity becomes the current “worship of nature”. A simple life is the message of the religion of nature. The picturesque sublime, the sensuous reverse looking at clouds, the sin of idolatry — worship of representations of nature instead of the jouissance it symbolizes — are all part of this conservation of the status quo “for the next genera-
tion” which is really just an excuse for doing nothing, an evasion of conservation. Proust, through the narrator in his novel says: “he knows that his own rare glimpses of a reality behind the phenomenal world have been more valuable than any knowledge which he could have his school, who can only copy the surface. 62

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The question of what it is to be human or fully human, rendered in eighteenth century meditations on language and
What about my Desire?, 2009, oil on canvas 204 × 270 cm

Churchill National Park, 2009, oil on canvas 200 × 300 cm
the sublime touch on the themes of death, eternity, earth and God. Taylor notes that Thoreau is a ‘paradigm protagonist’ of ecological consciousness, the idea of the interconnectedness of all life on earth. He also notes there is a complexity and tension here, “almost … a contradiction in the moral imagination of nature I’ve been describing”, between kinship with nature as the source of life and nature as hostile, indifferent and inhuman.63 One claim at stake in Taylor’s book regards which path, that of belief or unbelief, is the “more powerful and effective healing action in history”.64 Taylor is aware that “morality rationalizes”, that this engages and perpetuates the binding of religion and violence, inaugurating the profound ambivalence on which modernity is centered. He is concerned “to discover what the moving force is here, to give an account which does justice to it”, to help strengthen and liberate it from the forces “which so easily colonize philanthropy and turn it into its opposite.”65 He thus situates a religious path in contrast to “the awe-inspiring Stoic courage of a Camus or a Derrida”, a division between those with and those without a “faith commitment” that rests on a judgment, one that might be deconstructed if, like Oskar Pfister (Protestant minister, analyst and interlocutor of Freud), we consider the act of rather than the purported content of faith.

Elaborating on the identification involved in these moments of judgment, Davila describes how in the paintings about the gaze where the arguments about Courbet, Velázquez and Foucault, the painter and the model are represented, I have tried to depict the political gaze as well. The image of Dr Haneef unjustly jailed, the Minister that ordered his arrest and the painter witnessing the scene is depicted in one space. This does not occur in reality, but it can in a pictorial space. Two opposing mirrors replicate this horror to infinity. The mirrors reflect also someone other than the actors and the painter’s personal gaze is placed alongside the technological recording of such events. Impossible space, infinity, shifting of scenarios has a similar effect to the one that occurs with identification. In identifying with nature where one magnifies and intensifies its forms in an attempt to liberate something in us. Could it be a release of imagination in a utopian attempt?

Unintelligible life

Beauty, as Benjamin noted, “can be defined in two ways: in its relationship to history and to nature. In both relationships the semblance, the problematic element in the beautiful, manifests itself.”66 We see this depicted quite clearly in the landscapes titled, Wilderness. Life signified in the painted
touch of light in *Wilderness*, 2010, embarks (or disembarks) in the articulation of the bastard marriage between a science fiction modernity and the organic in nature. The green shape from *Pulp Mill on the River Tamar*, 2009, here comes to life of its own discord, leering animation like a cartoon visage, dripping. One legacy of modernity is nature as organic transmutation, terrifying in that it cannot be controlled. The green shape, an object of contemporary architecture, is reminiscent of the shape Zaha Hadid has applied to a range of things: a shoe, a bar, a building. In *Pulp Mill on the River Tamar*, 2009, this object was transposed in an unlikely place, an apparition of the contemporary modern in the landscape, here that apparition has become the landscape, an emanation, dripping, the underside of the sublime. *Wilderness*, 2010 addresses more directly this fear; depicted on the left hand side is a morphing drip. It could be a drop of oil, or water or mercury, but unknown and unknowable, it threatens with menace. To the side of it, a dark patch overlaid with strokes of pink paint evokes a kind of suture, while to the right we find the spinning constellation of strange objects evident in other works. Astral and maritime, strange worlds of reverie. In the history of painting there have been many views of nature that are not descriptive. Here the brush stroke as one kind of mark is overlaid with another: the flow of an automatic technique, *fumage*, the carbon trace left by holding a lighter near the canvas. Used by the surrealists, Davila suggests one could argue these are the truest renderings of the nature discussed by them and so contrary to Ruskin, whom he describes as an uptight academic determined to find moral meaning in everything, to outlaw chance. Both paintings draw out the fear and sense of disagreeable disgust, the horror which underlies an experience of Ruskin’s controlled sublime.

