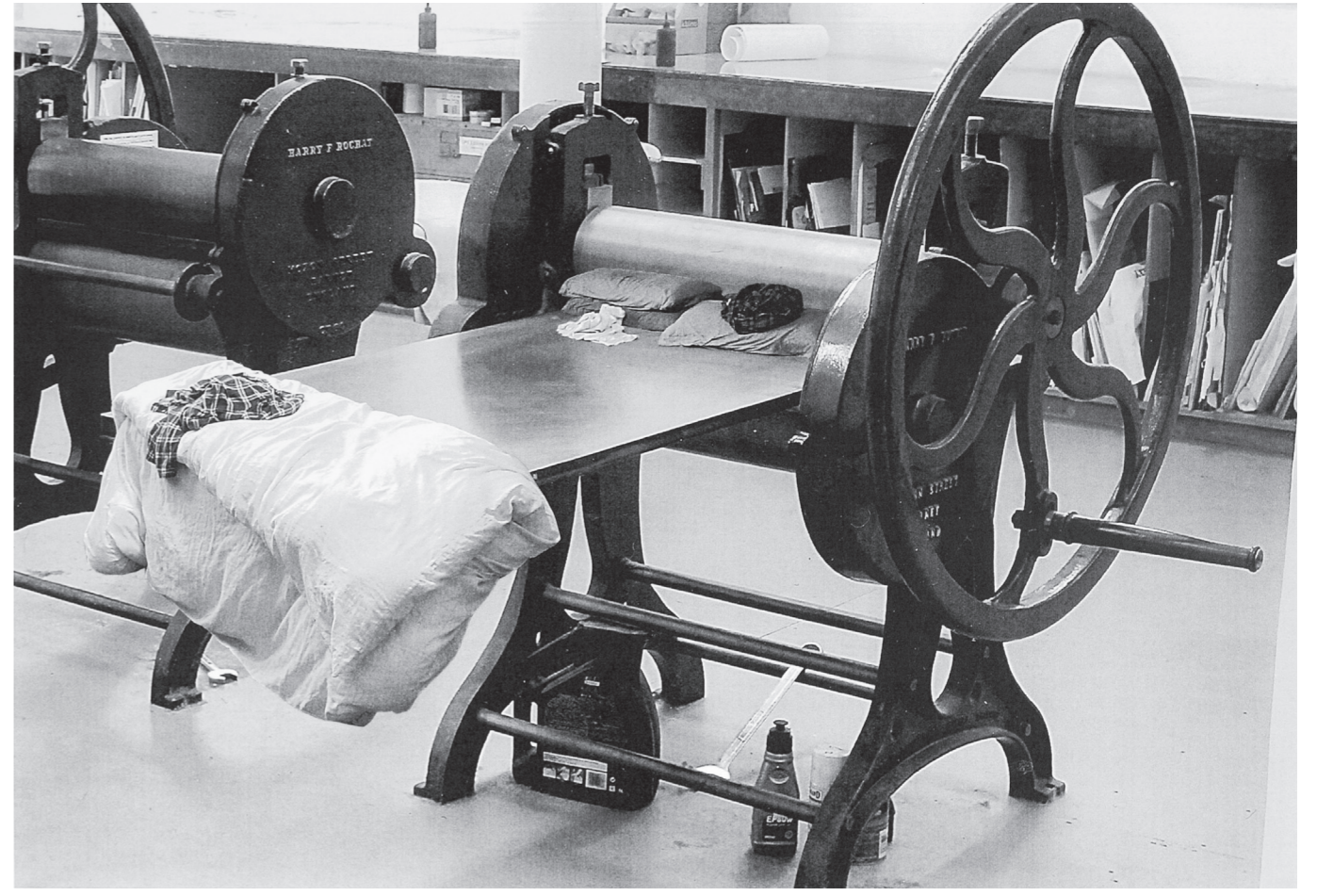




KATE DAVIS **The Unswept Floor**
 12 March - 16 June 2016 / DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY



On Sensitive Ground

Lucy Hammonds

"It is difficult to describe in words, the meaning of childcare. Because it is precisely this emotion which is conveyed by that activity alone. Our sense of touch is a fundamental sensibility, which comes into action at birth. The ability to feel weight and form, and assess its significance. Cleaning translates, for me, the closeness of mother and child ... In all this manual labour, the evocation of what one feels about man and nature must be conveyed by the woman in terms of mass, inner-tension and rhythm."

