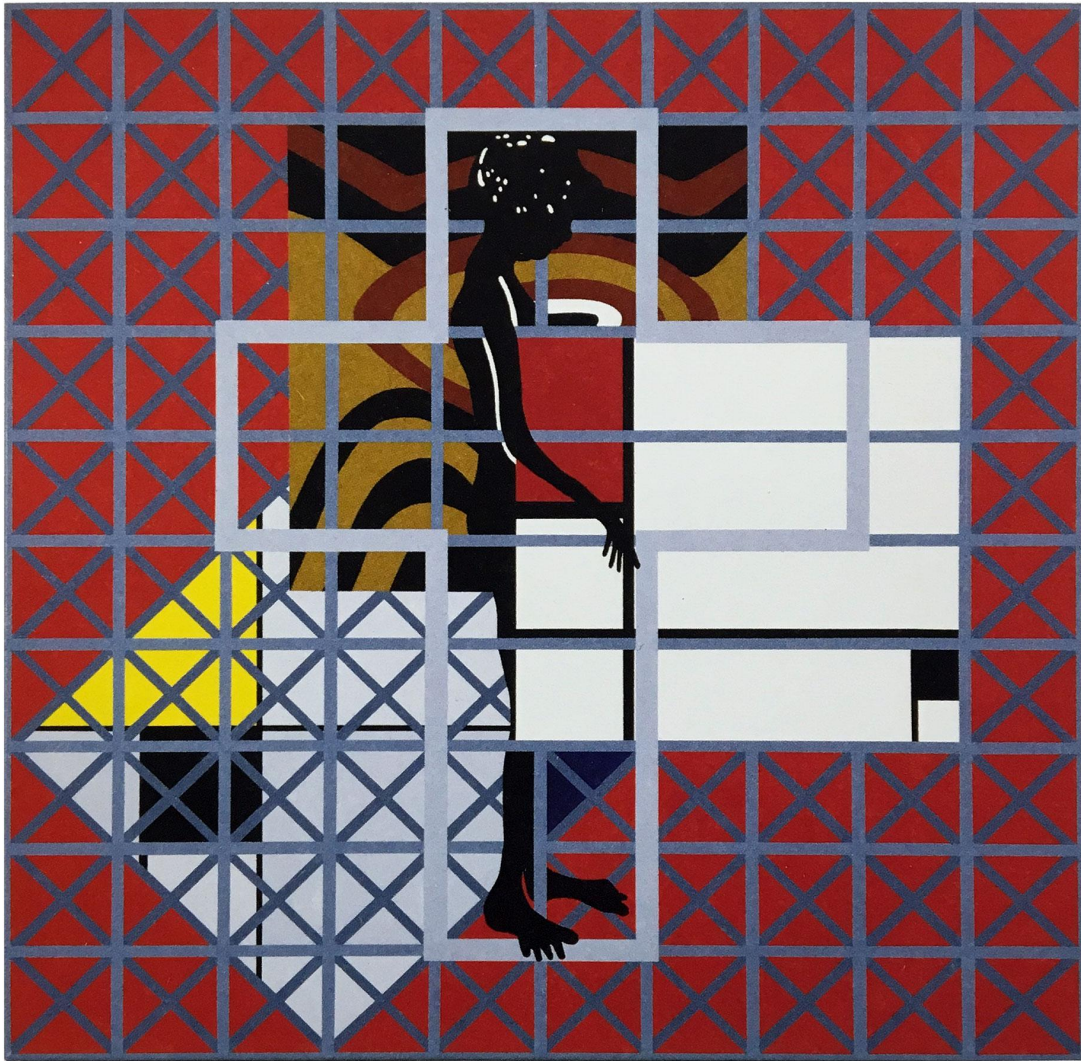


Discipline No. 4



Helen Johnson

Critical Ambiguity:
A Kantian Reading
of Recent Work by
Juan Davila

One does not get the impression that Juan Davila strives for innovation in his paintings. Indeed, cognisant of the inefficacy of avant-gardist approaches today, he embraces narrative and pre-modern technique as fundamental aspects of his approach to painting. In taking this course Davila has not, like some painters of his generation, retreated into a lazy fantasy space where a notion of the painter as a channeller of the ethereal might be indulged. Instead his engagement with the possibilities of representation is underwritten by psychoanalytic principles. Within this frame Davila employs intuition as a tool rather than something to be courted and given way to, the latter being connected to a derided and old-fashioned notion of genius.

