

Jo Dennis

Town Hall Disco

December 8, 2023 — January 25, 2024

There exists a tendency to situate an object of waste somewhere between two extremes: as 'just a modest thing' by which to measure some process or change or more spectacularly, as a thing through which to experience a full blown revelation. The former sees waste as a mere outcome or a product of time (its time has 'run out', it has 'had its day', 'past it'). The latter elevates waste as the necessary condition for spiritual, artistic and political change - that is, it helps form and articulate time itself.

— William Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

The oscillation between control and its absence lingers with us from the moment we grasp the structures that govern our lives. In *Town Hall Disco*, artist Jo Dennis uses abstraction to skilfully engage in this interplay of control, crafting works that brim with excitement and angst. The title, derived from one of Dennis' paintings, catapults us back to the initial social interactions of young adulthood—a time defined by teenage fervour and the desire to regulate the entropic nature of existence. Comprising works straddling the realms of painting and sculpture, these pieces feature surfaces that encapsulate history, embodying a visual language rich with the emotional weight of memories and a profound sense of place, whether real or imagined.

Jo Dennis, raised in a military environment with her father serving in the British Armed Forces, employs materials infused with both personal and political symbolism. Throughout the exhibition, many of her works are constructed using surplus military tent fabric as well as repurposed wood and metal. These materials, bearing marks of their prior use, carry a history that invites imaginative speculation. The military tent fabric is characterized by utility-type fastenings and sewn elements that influence the composition and painting technique. Leveraging the inherently three-dimensional nature of assemblage, Dennis builds upon the discourse of this movement pioneered by artists like Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg. She explores "*the way 'overlooked stuff' could be collected together to be reimaged into something abstract and narrative in the same moment*" and delves into how meaning is infused into the ready-made. Dennis finds it intriguing "*how we create a sense of belonging or connection to places of ruination and dereliction.*" In this aesthetic exploration, Dennis' work intertwines with the emotional resonance found materials carry, both personally and politically.

In *Town Hall Disco*, preservation and destruction infiltrate every work, embodying Dennis' fascination with blending opposing concepts. For Dennis, abstraction isn't separate from representation; rather, impermanence is recognized as leaving indelible marks on both objects and individuals. Her keen interest in ruins, a longstanding metaphor for human mortality in art history, serves as a potent reminder of life's fragility and the inevitable passage of time. Within this context, these "waste items" carry socio and geographical markers. *Home Front*, a large sculpture of sewn fabrics from her series *Absent Without Leave*, pays homage to womanhood, home, and shelter. It stands tall with painted military fabrics supported by a metal structure, creating a facade-like appearance reminiscent of London's historic

buildings where facades are left intact yet demolished on the inside. Despite its scale, the piece exudes fragility, seemingly on the verge of disassembling. In her exploration, Dennis delves into the inherent sensibilities of these structures, remnants, residue, and scars, a compelling reminder of the past. The concept of “home front,” originating from military jargon, refers to the activities of the civilian population during wartime. Dennis ventures into an inquiry concerning the stability and continual transformation of bodies, objects, and architecture. Amid the overarching themes of loss, decay, and the female body, *Home Front* vividly describes a ruined house, metaphorically narrating the female body’s ravages by time and childbirth.

For Dennis, each work functions as a “container,” embodying archetypes and expected behaviours. In *Twins*, a sculptural painting of folded fabrics symbolizes control and fluidity, reminiscent of feminine archetypes and relationships. The shape the fabric takes develops with each individual section of the piece, seemingly being held as a form of caring support. Another work in the exhibition, *The Sill Plate*, features an energetic painting composed as a diptych. The title is derived from the architectural term for the bottom horizontal member of a wall or building, to which vertical members are attached. Represented in the painting by the thick red band near the bottom, it serves as a kind of foundation for the rest of the piece. Dennis explains, “*In using the word ‘foundation,’ I refer to the construction sense of the term, alluding to the built environment.*” In all of Dennis’ sculptural paintings, the material contents slowly reveal themselves. The steel frameworks act as the support structure/control, while the folded, unravelling fabric serves as the more fluid and emotional aspect, conjured by memories of her personal experience.

In *Town Hall Disco*, Dennis employs diverse methods in a dynamic dance, including welding, drilling, cutting, building, and disassembling. From pouring, dripping, scraping, and rubbing to spraying, she engages with a variety of materials, even those that naturally repel each other. This intentional exploration seeks spontaneity or, at the very least, the illusion of it. Found objects and studio waste serve as catalysts for work addressing emotional connections to places and the transformation of surfaces and objects within the framework of temporality. Dennis navigates this artistic journey with a youthful spirit, reminiscent of the first dance steps in a town hall disco.

Jo Dennis (born in 1973 in Forres, Scotland) holds an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London (2022) and completed a BA in Fine Art and Contemporary Critical Theory at Goldsmiths College, London (2002). Recent solo and group exhibitions include *Matter*, Flowers Gallery, London (2023); *Ares*, curated by OHS Projects for the Art in Conflict series at Cromwell Palace, London (2023); *Absent without Leave*, Sid Motion Gallery (2022, solo); *Autonomous Zone*, Sid Motion Gallery, London (2021, solo); among others. Residencies include Cyprus College of Art (2022) and Castello Di Monticello d’Alba (2018). Dennis is a recipient of a Grants for the Arts from Arts Council England. Her work is part of numerous international collections, including the Soho House Collection, among others. The artist lives and works in London.

Town Hall Disco will run from December 8, 2023 to January 25, 2024. Opening hours are Wednesday through Saturday from 13:00 to 18:00 hrs.