



Davida Allen: "With Knowledge of My Fourth Pregnancy"
Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane and Sydney

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THE MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD

Some Aspects of Davida Allen's Painting "With Knowledge of My Fourth Pregnancy"

In the catalogue to her recent exhibition at the New Zealand National Art Gallery in Wellington, Queensland artist Davida Allen (b. 1951) is quoted as saying: "I am not really about art . . . my art is being married, having four children, living here (i.e. in Queensland), and the by-product happens to be art." The artist's statement names three focal points of her art: the family theme, the regional angle, the close linkage between art and private life. It also points out two poles of possible reception: sympathetic (empathic) appreciation through identification on a thematic base, and/or critical analysis of its ideological contents.

An example of the latter kind of critique comes from Cathy Lumby (*Art Network*, 16, 1985), on the occasion of Davida Allen's first comprehensive workshow in Sydney at the Ray Hughes Gallery:

"The abundance of thick paint is a thin veil for the artist's simple faith in her own ego. The latter is a canon from which a wide slice of contemporary art long ago lapsed, adjoined to which Davida Allen's work looks conceptually myopic, and visually familiar."

Lumby's critique is based on postmodern thinking, against the background of neo-expressionist art practice. In line with other critiques it doubts the possibility of ego-identity as the origin of art production. Instead it conceives of the Ego as a metaphor, a "figure of language", or a theoretical construct (philosophical, psychological, sociological).

Consequently the "confident coalescence, via an internal congruence" which Lumby sees — I think, correctly — as the vehicle for the artist's communicative urge, has no basis in reality, either as a point of departure or arrival — hence the criticism "conceptually myopic" when compared to other contemporary artists, who have taken up postmodern ideas in their practice.

In criticising "visual familiarity" Lumby seems to change the line of argumentation from a conceptual to a formal one — a viewpoint, which though theoretically opposed, is often simply neglected in deconstructivist practice. The formal aspects cannot be ignored, how-

ever, as formal elements in pictorial texts are the carriers of meaning (signifiers) without which no signification can be realised, whatever the angle from which the work is considered. In the following I will concentrate on Davida Allen's painting "With Knowledge of My Fourth Pregnancy", with special attention to the mother-child relationship. I assume the painting is a link in a long chain of motherhood myths.

Without exception, Davida Allen's work is concerned with the domestic scene: herself (as a mother, or as a daughter), her own family, her home. Nevertheless one could not call it "kitchen sink" in the tradition of genre painting. Stylistically this is due to a lack of representational detail, simplification (abstraction) of form, atonal use of colour, and a "raw" impasto application of paint. Usually Davida Allen's work is classified as "Figurative Expressionism", occasionally as "Synthetic Expressionism", in contrast to the more self-reflective "Analytical Expressionism".

The painting was painted in 1982, and exhibited at the Paris Show "D'un autre continent: L'Australie-le rêve et le réel", at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, where I saw it first in October 1983. The painting shows three figures set against a dark background. The two adult figures fill most of the canvas, and are easily recognizable as a female and a male. The female is holding a child in her left arm, which — with the title in mind — makes her the mother, while it suggests that the male is the father. The prototypical modern micro-family? Title and statement indicate that there are three more children at home.

The child is relatively large but not standing on its own feet. The big round head and the body proportions tell that it is still a baby. The incarnat is pinkish-white, the face shows big blue eyes looking at the viewer, and red smiling lips. The female figure is of a roughly triangular shape, or more exactly a triangular trunk sitting on a square formed by her legs and right foot.

Here already appears the first spatial ambiguity: Read as a two-dimensional surface design, the square seems stable. The details of the left leg, however, make the figure appear to be standing on tip-toe, with the left foot pointing backwards, suggesting a forward movement. The movement is hesitant, as it is hampered by the awkwardly inward-bent right foot. The shape of the upper left thigh, as well as the ductus of the brush marks, favour the impression of an advance. (We should not forget that the mother is the artist.)

Her advance is not only hesitant in itself. It is virtually blocked off by the disproportionately large and brightly coloured body of the baby. The (optical) over-weight of the child stresses the blatant discrepancy

between the child's body and the short and meagre arm with which the mother attempts to hold it. In fact the baby is not held at all, but floats magically in the void. The viewer's expectations of a mother-image expressing care and security (but also competence and superiority) are disappointed. On the contrary, one senses apprehension in the mother, while the child is powerful, almost monstrous, in its self-sustained just-being-there.

In terms of semiology: due to the specific "syntax", the signs "mother" and "child" do not integrate sufficiently to form a supersign "mother/child" on a next higher hierarchical level as can be found, for instance, in the Madonna symbol. (We will come back to that later.)

The ambiguity of the mother/child relation is deepened by further pictorial elements which are ambiguous in themselves: A pink triangular area below the mother's fragmentary left hand could indicate her womb. It corresponds with a slight hollow in the baby's body, as if it had been taken out of there. The colour patch is in the place, and of the size, of the missing palm. Fantasy may see this vagueness as establishing a (mythical) link between mother and child, but the visual effect is perhaps rather that of a further separation.