Throughout his career, Davila—a Chilean artist who relocated to Australia in 1974—has used painting to level an acidic critique at mainstream political narratives. Whilst his work of the 1980s and 1990s employed a barefaced postmodern pastiche to critique cultural identity and political life in Australia, in the past decade Davila has shifted toward beauty, employing a softer palette and treating of gentler imagery whilst continuing his sharp critique of Australian identity and public policy.

There is a particular nexus between beauty, morality and ambiguity in Davila's more recent work that can also be located in Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory, specifically in Kant's conception of beauty as the symbol of morality. By this Kant means that beauty directs our experience towards an idea of morality, while at the same time failing to make this idea sensible. This functions by way of an analogy: the feeling of subjective universal validity we feel when we experience beauty is analogous to the universal validity of the moral law, though it does not approximate it. The affect is that as we experience beauty, we are prompted to feel morally invested.

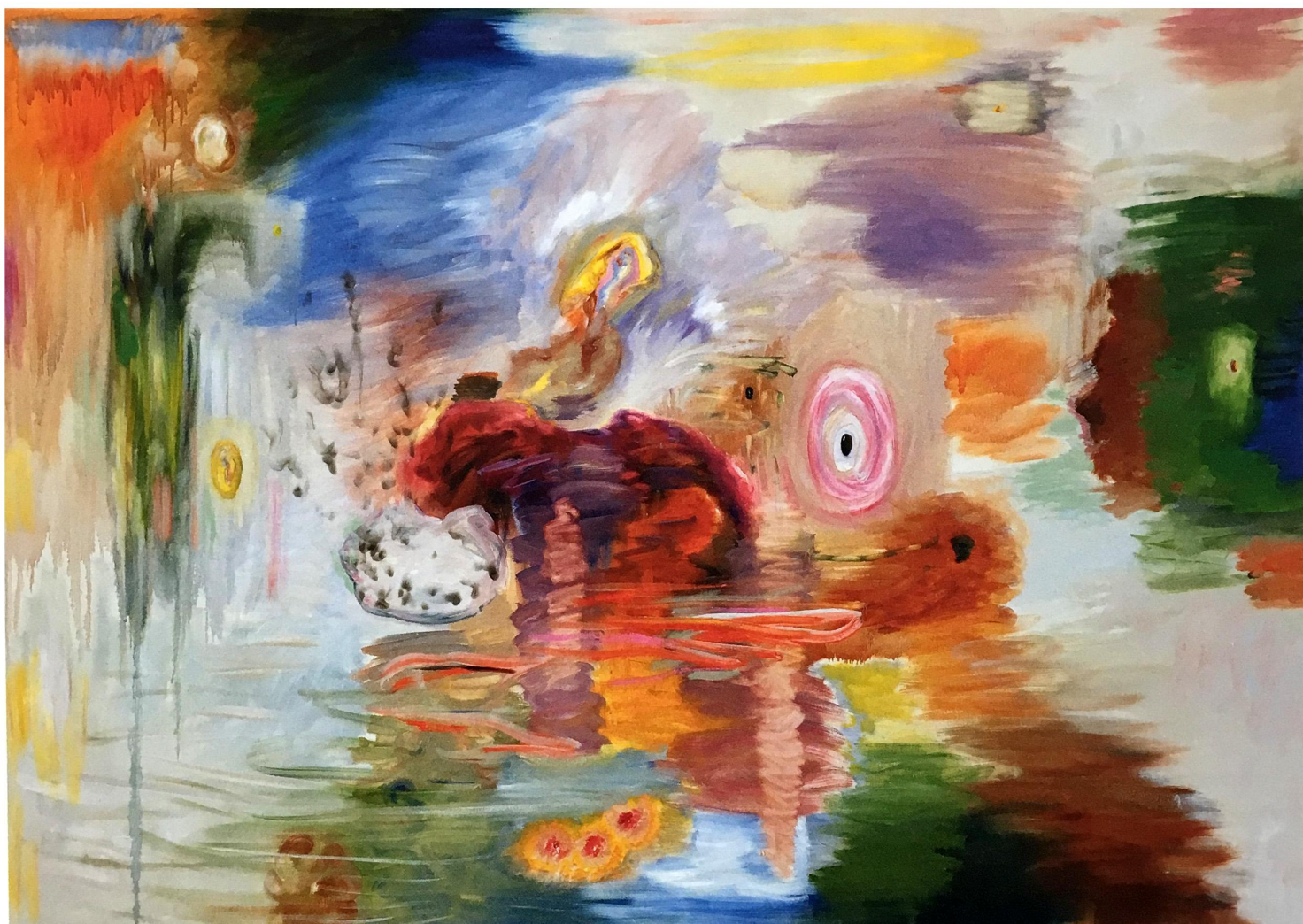
Accompanying Davila's shift in focus to the landscape and the woman as subjects, in 2010 he began producing *After Image* paintings, large-scale fields of loose, vibrant colour and gesture in which abstract marks converge to form glistening, arcane shapes that float on vivid planes pitted with sinkholes and occlusions. These paintings invite the viewer in with their seductive colours and generous scale. Their exuberance is punctuated with dark, glinting little beads that glare out from the luscious surfaces. Hot pinks turn to scabrous reds and browns, and lucid mauves deteriorate into murky areas of grey-brown.