One key to the shift from the eighteenth century to contemporary context of the sublime is that today the natural environment, or what is left of it is, is so evidently disappearing, just as we are if we pause to reflect on it. Our being for death, the existential moment of life as awareness has been projected onto the natural world such that the projection itself has become real; with so many people multiplying on a limited land mass, polluting air, water and degrading the environment this way of life is passing. We have created the environment as an effect of our fantasies and foreclosures, destroying the future we could not envisage. Too caught in economies of anxiety, exploitation and control to notice that these economies were themselves becoming our natural environments, they have become real. We can see this from the perspective of those moments outside the system, those moments in the reverse of ‘feminine’ jouissance without content or those moments of reprieve granted from the slow work of studying one’s own unconscious, elaborating the domain of one’s own response. This endeavor doesn’t put an end to fantasies or foreclosures but it allows one to notice how one responds to the other in light of one’s own gaze, one’s own expectations of the other and uses of the other as an object, one’s own relation to phallic jouissance.

The equation between human and environment is not sustainable in that it does not exist. Just as there is no equation for sexual difference, for the relation between man and woman in the unconscious, despite what Jung would have us believe, so there is no equation between man and the environment. For one, on the whole, exists only where the other has not been. The landscape as natural environment is not necessarily hospitable to people or to our convenience and so – at least with modernism – it comes under threat, it ceases to be. The modern condition of our relation to the landscape is that it reflects our being-to-death in its very disappearance, and the consequence of our unconscious (run by fantasies and foreclosures) is made real. That consequence is a devastation and death and our task is to consider both our finitude and our capacity for destruction. Self control,
as Freud noticed, is a condition of civilized society and it comes at a price. We might, with Judith Butler, “ask what remains unspeakable here, not in order to produce speech that will fill the gap but to ask about the convergence of social prohibitions and melancholia, how the condemnations under which one lives turn into repudiations that one performs, and how the grievances that emerge against the public law also constitute conflicted efforts to overcome the muted rage of one’s own repudiations.”68 Acknowledging finitude and one’s own potential for violence is a process of mourning the destructive aspect of human experience: Practices of desecration fueled by fantasies of allure and fornication, or the forms of violent domination rendered and made possible in foreclosure. As Finite beings, “each of us must find our own ‘path’ to death,”69 and “the subject wishing to indefinitely maintain himself in similitude (in the as if), while contemplating his ruin, simply loses the wager. He who upholds himself in the messianic vocation no longer knows the as if, he no longer has similitudes at his disposal. He knows that in messianic time the saved world coincides with the world that is irretrievably lost, and that, to use Bonhoeffer’s words, he must now really live in a world without God.”70

There is one more portrait. The woman here is centered, still and somber. There is a depth to her look, a gravity to her gaze and she, unlike most of the women represented here, is looking directly at us. The most emotional of the portraits, her bearing is delivered through the gaze. Something is happening in the landscape, perhaps a brooding tenor in the background, some event on the horizon yet it doesn’t distract from the portrait of the young woman who holds her own. There is a melancholic trace, a sadness in her eyes, which direct the portrait, for the colour of what appears as landscape is rather the colour floating as needed to frame her gaze. Floating there to frame, it moves into the background a landscape of mauve and green, an autumn fire burning perhaps, her gaze distilled in our focus.
Two Women on the Banks of the Yarra, 2003, oil on canvas 175 × 260 cm

Albert Street, 2007, oil on canvas 185 × 235 cm
Juan Davila, Project Concept and Rationale, 26 April, 2009.