The position of the mother's right arm provides yet another ambiguity: pointing to the upper left corner of the canvas, the line of the outstretched arm divides the pictorial zones of both figures while the opened hand forms an optical link — "a bridgehead" — between both faces. As a gesture it can be received as a greeting or a call for help; the neutral expression of the mother's face leaves it open.

The male figure occupies the right third of the painting. The optical links between the male and the child figures are formed by two sets of parallels given by the male's right arm and the child's left leg; and by the male's trunk and the child's raised left arm. These parallels form a solid square almost in the centre of the painting, and though both figures do not actually overlap, their relationship appears paradoxically stronger and more stable than that of mother and child. The optical link is strengthened by the light colouring of both.

In its movement the male figure shows an ambiguity similar to that in the movement of the female. It is however not the child that holds him back but his own inward-bent foot. The male figure stands isolated from the mother/child group. Indeed one could easily imagine a row of figures added up in this way: the connotation "parents" lies closer than that of "couple". It is a rather chaste image of a family.

Compared to the bright blue of the female, the blueish-grey of the male appears cool and detached. While the female face is left in a natural tan, the male face is whitish, and about double the size. Thus

the father appears as the cool “head”, if not even the “brain”, of the family.

The unstructured, though heavily textured background does nothing to counter the isolation of the figures. It allows for just as much depth as is required for the figure movements. Since it contains no indications of an actual room, the figures appear almost to be floating.

So far we have found quite a complex family image, with the mother/child relation being more ambiguous and disturbed than might have been assumed at first glance; a rather conservative father image; and an adult partnership that is “primmer” than the raw painting style could have led us to expect. In view of its forward-looking character, and the identification of the artist with the mother, the painting has to be understood as a personal message about the artist’s doubtful expectations for her private and professional future. This reading is supported by the portrait likeness of the adult faces. The open code of the other pictorial signs allows it also to be read as a contemporary version of a mother myth.

To this point the investigation of the painting has omitted the question of how we come actually to perceive meaning in the images. Cathy Lumby in her critique rejects the possibility of “Internal Congruence” (immediate “natural” understanding) as a fundamental of communication. Nevertheless the high emotional charge of a topic as existential as motherhood can hardly be denied. It seeps through even Lumby’s cool critique. The reading of this painting will almost certainly be influenced by emotional reactions, and the less conscious they are, the stronger the reactions will be.

In this context it is interesting to note that the figures of the child and of the mother present two key stimuli, or optical triggers, for instinctive reactions in humans, as described by the zoologist Konrad Lorenz: the “baby face”, and the symbolic accentuation of the female hips. A typical example of the latter is the “Venus of Willendorf”, a small prehistoric stone sculpture. According to Lorenz, the features of a “baby face”, especially the large, round, protruding forehead which lowers the level of the eyes to half of the head’s height, release a spontaneous protective reaction when they are met as sufficiently significant determinators of a form. This also is demonstrated in the appreciation of animals by humans: the “cute” sheep, bunnies, budgies *versus* the “fierce” wolves and shepherd dogs. The reaction is powerful enough to lower the guards in interhuman relationships: people with a “baby face” tend to meet less resistance than those with an “eagle profile”. (Of course they are also said to have less character.) The instantaneous reaction will be followed by more varied, but still mostly unreflected accepting or rejecting responses. Unless a critic

becomes aware of these responses as an intergral part of his or her reflection, they will limit the validity of his readings of paintings. In a different context, the responses can also throw light on the initial phases of art appreciation.

The emphasis put on the hip/womb area of the female in Allen's painting, enhances the figure's sex appeal, transforming it into a fertility symbol, similar in this respect to the Willendorf "Venus". Stylistically, this choice of form creates a sense of the archaic in a way quite common in modern painting. In this case the archaic is in harmony with the expressive use of colour, but it clashes with the realistic faces. The fertility symbol can also express a wish for security, as it allows the viewer and also the artist to return in fantasy into the mother's womb.

Different from the Willendorf prototype (a C.G. Jung archetype?) which is diamond-shaped, Davida Allen's mother image shows a roughly triangular basic shape due to the anatomically wrong position of the legs. But the triangle calls up another prototype in the "imaginary museum" (André Malraux) of the viewer: the Madonna-Protectress, traditional in Europe since the Middle Ages. The image is a variation of an older type of the Byzantine Madonna, the so-called "Hodegetria", which shows Maria with the Jesus child on her left arm. While in later periods the Madonna image was put into a pictorial context, early Byzantine icons set it against a dark or golden background.

In Davida Allen's painting, all streams come together: the prehistoric fertility symbol and reminiscences of Christian (both Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic) traditions. The affirmative connotations of the traditional models, however, are countered in the modern painting by the threatening size of the child and by the immodest nakedness of the mother.

It is in this cross-referential mixture of styles and models that Cathy Lumby finds the "visual familiarity". To me, these crossings are rather surprising, and as such interesting. Admittedly there are no indications that the artist reflects these referentials as such. But is that necessary? Is the artist obliged or entitled, or condemned to perform as a critic?

Postmodern criticism sometimes seems to contradict itself: it doubts originality, and at the same time rejects familiarity. It acclaims regionality, and at the same time cancels typical concerns of non-urban life: family, nature, religion. If nobody reconstructs, what will there be left to deconstruct?