

Figuring out sincerity without irony

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Reviewed by Robert Nelson



Detail from Penny Byrne's *iPROTEST* installation, 2012.

JUAN DAVILA

Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Ormond Hall, 557 St Kilda Road, season ended

HAUNTS and FOLLIES

Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, 26 Acland Street, St Kilda, until September 16

A WITTY painting by Jon Campbell consists of nothing but writing. Lurking at the back of a tasteful *New Art Fair* at Kaliman Rawlins, the canvas says: "this picture has irony in it".

If the picture declares that it has irony, it has none. If you claim irony you negate it. Still, this paradoxical painting remains ironic in one detail: it calls itself a picture when it isn't. The painting doesn't depict anything but contains only words.



Juan Davila, *Untitled*, 2011.

Irony is subtle and entertaining, but sometimes you long for sincerity. With irony, the symbolic value of anything is ingeniously self-negating. The symbol falsifies itself and we laugh.

In contemporary art, we look at any symbol expecting it to be undermined. It's a pity if this wily convention obscures the poetic way a symbol can be used with sincerity. Thankfully, Juan Davila, in a grand show at Ormond Hall, reveals how symbols achieve poetic integrity in standing for a mythical, pregnant idea.

Supported by numerous works on paper, a suite of mural-size paintings hangs from the balcony. Figures negotiate and perform in an indefinable space, reminiscent of the abstract field of Greek ceramics, only contrasty, pulsating and unsettled.

The figures recall classical types from mythology, as with a running woman who brandishes her fists, above the level of two oval forms that frame her.

Not so classical, but awesomely symbolic, the woman has a child in a transparent womb, as if carrying ultimate responsibility all on her own, precariously balanced between strong determination and unstable fury.

A neighbouring work shows a young man with an erection dancing in ecstasy around a fire. A classical grimacing grotesque or *banausos* - the ancient Greek word for bogan - looks on with a sinister leer.

We have no idea if the youth is responsible for inseminating the woman or if he is the mature product of the see-through womb. He could be both or neither. On the other side of the hall, a squatting dandy with top hat but no pants talks to an uncertain naked woman, which doesn't impress a nearby magpie. The neighbouring work presents a cosier relationship between man and woman, but excluding an indisposed man on the other side of an oval form, whose legless body has become a bottle.

The author of a catalogue essay, Kate Briggs, suggests a continuous narrative that links these images to psychoanalytical and social circumstances. Each image embodies ideas in symbolic form which are mysteriously transferable to other realities.

Though the compositions are simple, Davila's picture-making is noisy, with contrasty strokes inside the figures as well as in the background. In a large, apparently abstract picture, Davila gives the reason for some of this chaotic infill: it represents an after-image, as when you shut your eyes after seeing something and your whole field becomes alive with chaotic but transient forms. It's as if all of Davila's work is conceived in visual asylum, in the moment of private sanctuary while resting the eyes.

A curious collaboration between Davila and Constanze Zikos explores the symbolic relationships of ornamental patterns and enclosures, which share indirect equivalences with the figures that are so engorged with ambiguity and incestuous innuendo.

Symbolic ornament is also central to a rich exhibition at the Linden gallery, *Haunts and Follies*.

Curator Simon Mee has himself created learned pieces of symbolism in unusually good drawing, with multiple figures and coherent space. Sam Leach is preoccupied with sharp representation as well; but other artists in the show, Kate Rohde and Penny Byrne, are selected because of their symbolic ornament.

Byrne is the most directly political, making cartoon-like images in ceramic, reminiscent of neo-rococo collectables. Their faces are emblazoned with national insignia, which deny their natural expression and power of speech. Ironically, they're all linked by Facebook.

These cheerful souvenirs from all the areas of the globe most troubled by Western intervention are symbolically cruel, celebrating in joyful trinkets the conversion of the oppressed to powerless consumer individualism. It's one case in which irony adds to the clout of the symbol.