The term *After Image* refers to the trace of what has been seen, lingering on the retina once the eye is closed. Though these paintings ostensibly

serve as visual traces of figurative companion works, one can more readily perceive them as navigations of the unconscious. Once executed, they do not require the accompaniment of their figurative referents. Davila has said of them: 'These last paintings seem to try to shift the representational aspect to things not considered before, for example, impossible space, infinity, shifting of scenarios.'¹ These are all phenomena that the imagination cannot adequately represent, that can be referred to but not described: in this regard they align with Kant's definition of the rational idea, 'a concept, to which no *intuition* (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.'² Converse to the rational idea as a concept to which no intuition can be adequate, the aesthetic idea is an intuition to which no concept can be adequate—and the aesthetic idea is, for Kant, that which distinguishes art from nature. Taking the reading of Davila's work further along a Kantian line, it might in turn be said that in the *After Image* paintings he has assigned to intuition the task of orienting a 'representational aspect' around the rational ideas he is dealing with, which complicates the schema: in a Kantian frame it might be argued that Davila has deployed the aesthetic idea as a means of supplanting a set of rational ideas into intuition, staging a collision between these two modes whilst retaining the unknowability of both.

A connection can be made between this invested unknowability, this acceptance of truth existing outside empirical knowledge, and what German literary theorist Uwe Wirth terms discursive stupidity. Drawing upon the thought of Friedrich Schlegel, Wirth has argued that the imagination has the power 'to gather with rapid, bold flight to the highest level of thought, and then suddenly spring to the opposite position.'³ In his reading, this sudden leap 'describes a form of ambivalence that, insofar as it perverts a thought into its opposite, produces either a sudden coherence or a sudden incoherence,' the former being an ingenious insight, and the latter stupidity or foolishness.⁴ Both genius and stupidity, then, constitute a leap away from higher reason, and the line between the two is not a clean one.

Philosophical debate around the concept of genius is deep and ongoing. The problems are, I would argue, more to do with the way genius is situated than with what can be thought of as the actual processes thereof. Genius did not always attach to originality. It shares etymological roots with both 'generate' and 'engender.'⁵ In its Latin usage, genius acts as a basic determinate for one's character: everyone is born with it.⁶ In the eighteenth century the concept of genius migrated from meaning one's 'guiding spirit' to the ability to invent and finally,



Juan Davila, *After Image, Kreon*, 2013, oil on canvas, 200 × 250 cm



with Kant, it became attached to artistic creativity specifically.⁷ Genius for Kant pertains exclusively to the ability to imbue artworks with aesthetic ideas. He makes a point of distinguishing this from 'an aping of *peculiarity* (originality) in general, for the sake of distancing oneself as far as possible from imitators, while the talent requisite to enable one to be at the same time *exemplary* is absent.'⁸ This sentence could be used to describe any number of post-Conceptual painting practices, for instance those of Christopher Wool or Michael Krebber, for whom originality lies not in producing exemplary representations, but in generating materially embodied residues of reflexivity, works that perform themselves to demonstrate their self-awareness within specific systems. In this regard I would argue that originality operates well beyond the province of the Kantian understanding of genius today. Genius has become a remnant of originality: though perhaps it could once have been said that they existed in symbiosis, this has shifted with the paradigm of how we handle information. Attendantly, the remit of the artist migrates away from production, toward recontextualisation and reflexivity. If genius can be said to exist in a contemporary context, it is emphatically on the back foot, no longer holding a monopoly over innovation. Perhaps, then, a repositioning of genius is timely, if it is to be understood as the condition under which one might render material an intuition to which no concept can be adequate—not by definition a grand, heroic space, but a space for thought outside rational knowledge—a negative presentation. As Jean-François Lyotard has written:

What is this negative presentation? It is neither the absence of presentation nor the presentation of nothingness. It is negative in the eyes of the sensible but at the same time is still a 'mode of presentation' (*eine Darstellungsart*). This mode is withdrawn, in retreat (*abgezogene*), and the presentation it furnishes consists in an *Absonderung*, a putting apart and to the side, an 'abs-traction'.⁹

Davila's *After Image* paintings constitute negative presentations insofar as their function is not to apprehend the absolute through representation, but to 'present that there is some absolute.'¹⁰ The after image might be read as 'stopping short' of a conventional sense of representation, though as abstractions the *After Image* paintings exceed themselves and their representational counterparts. I would argue that this is in fact their function: to fall short of conventional pictorial representation, in turn opening a space beyond it that might attain to the representation of an end's un-representability. We see here an echo

of Schlegel's sudden leap to a space in which there is a slippage between falling short of representation and exceeding it.

It is worth noting that Theodor Adorno has conceived of the artwork *per se* as after image, as a gesturing beyond the empirical framework: 'Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience.'¹¹ It is interesting to compare the respective addresses that Davila and Adorno have made to form. Davila has said 'The inner space of our mind and emotion is not really mapped by science. Artists camouflage it in a theory of form.'¹² Adorno, for his part, has written: 'Through form art participates in the civilization that it criticizes by its very existence. Form is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom.'¹³ These differing positions reveal something about one another: for Adorno, form can be critical, inherently outside and transformative, whereas for Davila, form acts as a false front for truth content. Though form is situated outside rational knowledge for both Davila and Adorno, what it embodies for Adorno, it only struggles to contain for Davila.

One of Davila's most recent works, *After Image, Kreon* (2013)* brings figuration and the abstract fields of the earlier *After Image* works into the same pictorial ground. In this painting Davila has created a literally disoriented scene. A retro light-fitting hanging from the upper edge of the painting suggests a conventionally described domestic space, but it is stranded as the only suggestion of such spatial logic amidst a field of fleshy mauves blotted with loose patches of colour. A sky blue clearing and a patch of leafy green in the centre offer a rough suggestion of landscape. The depiction of landscape is seldom fixed in Davila's paintings, but recurrently falls open, leaks and congeals, a reminder that the ordered, bucolic landscapes of Europe which colonists struggled to impose upon Australia have not defeated the nature of this place. Off to the right a man stands, torso bare, the lower half of his body dissolving into the abstract milieu. This, we can presume, is the titular Kreon, whom we might identify with Creon the King of Thebes, the successor to Oedipus's throne in Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone*.¹⁴ The relation between Antigone the daughter of Oedipus, and Creon her uncle, was interpreted by G.W.F. Hegel as a conflict between divine law (Antigone) and human law (Creon): Creon is 'the independent personification of law and the state.'¹⁵ Creon, as a figure seeking to act in accordance with a moral code even if it leads to fallout on an empirical level, shows us the limitations of the morally good. In keeping with the laws of man, he

prevents Antigone from giving her brother proper funeral rites because he died attacking the city. In seeking to adhere to the law of man above divine law, Creon makes of himself a wretch, a model for the contemporary politician: 'Creon arrives and makes a long speech justifying his actions. But in reality there is only a docile Chorus there to hear him, a collection of yes-men.'¹⁶

In his left hand, Davila's Kreon clutches a sheet of paper bearing handwriting, depicted in such a way as to be illegible to the viewer. The fingers of the same hand hold a smouldering cigarette. The feet of a second figure jut into the painting from the lower edge, as though the figure looks down into the painting from outside the frame. They could be seen as the feet of a squatting figure, a non-committal subject hesitating to take the final plunge into the painting, or as the feet of a man dangling from a gibbet. This has the effect of further disorienting the spatial logic of the composition, drawing it out towards the viewer's space and pivoting it on a horizontal axis.