In an earlier version of this paper, addressing the paintings from 2007 and 2008, was presented at Out Of Bounds: Arts, Faith and Belonging, convened by Doménico de Grazia and Sarah Cusins (Monash University, Caulfield Campus, August 20-23, 2008) with an invitation to consider the work of Giorgio Agamben.

A further set would include Lock in the Grass, 1975; Nuncio, 1976; The Heretic, 1978; hence this period would be from 1975-78.

Other paintings in this period from 1979-1982 would include works such as Historical Tour, 1979; Bedroom Exercises, 1980; Tod, 1980; Fat Man, 1980; Sleep as a Painter, 1981-82.

Evident in works such as Folk of Australian Painting, 1982-3; Portrait of Joshua Smith, 1990; Nothing but an Abnormous, 1991; Portrait of Bungaree, 1991; Flower Heads, 1991; The Librarian Simon Bolívar, 1991; Juana Laguna as the Andean Inhabitant, the Latin American Colonial Angel, the Dollar, Bungaree, Jelly and Hype, 1994.

This third period includes works on the gate and the Courtsey analysis series, for example: Two Women at the Banks of the Yarra, 2001; Origins of the World, 2002; Portrait of Joanna Hoffman, 2003; The Studio of the Painter, 2003 and The Painter’s Studio, 2006.


Ibid, p. 123.


Clarice Lispector, Discovering the World, P 124.

Ibid.

Juan Davila, correspondence with the author.


J A Miller, “Of Semblants in the Relation between Sexes”, Psychanalytical Outlooks of the London Circle, Issue 1, Autumn 1999. P 20. Miller described the inexistence of the Other as opening “the Lacanian epoch in psychoanalysis”, and argues that if Lacan formalized the Freudian Oedipus complex in terms of the concept of the Name of the Father, he did so in order “to expose it as a semblant and to open up its dual pluralization” (J A Miller and Eric Lomnitz, “The Other who does not exist and his ethical commitments”, Analysis of Psychoanalysis, 1994, p. 26). That is what, he says, “in the teaching of Lacan, is announced under the rubric of the… the signifier of the barred Other, which shattered when he gave the reading of it which made the Name-of-the-Father plural… Not only does this reading of the mathematics pluralize the Name-of-the-Father, it disintegrates it, devastates it from within, by equivocation, by attacking the bond of the signifier with what one believes to be its signified” (Ibid.).


21 The idea that believing is religiously important turns out to be a modern idea. It has arisen in recent times, in ways that can be ascertained and demonstrated. I might almost sum up the implication of my thesis… by saying that a great modern heresy of the Church is the heresy of believing. Not of believing this or that, but of believing as such. The view that to believe is of central significance – this is an alternation.” – Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Belief and History. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977: P 8.

22 Morel notes the case of a woman who experienced a kind of bliss while working in her garden, something she did not relate to a religious experience and which is to be distinguished from the sexual or phallic jouissance and from the jouissance of the asymptotic also referred to in the case. Morel, G. “Female Conditions of Jouissance” Journal of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research 3, 1994. P 3.

22 Rózsa Landy, for example, writes that “Feminine jouissance refers to the natural ability for suffering characteristic of the feminine psychic structure. This is a Freudian thesis, and it is based on a relentless logic that appears in his text on the economic theory of masochism.” – Rózsa Landy. Research in Sex Differences. University of Texas Press, 1986.

22 Mazel notes the case of a woman who experienced a kind of bliss while working in her garden, something she did not relate to a religious experience and which is to be distinguished from the sexual or phallic jouissance and from the jouissance of the asymptotic also referred to in the case. Morel, G. “Female Conditions of Jouissance” Journal of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research 3, 1994.