This script, written by Kate Davis, is adapted from the words of Barbara Hepworth speaking in a 1961 BBC documentary about her life as an artist, a mother, and woman living in Britain in the early 20th century. In 2014, Hepworth's words were altered and revived by Davis; another artist and mother, similarly interested in how this life experience might inform the critical and creative outcomes of her own labours. In her film *Weight*, Davis connected script from the Hepworth documentary with her own discussion of domestic activities. The work signals her interest in 'how televised depictions of creativity have constructed our understanding of artistic production and other forms of labour.'

Davis's selection of archival imagery for *Weight* shifts focus away from the figure – a subject that has been central to her work since the early 2000s – and instead draws attention to the activity or action depicted. Where a significant emphasis of her earlier work has been on the depiction of the body/figure, *Weight* finds its force in the presence of action; imagining that the essential everyday tasks involved in caring for oneself, others and the home, could be discussed in the same way as an artist or artwork. Davis has extended this interest during her residency in Dunedin, using her work to ask questions of certain value systems.

Her resulting series of new works, *On Sensitive Ground*, explore the relationship between domestic activity (that which is historically invisible and unpaid) and the printmaking process. Davis began thinking through the shared language and actions of the home and the print studio; the bed, plate, blanket, or bath, and wiping, rubbing, washing and cleaning for example. The pervasive nature of dust in the home, tracking our movements across objects and surfaces, and its functional role in printmaking offered particular potential for image-making. 'The etchings are drawing on the parallels between the work that happens within the home and printmaking; treating the repetitive and largely invisible processes which both contexts share, as the subject of the work itself.'

On Sensitive Ground identifies a series of shared locations across the home and print workshop, and works to record the presence of actions connected to these sites. Using a soft ground, and plates that reference these particular sites, Davis captures the movements of her family going about their everyday lives. Her etched marks become evidential, forensic even; the scrape of a knife and fork across a dining plate, or the movement of a child's body on a cot mattress speak of action in the past-tense, and of absence as much as presence. These lines hold little pretence of beauty, but instead feel like the detritus of a meal, the scuffs on the lino, the sort of marks that are quickly erased and remade. There is an honesty in these images that rebels against domestic archetypes, an invitation to private spaces full of messy activity and real life. Alongside this the notion of currency becomes equally relevant. The act of translating that which is typically unpaid into the language of fine art implicitly challenges associations of value, both culturally and economically. In doing so, Davis offers these images as an alternative currency – one which makes a claim for the value of activities like cleaning, caring and feeding.

Davis's decision to engage with printmaking in this series carries implications independent of her interest in feminist value systems. Prints, multiples and reproductions have played a significant role in her practice, the artist using different processes to ask questions of certain art historical rules and expectations. The alignment she sets up between printmaking and domestic activity might equally be read as a critique of the traditional values applied to art-making; ranging from 'high' art through to process-based practices. Davis's commitment to practices including pencil drawing, printmaking and different methods of image reproduction are an indication of her interest in how her own contemporary practice might disrupt the hierarchy of Western art-history. This is a decision that echoes feminist artists of preceding generations, who have so often worked against traditional values to redefine the form, nature and materiality of art.

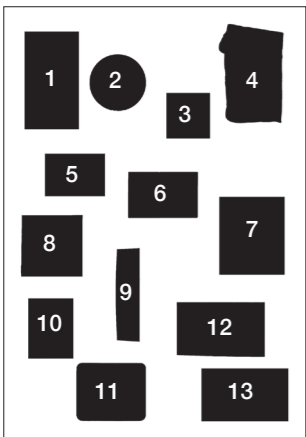
Setting up a conversation with certain histories, events and figures is important to Davis, who sees her practice as a means of responding to the complexities of history. Most recently, her research introduced her to the work of a number of New Zealand artists and feminist figures who have become influential on her thinking in the development of *On Sensitive Ground*. She notes the influence of New Zealand economist Marilyn Waring, and in particular her 'revealing unpicking of mainstream economics, and her insistence that we can, and need to, rethink how and where we place value.'³ Alongside this, Davis has drawn on the work of New Zealand artists including Joanna Margaret Paul, Jacqueline Fahey and Fiona Connor.

