Reconsidering gender, labour and value

Internationally acclaimed artist Kate Davis explores the value systems placed on labour from a feminist perspective. Lucy Hammonds spoke to Davis during her residency at Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

At a time when New Zealand’s contemporary art scene has its sights set firmly on the international horizon, Dunedin Public Art Gallery is welcoming one of our own back into the fold.

Born in New Zealand, Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis has spent the past decade carving out a name for herself in the British and European art scene. Working across a range of media, including film and video, drawing, printmaking, installation and bookworks, her practice strikes up a conversation with the past – creating opportunities to revisit certain moments of social, political or historical significance, and to insert her own voice into these dialogues. Interested in the role and depiction of women in society and art history, Davis describes her work as “an attempt to reconsider what certain histories could look, sound and feel like”.

As part of Dunedin Public Art Gallery’s International Visiting Artist programme, Davis has lived and worked in Dunedin over the first three months of 2016. She’s joined by her husband, art historian Dr Dominic Paterson, and the couple’s 14-month-old son. Working out of the print workshop at the Dunedin School of Art, Davis has used her residency to realise a new series of etchings that explore the value systems that are placed on different kinds of labour.

She began to plan this series of work before leaving Scotland, realising that her particularly labour-intensive approach would require a longer gestation period than the 12-week residency would offer. Her initial research looked towards Dunedin itself. “I started by trying to familiarise myself with the Dunedin Public Art Gallery collection and learn a little about the institution’s history through...
flying visit

In Dunedin, Davis has been working to expand her interest in the visual depiction of activity and labour. Her research has introduced some New Zealand references. “Over the last few years my art practice has been influenced by New Zealand feminist economist Marilyn Waring’s engaging and revelatory unpicking of mainstream economics. Her insistence that we can, and need to, rethink how and where we place value, I find inspiring and also resonant with questions I’ve tried to ask in my own work.”

This, in turn, has led her to think about the parallels between domestic activity (that which is historically invisible and unpaid) and the printmaking process. “In the lead up to this residency, I was also learning about becoming a mum and spending much more time at home immersed in domestic and caring activities. I was struck by the fact that much of the activity you undertake to make a print is similar to housework and I began thinking about the language which is shared between the print studio and the home too – such as beds, plates, baths, ground, dust – and then there is the wiping, rubbing, polishing, washing, cleaning that you need to repeat, again and again. The etchings I’m working on for The Unswept Floor are drawing on the parallels between unpaid domestic labour and printmaking; treating the repetitive and largely invisible processes we use to care for ourselves, others and our work as the subject of the work itself.”

Kate Davis, Curtain II, 2011, one of a series of digital pigment fine art prints, 64 x 84cm. Courtesy of the artist
These new works will be presented alongside a survey of works, including drawing, photography and film loaned from collections in the United Kingdom and Europe. The exhibition promises to be a dynamic experience, with Davis placing significant emphasis on the exhibition as an ‘active’ space. “I try to think carefully about the structures that support (literally and figuratively) works of art and what those structures might have to do with questions of value, as well as with the viewer’s relationship to the work”.

Within her exhibition, Davis has incorporated a group of works by other artists, drawn from the collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery and beyond. These ‘guest’ artists range from Rembrandt to fellow ex-pat contemporary artist Fiona Connor – each chosen for “meaningful connections” to the concerns of her own works. “From Fiona Connor’s sculptural Stand Series, 2012, to Jacqueline Fahey’s painting Christine in the Pantry, 1973, and Joanna Margaret Paul’s film Task, 1982, all of the collection works I will be exhibiting are asking us to look closely at the activities or moments which are often on the periphery or overlooked,” says Davis.

For anyone familiar with her previous projects, this steer towards other artists and historic collections will come as no surprise. Collaborative approaches and responses to historic artworks, events or figures are both recurrent strands in her practice. It is here that Davis’ interest in feminism becomes most apparent, with several of her major series addressing feminist themes, histories and figures. As she says, “My practice often uses feminist approaches to rethink the ways in which histories are produced and perpetuated... This has often involved responding to the aesthetic and political ambiguities of historical art works and their reception from a feminist perspective.”

Davis approaches these histories from a highly personal stand-point, often using her own body, action or artistic intervention as a means of starting a conversation with the past. In Waiting in 1972; What About 2007?, which was presented in 2007 at Art Basel, Davis worked in response to a 1972 performance Waiting, by the influential feminist artist Faith Wilding. Wilding has become an important influence and a collaborator, and an example of how Davis thinks of her own work in relation to the wider context of feminism and art.

“It has been really important to me in my work to treat feminist movements (whether artistic or not) as in some sense contemporary with my own efforts, rather than to project my own work as particularly new. My collaborations with Faith Wilding would be the most obvious example of this – art history might present Faith’s work as part of ‘second-wave’ feminism, but to me she is a contemporary artist, and the way she has revisited and drawn on her own past in her recent work is very inspiring.”

Many of Davis’ earlier projects have looked at ways of establishing these kinds of intergenerational relationships between her own practice, and those of her predecessors. For ART NOW at Tate Britain, Davis created Your Body is a Battleground Still, 2007, a project which operated in conversation with works by Barbara Kruger and Joseph Epstein in the Tate collection. Disgrace, 2009, a drawing and film work made in response to Modigliani’s female nudes, acknowledges Davis’s own conflict between admiration for the artist and frustration with his depiction of women. In the series, Reversibility, 2011, and Curtain I–VII, 2011, shown at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, and London’s The Drawing Room respectively, she turns her attention toward the complexities and implications surrounding the care and preservation of cultural material – how this might affect the original artwork, and the way it might operate within a contemporary context.

Although Davis has exhibited her work throughout the world, The Unswept Floor will be the first time her work has been presented in New Zealand. Davis left New Zealand as a teenager and the opportunity to return and work in Dunedin has meant a great deal to her. For an artist so attuned to history and context, it has opened up new lines of research into figures from New Zealand art history. Although she is aware that in three months she is “only scratching the surface” Davis leaves her native country excited by the possibilities that this residency might present in the future.

Kate Davis: The Unswept Floor is at Dunedin Public Art Gallery from 12 March to 6 June, 2016.
Kate Davis, *Reversibility (It is the body and Excised)*, installation view (front) at GoMA, Glasgow, 2011. Courtesy of the artist

Kate Davis, *The Unswept Floor*, 2016, mixed media collage. Courtesy of the artist