DAVILA is referring here to Waker Benjamin's concept of inner necessity.

JUAN DAVILA is reported to have said of Davila's rendition

JAVIER MURILLO is expected to have said of Davila's rendition of Simon Bolivar: "This painting is haphazard from a historical point of view and pornographic as art", The Independent, London, August 12, 1994.


JÜL, M.


IBID. Davila is referring here to his painting, Veronese or a Pinto, 2005, but on the other hand, the "as if" in his book as he does his book of Vivid Recall (1990) refers to the obvious pathmarchers and standardization of the lived-for, a phallic creature. Today we can view the parent quite differently...it can only be an expression of tremendous anxiety." P. 216.


MICHAEL FUCHS, THE ORDER OF THINGS. An Archeology of the House, New York: Vintage Books, 1973. P. 374-5. Fuchs goes on to comment on psychoanalysis 'recognizes' itself in psychoanalyzes, 'as if' the psyche themselves were displaying in a savage illumination...as to which analysis must make its laboratories way." P. 370.

IBID., p. 16. He concludes: "Perhaps these eaus, in this painting by Van Gogh, the representation is as seen of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation underlies to represent itself here in all elements, to all eyes, to the eyes to which it affects, the face it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there...is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is invisible: in the void, the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject— which is the case— cannot be represented. And a representation, found finally from the relation that was impediment, it can offer itself as representation in its pure form. The only thing is that the gender of the coded subjects has been read in the colors rather than the meaning of the sovereign, it might have been his daughter.

JUAN DAVILA, "Courtier's Curtain", JUAN DAVILA, p. 211. Kaja Silverman has often criticized the vehicle through which art exhibited its autonomy. Art had to get rid of simulacrum, became only by being made. The idea here is that our existence, or vitality, or creativity depends, not just on the unhuman outside of us—for instance, on the overwhelming power of earth which awakens beast in us—but on the wild and psychic in us as which existence to dust alien external power. We have gone beyond Kant, where the sublime awakens our supernatural moral agency, and where the 'savage skies above' can be linked together with the moral law within, as two realities which in all alien "wonder and respect". We are now in the domain of Schopenhauer, where our "wonder comes from a Will which is wild, unframable, amoral...the fact that we can conceive of giving this kind of meaning, at least within the context of this kind of comprehensible within the world animated by the modern cosmic imagination. This is one which relates to a surmise which is not necessarily structured and limited by a rational, benign plan..." P. 346.

IBID, p. 703.

IBID. p. 702.

JUAN DAVILA, personal correspondence, notes, 28.02.2010.

JUAN DAVILA, personal correspondence, notes, 20.02.2010.

JUDITH BUTLER, ANTIGONE'S CLAIM. Kinship between Life and Death. NY: Belknap Press of Harvard university Press, 2007. P. 345. "The sublime awakens our suprasensible moral agency, and where the idea here is that our existence, or vitality, or creativity depends, not just on the unhuman outside of us—for instance, on the overwhelming power of earth which awakens beast in us—but on the wild and psychic in us as which existence to dust alien external power. We have gone beyond Kant, where the sublime awakens our supernatural moral agency, and where the 'savage skies above' can be linked together with the moral law within, as two realities which in all alien "wonder and respect". We are now in the domain of Schopenhauer, where our "wonder comes from a Will which is wild, unframable, amoral...the fact that we can conceive of giving this kind of meaning, at least within the context of this kind of comprehensible within the world animated by the modern cosmic imagination. This is one which relates to a surmise which is not necessarily structured and limited by a rational, benign plan..." P. 346.

IBID, p. 703.
KATE BRIGGS: In another chapter, the next instalment, a new body of work, Davila embarks on a new enterprise, on the one hand contemplating what has been constructed to date, then turning to address once again a mythical narrative and, now, its afterimage or effect.