In *The Unswept Floor*, Davis's 2016 exhibition at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, she has drawn on works by these artists, and others, to create a context for *On Sensitive Ground*. Rather than claiming a direct influence, Davis is more interested in exploring the connections between her own concerns and that of other New Zealand woman artists; '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.' Paul's poetic 'domestic portraiture'⁴ and Fahey's bold, painterly defence of her everyday environment, resonate with Davis's own interest in the potential of the domestic situation. Fiona Connor's *Stand* series introduce a more reactive stance, challenging the conventions and traditional hierarchies of the art gallery and, in Davis's words 'echoing the feminist desire to react against the monumentality of the picture frame, the gallery wall and the plinth whilst also actively claiming and occupying that space.'

While *On Sensitive Ground* offers an opportunity to think through value systems – both domestic and art historical – Davis manages to raise these questions without anger or opprobrium. In the second volume of her memoir, Jacqueline Fahey wrote 'I decided that rather than getting away from it all, I would embrace domesticity, transform it, interpret it. Who better than someone immersed in it? I did not want to escape from my family, I loved them.'⁵ In a similar respect, Davis's practice might be characterised by this desire to create a critical domestic space, rather than a critique of domesticity.

Lucy Hammonds

1. Artist statement, <http://katedavisartist.co.uk/about/> [accessed 23/02/16]
 2. Pers comm. Kate Davis to Lucy Hammonds, 08/02/16
 3. Pers comm. Kate Davis to Lucy Hammonds, 08/02/16
 4. Martin Rumsby quoted at <http://www.circuit.org.nz/artist/joanna-margaret-paul> [accessed 24/02/105]
 5. Kate Davis, email correspondence, 29/01/2016
 6. Fahey, Jacqueline. Before I Forget, Auckland University Press. (Auckland: 2012) p. 37



1. Jacqueline Fahey
Christie in the Pantry 1973
Oil on board
Collection of the Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru.
2. Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - plate 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
3. Hermanszoon Van Rijn Rembrandt
The Artist's Mother 1628
Etching
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
4. Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - blanket 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
5. Joanna Margaret Paul
Task (1982)
8mm film transferred to Digital Video.
Courtesy of The Estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand

6. Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - shelf I 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
7. Jacqueline Fahey
Sisters Communicating 1974
Oil on board
Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hakenu, University of Otago.
8. Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - floor 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
9. Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - shelf II 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
10. Joanna Margaret Paul
Self Portrait 1970
Pencil on paper
Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hakenu, University of Otago.
11. Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - sink 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
12. Joanna Margaret Paul
Untitled 1970
Pencil on paper
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
13. Fiona Connor
Stands created for the exhibition *Untitled (mural design)*
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Kate Davis Biography

Born (1977) in New Zealand, Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis attended Glasgow School of Art from 1997 to 2001, completing a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Art and then an MPhil looking at the place of printed matter in contemporary art from 1990 - 2000. Since this time, she has established a significant practice as a contemporary artist, working across drawing, photography, film/video, installation, printmaking and bookworks.

Davis's work strikes up a conversation with the past – creating opportunities to reconsider certain moments of social, political or historical significance, and to insert her own voice into these dialogues. The role and depiction of women in society and art history are among her key concerns. She has exhibited widely in Britain and Europe, including solo exhibitions at The Drawing Room, London; Temporary Gallery, Cologne; GoMA, Glasgow; Galerie Kamm, Berlin; Museo de la Ciudad and La Galeria de Comercio, Mexico; CCA, Glasgow (with Faith Wilding); Tate Britain, London; Kunsthalle Basel and Sorcha Dallas, Glasgow. *The Unswept Floor* (2016), at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, will be the first exhibition of Davis's work in New Zealand.

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Top left: Kate Davis
On Sensitive Ground - bed 2016
Etching on paper
Courtesy of the artist.
Top right: Kate Davis
The Unswept Floor 2016
Mixed media collage
Courtesy of the artist.

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