At the centre of the painting is what appears to be a festering wound or a scab. In the upper left portion of the composition, upside down, the word 'sorry' is rendered in stylish yellow capitals on a background roughly two thirds black, one third white, which I take to reference the apology to the stolen generations of Australian Indigenous children, undertaken by Kevin Rudd in 2008 as one of his first prime ministerial acts. In relation to this sign of apology, the paper clutched by the figure of Kreon reads as a speech; we might then presume that this man, topless and smoking (how uncouth!), is preparing to make a public address. This promise of an address does not offer answers, but begs questions: to whom will his address be made, and what will he say? What, in turn, can we say of the Australian government's treatment of Indigenous people today? Though Rudd's apology was a potent and vital symbolic action, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, otherwise referred to as 'The Intervention,' that was put in place by John Howard in 2007 as one of his final prime ministerial acts, remains largely in place.¹⁷ Davila's reference to the apology, though not calling upon specific details of the situation, becomes a lens through which the painting as a whole can be read. In loading this painting with signifiers, though maintaining a disoriented and ambiguous relation between them, Davila evokes the complexity of Australia's cultural situation. It is not that any given element refers to something unspeakable, but that the painting as a whole refers to the un-addressed and un-expiated histories of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations that underwrite the Australian cultural outlook. Davila produced this painting in 2013, when Australia shifted

to a deeply conservative government. Its criticality relies on an awareness of its socio-political context, in terms of both locality and temporal specificity.

In Davila's work there is the sense of an intuitive underlying rule that governs a given convergence of imagery and gesture, though we may not perceive it consciously. Lyotard launched a polemic against the intermixing of disparate imagery in painting, which he saw as Trans-avant-gardist: 'Mixing on the same surface neo- or hyper-realist motifs and abstract, lyrical or conceptual motifs means that everything is equivalent because everything is good for consumption.'¹⁸ Interestingly, Lyotard sees this eclecticism in painting, this 'spirit of the supermarket shopper,' as 'deresponsibilizing the artists with respect to the question of the unrepresentable.'¹⁹ Davila's means of bringing together diverse imagery undoes this claim.

There is a moment when the aesthetic idea, successfully executed, begins to feed back into the meaning of what it refers to, to actually alter the meaning or possibilities of understanding for its subject. In my understanding it is an overarching function of Davila's painting practice to open and reopen the question of what feeds and underlies Australia's relation to history and cultural outlook in this way. In this sense Davila's work is critical in a Kantian sense: critical as opposed to dogmatic, insofar as it does not undertake 'to decide anything as to its object.'²⁰ One can see in Davila's practice how painterly approaches in which aesthetics play a role can operate beyond what might be understood as an aesthetic approach. Strategies of slippage and suggestiveness can be turned outward as a means of questioning agreed meanings in matters beyond painting itself. By inhabiting a space between coherence and incoherence to produce meaning, painting might trouble conventional perceptions. For painting, such spaces might be described as being possessed of critical ambiguity.

Juan Davila, *After Image. That is No Man*, 2010, oil on canvas 200 × 280 cm



- 1 Juan Davila, 'A conversation between Juan Davila and Kate Briggs,' in *Juan Davila: The Moral Meaning of Wilderness* (Canberra: ANU Drill Hall Gallery, 2010), 52.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142–143.
- 3 Uwe Wirth, *Diskursive Dummheit: Abduktion und Komik als Grenzphänomene des Verstehens* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 207, quoting Friedrich Schlegel, 'Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe,' vol. 8, ed. E. Behler and H. Eichner (München, Paderborn, Wien: Schöningh, 1964), 296; my translation.
- 4 Wirth, *Diskursive Dummheit*, 207; my translation.
- 5 Paul W. Bruno, *Kant's Concept of Genius* (London: Continuum, 2010), 9.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 15.
- 8 Ibid., 147.
- 9 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime,' in *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures, 2010), 151.
- 10 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), 126.
- 11 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 4.
- 12 Davila in *Juan Davila*, 52.
- 13 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 143.
- 14 There is also a character named Kreon who was created by DC Comics, a Green Lantern from the world of Tebis, who is distinguished by the gold prostheses he wears in place of his right arm and left eye. A warlord, Kreon is driven to end wars rather than start them. Today one might additionally identify Kreon as a company offering contemporary lighting solutions, and Creon as a drug that helps people with pancreatic disorders to digest food.
- 15 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1163.
- 16 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, bk. 7, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 266.
- 17 The Northern Territory National Emergency Response, which has since been replaced by the very similar Stronger Futures Policy, included the banning of alcohol, increased numbers of police in Indigenous communities, prohibition of pornography, introduction of night patrols in seventy-three communities, compulsory acquisition of townships held under the provisions of the Native Title Act, and the suspension of the permit system controlling access to Indigenous communities, among other measures. (Sourced from the Australian Government Department of Social Services website, accessed December 18, 2013.)
- 18 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 127.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 223.