JUAN DAVILA: Looking back to the group of works, about 30 paintings, that I have done in the last 4 years one can begin to see the development of an argument. The portraits of women, by themselves and in the landscape, the argument about the gaze and the approach to what is called nature seem to be the major themes that have emerged. Still, there is so much that is not yet addressed.1

KB: Looking back there is so much that is not yet addressed…like Eurydice falling or the moment where the distinction opened between sight and seeing, between the object and its representation is rendered or defined by a semblant.2 The surrealism of the trajectory of the drive, sketched in these six works, take us from the moment of encounter to its after image, a state of reception distilling in form, jouissance.

In the first of these paintings we find a man sitting on the ground in a clearing. He is in front of a camp fire and looking at someone or something that is out of the frame to our left hand side, his arm is outstretched, as if in this moment of quiet repose he is grasping towards something unknown. Reading the title, A Man Renounces Love, 2010, one is stopped short, sobered, caught as it were between these moments of his gaze and his hand, fixed there for a second in the snapshot of the painting. His other hand rests quietly on his knee. He is dressed in blue work pants and sharply polished shoes, but wearing no shirt. Neither elderly, nor young, history is carried with him, and we are watching him in this mythical moment, a turning in the rendition of his soul. Our eyes are drawn from the yellow aura around his face, through the sweep of the clearing to the light on the horizon and into the yellow sweep of the sky. Where yellow transposes to deep azure blue around the upper limits of the frame, the foreground is worked in the orange red reflection between the fire and the ground, with the intensity of the moment figured in the blurring of more realistic depiction of leaves as we enter the foreground nearing the place where we stand viewing this scene. For just as the flames of the fire merge into impressionistic colour of movement, the leaves of shrubs and bushes to right and left of us blur as they might in a photograph taken by someone who is moving. The blurring depicts for me the movement of the real.

You have captured the gaze, the uncanny moment of an encounter in the real, and the ambiguous staging of this event tends both to illustrate the work of a painting as a lure for our gaze, and to nonetheless operate in the realm of the iconic. What is happening in this scene? What is this man doing dressed with his city shoes, with his elegant silver hair, his outstretched hand; is he a father, a hostage? Whatever we imagine might articulate a dialectic of sacrifice and faith in the face of the real. To dim the lights and see the rather religious ambience of the gesture, the humanity in the gesture of his outstretched hand, the yellow aura around his body, the light on the horizon, the contextualizing colour. It is a masterful work. Iconic. Then to see from another
The “Wilderness” landscapes that I worked on acquired an indescribable shimmer of colour, spatial ambiguities, a sense of delirium and dreamlike fantasy, an introvert approach to the mystery of science's micro and immense spaces. The inner space of our mind and emotion is not really mapped by science. Artists camouflage it in a theory of form. Art cannot resort to the use of our conscious faculties. The art scene, which now deals only with products, big toys for the canon of collectors and curators. Automatism was once believed to give access to a world beyond the realm of external reality. The fallacy of this is that we cannot know if we are capable of relinquishing our conscious faculties. Can we be free and uninhibited and release control? Is painting a language? In any case the attempt to use chance techniques in art, to think of our own irrational and self destructive world as gaze entreats us to consider its formation in art and the animation in viewing. Davila here addresses this moment in a double effect; the canvas of representation is accompanied, partnered, by another rendering of its effect. Using an after image in this way evokes works by Arshile Gorky who reworked images to present visual enchantments with similarly captivating annotations. For example, his breathtaking 'My Island'.
A Man Renounces Love, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm

After Image. A Man Renounces Love, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm
abnegation: That is no man! Is this a comment said about her or is it the effect of her demeanour as directed to another? Her refusal in disdain of the other – it is fuelled by angry envy of this object whose possession she resents: ‘The after image. After Image. That is No Man’, 2010, gives among other things, an impression of dark anger. Yet who is she? I am immediately conscious of writing such things about an image modelled on someone, a woman perhaps who did not have her father’s love.

