

ARTTHROB

FEATURE REVIEW NEWS ARCHIVE WHERE WE'RE GOING SHOP SEARCH



Nolan Oswald Dennis, *the last rhodesian (interspace south)*, *the last rhodesian (interspace north)*, 2018. Coloured pencil, washi tape, ink, embossed label, marker on cotton paper, 61 x 45.7 cm

The Grammar of Suffering: Nolan Oswald Dennis's 'Options'

Nolan Oswald Dennis

By Ashraf Jamal

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Every now and then, inside the divisive declamatory din, I encounter an artist one can listen to while looking at a work. Nolan Oswald Dennis is such an artist. Studying a pencil drawing my first thought was of writhing worms, the second of Dimitri Tsafendas, who, during his trial claimed that a tapeworm in his head made him kill the 'Honourable Dr Hendrick Frensch Verwoerd', the architect of Apartheid. Dismissed as insane, consigned to life imprisonment, the nagging matter of the worm was never clinically resolved. Judge Beyer's conclusion – on October the 20th, 1966 – was striking: 'I can as little try a man who has not at least the makings of a rational mind as I could try a dog or an inert implement ... He is a meaningless creature!'

One tends to dismiss what one cannot understand. To me however, Tsafendas is no meaningless creature. And if that worm returns now, as I face Dennis's works, it is because therein – concealed beneath the surfaces we hysterically fetishize – there is matter of the gut, entrails, viscera, which, in Dennis's drawings, assume centre-stage.

In the artist's words, he is 'trying to work with [the language] of some internal biological opening', some wound or rupture, some haemorrhage. The artist's approach to this rupture is always stealthy, for the wound – which erupts-heals-erupts again – is not only physical, it is psychological.

According to Dennis, this 'wound' his art examines centres on the underdevelopment of Africa by imperial forces, and, subsequently, the desire and the will to right this damage. We are not only dealing with the damaged innards of the colonial and post-colonial subject but also with the damage done to the very body of Africa.

This is a herculean optic, but one senses that Dennis is not predictably exercised by revolutionary zeal – the reactive and prescriptive desire to reconstruct a perceived damage or reaffirm an imagined future –

as he is exercised by the desire to exist and express himself inside a psychological and bodily dilemma. What interests the artist is immanence – the wracked state of an inconsolable present which, emotionally and mentally, one cannot ignore.

Which is why, to my mind, Dennis's works read as x-rays, or diagrams, or, in the artist's words – 'cosmographs'. This is because Dennis is as interested in the thing-in-itself – the bodily and psychological chaos afoot today – as he is interested in a provisional dialogue with the existential threat it poses. Hence the title for his exhibition – 'Options' – and the prepositional rather than the propositional approach which he assumes, an approach which is neither decisive nor glibly circumspect. Rather, Dennis invites us *inside* the innards of a dilemma – regarding oppression, regarding change – which compels us to suspend judgement. An approach, frankly, which I find immensely reassuring in these pig-headed times.

Nolan Oswald Dennis, *after-world (schema)*, 2018. Coloured pencil, washi tape, embossed label, ink, marker on paper, 105 x 190 cm

Three words scored into a coiled field – which I've interpreted as a cropped detail of the human gut – read as follows: 'history tragedy strategy'. If 'history' supposes the nauseating reflux of the eternal return – the notion that as a species, a civilisation, we are condemned to repeat ourselves – then tragedy, the fallout of this repetition, supposes 'disaster, calamity, misery, agony, dysfunction'. However, to avert what seems to be inevitable, Dennis proposes a *strategic engagement* with this monstrous problem of repetition – the promise of a 'policy, programme, conspiracy, formulation' – which could potentially up-end the nihilistic circuit or end-game in which we find ourselves.

Dennis is no ideologue. He is not telling us how to solve a problem which, today, appears under the alluring yet flawed belief in decolonisation. Rather, the artist wills us to engage with what he calls the 'bleeding discontinuous body', or the interface of 'entropy-empathy', or the 'critical condition' in which bodies are processed 'in the cut'.

It is the grammar of suffering which intrigues Dennis. For him liberatory discourse is all too sententious, all too causal. This yearning to solve a problem, which is built into language as it is built into the despairing human body, dangerously supposes that meaning and a fullness of being is achieved by adhering to the law of the sentence – subject-verb-object. For Dennis, however, this law is far too simplistic, worse, it is dangerously delusional, for it supposes that the damaged wreaked by imperial history can and must declaratively be corrected.

But what if the past-present-future is not sequential? What if all of time exists only in the arrested present? How, then, can one move forward? How can one solve the problems which afflict us? One does so, if I understand Dennis correctly, by embracing the immanent and unresolved nature of an oppressed being. The artist's x-ray's, then, his worm holes as it were, are attempts, or prepositions, or options which allow us to tenuously engage with the difficulties that affront and confront us.

It is the subtlety of Dennis's inquiry which, as stated at the outset, which I find particularly reassuring. To categorise the show as merely conceptual is to miss the mark because the body which he addresses – the black body in pain in particular – is not one which can be solved by reason alone.

Nolan Oswald Dennis, *working through (nand gate)* (Detail), 2018.

The brilliant novelist, K. Sello Duiker, well understood the limits of reason and its dark messianic cohort, belief, and the bloated sententious discourse which underpins it. 'We're not all God's children', he writes in *The quiet violence of dreams*, 'In here God doesn't exist. I am the forgotten who lies rotting in a barrel of fermenting apples. God never heard my cries. I never saw the light or touched on something sacred inside myself. We're not all mystics who can extract beauty from our pain. Some

of us are just born with too much corruption to ever survive it'.

The genius of Duiker's writing is that it asks us to inhabit difficulty rather than pre-emptively imagine its overcoming. Alas, living in a boiled down universe enthralled to excessive certainties, we are in danger of losing any ability to live inside of this difficulty. Statement art, riddled with deception, fantasy, largess, and hubris, will not save us – and Nolan Oswald Dennis well knows this.

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