

Anthony Davies
Apocalypse Now

Edward Hanfling

The art of Anthony Davies has always been political. He responds to the world he sees around him. *Apocalypse Now* is a series of works made during 2011-12, registering the impact of a range of calamitous events, such as the Christchurch earthquakes and the Rena Disaster here in New Zealand, and overseas the carnage of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami and the damage created subsequently by the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

These are big things to deal with – too big to cope with, one might think, within the relatively confined world of art. Davies, however, is not someone who is content to make art about art, and he asks us to think, rather than drifting off to some transcendent realm of pure aesthetics.

Paradoxically, his commitment to the idea that art should address the social and political comes out of his commitment, almost totally and exclusively, to art itself. Making art is Davies' full-time occupation. He does not just dabble in it, consider it a luxury or an indulgence, or merely find time for it in between the day-to-day routines of a salaried job. He is a worker, and his work is to make art. Over a long career reaching back to the 1960s, he has built up an immense body of work demonstrating a virtuosity of technique in the full range of print media, and highlighting the lives of oppressed and marginalised social groups. Making images is Davies' way of living in the world, enduring, being productive, grappling with the most urgent issues of our time.

A case could be made for the belief that politics is part of the discipline of printmaking, intrinsic to the medium, not just something that prints can be *about*. Davies makes a significant contribution to a long history of gritty, hard-hitting image-making. For example, the German Expressionists of the early twentieth century used the technique of the woodcut in particular to connect with the most tumultuous issues facing their nation – to cut into the very tissue of society, to cut through the crap. Printmaking is, certainly in the form of woodcut, a graphic medium in the sense that it requires drawing, lines cut into a surface. But it could equally be described as “graphic” in the other sense of the word – insofar as it offers a method peculiarly

suiting to creating stark, striking and explicit images. (The expressiveness of painting, in contrast, is of a different order; brush-marks spread and mingle; it is a looser, more equivocal medium.)

There is a rudimentary, matter-of-fact directness to the woodcut print. It appears irrevocably real, despite the fact that it does not exude “realism” of a photographic kind – simulations of how things appear to the eye. The reality of the woodcut comes more from the immediacy of the marks – from seeing the artist’s physical incisions – and from the rawness of the material – the visible presence of the wood, the grain and grooves that run through the printed image. This is not to claim that Davies’ woodcuts are, absolutely, more direct and raw than the works he has made using other techniques; and the *Apocalypse Now* works are as elegantly and finely executed as any of his work. It is rather that the impact of these images comes from the way he has drawn upon the connotations and the “language” of the woodcut medium.

Davies has added another dimension to this particular series of woodcuts. Overlaying each image are black, spray-painted shapes. The relative softness of these shapes, which comes from the particular mechanism of the spray can, and the fact that they are black like the printed ground of each picture, means that they are not always conspicuous or immediately apparent. But they lend a more lingering, nuanced play of light and shade, chiaroscuro, to the sharpness of the graphic elements. They add space and atmosphere, depth and gravity, light and shadow. Yet the method adds also to the feeling that these works are embedded not just in artistic traditions but in the immediate environment, the here and now. Spray paint calls to mind tagging or graffiti, a raw, subversive and inherently political form of creative expression.

Notable in this series of prints, and characteristic of Davies’ work in general, is the range of mark-making, the level of invention involved. While each image is consistent with the next in style, and the rendering of figures, buildings, boats and so forth, each also has new things to savour – distinctive configurations of lines, little abstractions that nonetheless serve a figurative function. The naturalness with which these various pictorial devices belong to the compositions, and the ease with which Davies seems to conjure them forth, means that their inventiveness could be overlooked. Yet these patterns and schematic shorthand devices are essential to Davies’ art because they are suggestive rather than illustrative. That is, they cannot

be instantly recognised and grasped; they allude to a number of things at once, and in the way that they overlay and overwhelm the details of a scene, they suggest forces and feelings that are larger than the details, more portentous.

If Davies' images seem somewhat grim, it is worth thinking about them as being, like Goya's etchings, beautiful pictures of ugly things. *Apocalypse Now* is a series of rich orchestrations of line and pattern, light and shade. The bleakness comes from the relationship between these forms and the subjects they make and shape, and here we are asked to think about and interrogate our own beliefs about humanity. The view Davies offers is not comforting. We see human beings acting out a kind of ritual of building and destroying, victims and rescuers. Davies vividly shows these seemingly opposed roles as mutually dependent, as if human life depends on creating problems and disasters, and then scurrying around mopping them up. As the line in a Paul Simon song goes, "everything put together sooner or later falls apart."