J.D.: We were talking about hysteria. “Das ist kein Her father’s love.  
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That is No Man, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm

After Image. That is No Man, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm
The Persistence of Memory, 1931, where watches are seen melted across an angular plane, a dead branch, the stretched out surface of a human face. Distinguishing Gorky from the madman who enjoys “illusions of false recognition,” Breton delineates Gorky’s use of the real as attempting neither to simply record the visible nor withdraw from reality. While having recognized the “irrational ferment” of Dalí’s “paranoiac-critical method” in a lecture on surrealism originally published in 1934, the distance he takes from that here is worth considering. 196

Is the golden object there in this painting to signal its own occasion, something emerging to organize and also to veil the real, or is it there to speak to these discourses? Is it there to indicate the real produced in nature by science and technology, depicted by the nuclear reactor? “Science doesn’t stop producing [the] real where there was nature… By the production itself, the scientist unveils the death wish contained in knowledge.” 17 As Eric Laurent notes, this foreclosure of the subject by science is one way of putting an end to suffering related to living. Another form of this erasure of the subject and subjectivity is described by Gérard Wajcman as the order of transparency to which the hypermodern world is subjected. We are in an era where the expansion of the means of technical surveillance leads to the phantom or fantasy of creating “a man without a shadow, a totally transparent subject, in body and soul.” 18 The mythological narrative, in pictorial depictions, and the after image are forms of response to this erasure of the subjective by the discourse of science and its technological means. They are also a response to complacency. Psychoanalysis and art then are partnered to “drip the illusion of transparency,” to defend the shadow as “a cause of truth;” as “two discourses of the other side of transparency…art and psychoanalysis are necessary.”

Breton had visited Freud in Vienna soon after the end of the First World War and his first book, published in 1921, was an experiment in ‘unconscious’ or automatic writing. His Manifeste du surréalisme, published in 1924, states that: “We are still living under the reign of logic…forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices… Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream. It is, in fact, inadmissible that this considerable portion of psychic activity…has still today been so grossly neglected.…” 19 I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream
A Man is Born Without Fear, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm

After Image, A Man is Born Without Fear, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm
and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but unimpressed by my death nor to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession.” He described surrealism as “based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to dissolve all the principal problems of life.” Davila quite literally grew up with these texts. The brother of his maternal grandmother, Celia Claro de Willshaw, was married to Elisa Bindhoff who became Breton’s third wife in 1945. Breton remained in contact with the family once they returned from Paris to Chile and would send books and stories. The surrealists were thus not only part of the family mythology but in their direct circle of acquaintance. Davila’s first love in art was invited by the reception of these materials sent by Breton.

Breton met Gorky in New York in early 1944. Breton met Gorky in New York in early 1944. Gorky is, of all the surrealist artists, the only one who has been Gorky’s for the past twenty years; the proof that imagery is made possible. If the painter’s conception of colour and light presenting before our own closed eyes. It is illustrated in Jouissance, a white suture, then the pattern and shape repeated in a fresh impression of colour and light presenting before our own closed eyes. It is illustrated in Jouissance, a white suture, then the pattern and shape repeated in a fresh impression of colour and light presenting before our own closed eyes.

It is illustrated in After Image. A Man is Born without Fear, 2010; an event of turbulence, of anguish and of loss.
CUURRICULUM VITAE: JUAN DAVILA

BIOGRAPHY
Born 1946 in Santiago, Chile
1965-1969 Law School of the University of Chile
1970-1974 Fine Arts School of the University of Chile
Moved to Australia in 1974. Lives in Melbourne
Artist, Editor Art and Criticism Monograph Series in Melbourne

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS
1980 Centro Cultural de la Municipalidad de Miraflores, Lima
1982 From Another Continent: Australia, the Dream and the Real,
POPISM, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1982. PolPoesM, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1983 From Another Continent: Australia, the Dream and the Real, Museum of Modern Art, Paris
1989 Prospect 89, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt
1990 Vollbild, NGiK, Kunsthalle Gelsenkricken, Berlin
1990 The Australian Exhibitions, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt
1993 Transcontinental, 9 Artes from Latin America, Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester and Run Gallery, Birmingham
1994 el deseo de la colonizacion, 6th Bienal de Havana, Cuba
1994 La cita transcultural, ICJ, Buenos Aires
1995 America, Bride of the Sun, Royal Fine Arts Museum, Antwerp
1996 CuRRICuL uM vIT AE: ju AN DA vILA National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea
1998 'A New Internationalsm', Gordon Bull, Domus 77, Italy
1999 'La historia de la pintura chilena (The History of Chilean Painting), Gaspar Galaz and Milan Ivelic, Catholic university of Chile
2001 'Nothing has been Settled', Guy Brett, juan Davila, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, pp2-23
2003 'Art or Mart?', Meanjin 60, 4, 128-132, Melbourne
2004 'Courbet's Curtain', Meanjin 63 (1) pp 211-218, Melbourne
2006 'Home and Away, Place and Identity in Recent Australian Art, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
2007 'Losetas de la primma chilena (The History of Chilean Painting), Gaspar Galaz and Milan Ivelic, Catholic university of Chile
2008 'A Panorama of Melbourne', Primary Views, Clayton: Monash University Museum of Art, p20
2009 'The Migration of Images: Inscriptions of Land and Body in Latin America', Charles Merewether, catalogue America, Bride of the Sun, Royal Fine Arts Museum, Antwerp
2010 'Love in Quotes, on the Painting of juan Davila', Nelly Richard, Hysterical Tears, Greenhouse Publications, Paul Taylor Ed.; Melbourne
2011 'Home and Away, Place and Identity in Recent Australian Art, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
2012 'La Cultura Planetaire: hegemonie et resistance', Guy Brett, Le Miroir de l'Art N°1, Kunstforum Bd.69 1/84, Germany
2006 'Seduction, Confrontation and Surprise', Russell Storer, Gallery, NGV, November-December 2006, pp44-46
2007 'Juan Davila, Museum of Contemporary Art', Charles Green, Art Forum USA, January 2007, pp269-270
2008 'Painting has not Died: the Post-modernist Battlefield of Juan Davila', Nicole Chen, Art Map, China, 2008.1, pp82-95
2008 'The Naked and the Nude', Elizabeth Cross, The Naked and the Nude, Ballarat: Ballarat Art Gallery, p28
2008 'Das Sagt Mir Was', Christian Saehrendt, Steen T Kittl, Koln: Dumont

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Australian National University Collection, Canberra
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Holmes a Court Collection, Perth
Lady Conyers Collection, Perth
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Museo Emeuteno e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporaneo, Spain
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
Smorgon Family Collection, Melbourne
State Library of Victoria

THE MORAL MEANING OF WILDERNESS

LIST OF WORKS

1. Two Women on the Banks of the Yarra 2003
2. Two Women on the Banks of the Yarra 2003
3. The Painter's Studio 2006
4. The Studio of the Painter 2006
5. Australia: Nuclear Waste Dumping Ground 2007
7. Albert Street 2007
8. Albert Street 2007
10. Uli Winterberg Road 2008
11. Uli Winterberg Road 2008
12. New Sun 2008
13. Untitled 2008
15. Untitled 2008
16. Untitled 2008
17. Two Women in Melbourne 2008
18. Women by the River Yarra 2008
19. Melbourne's Nuclear Plant at Wattle Park 2008
20. Pulp Mill on the River Tamar 2009
21. Revive 2009
22. What About my Desire? 2009
23. Prince Highway, Melbourne 2009
24. Mona 2009
25. Churchill National Park 2009
26. Untitled 2009/10
27. Untitled 2010
28. Wilderness 2010
29. Wilderness 2010
30. Pulp Mill on the River Tamar 2009

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