

Jennings Kerr

Imbi Davidson
House of Cards

*All afternoon it rained, then
such power came down from the clouds
on a yellow thread,
as authoritative as God is supposed to be.
When it hit the tree, her body
opened forever.*

- RAIN by Mary Oliver

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of my brother who passed on 1st March 2022 during the apocalyptic floods in the Northern Rivers. - Imbi Davidson

House of Cards is a show that deals with tragedy and loss, chaotic natural disaster and the uncertainties brought on when tackling such turmoil. Despite the difficulties faced by the artist, we see paintings bursting with colour and vibrance, surfaces that seem to act like portals or passageways to calmer and more stable footing. These paintings possess a frenzy of marks, intuitive gestures loaded with passion but composition and colour brought together with great control and consideration. The paintings are a way for the artist to navigate rough seas and find comfort in connecting to her heritage. Davidson's studio is based on the coastal edge of the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. This area has seen devastating flooding and destruction. The day the flood hit the region Davidson also suffered the tragic loss of her brother due to complications from haemophilia, a genetic blood disorder carried by the male lineage of her family. These paintings come intuitively, they are a means of connection to her heritage with a tender touch. They mourn and speak to loss and chaos but move us forward, through and away from it. The compositions have found more structure, not rigid but perhaps soft gateways to move through.

The work 'Steps to Valhalla I-IV', 2022 is a painting across four panels that as its title suggests is representative of Davidson's Viking heritage but more importantly is a piece in memoriam of the passing of her brother. Valhalla or the 'hall of the fallen' is said to host an afterlife that was the envy of any Viking warrior. Here the fallen are able to continue their battles of valour and then be healed to enjoy feasts of the evening. I see the piece as a 'memento mori' but more importantly as a visual feast and celebration of Davidson's connection to her brother and her family. The paintings in this show are a channeling of emotional strain as a means to process this loss. Davidson states;

"The studio has been a singular, solo site of personal solace, as our town, region and family come to terms with such devastation and grief. The act of painting in such times has been tough, uncomfortable and at times challenging. I almost gave up. These works speak to that place of vulnerability that feels as shaky as a house of cards. The feeling that at any minute the world might break, the land move or crumble, reminding us of our inherent fragility in the face of life."

Despite the raw emotion and energy of mark we find a very bright and uplifting palette in this show. Ironically a little less muddy without the browns of the previous show. Here these works feel fresh and bright. Pathways, steps, windows of light woven together with control of translucent and opaque passages in the compositions. The paintings are still wild and free but they are somehow softer and maybe more open while also continuing the use of what the artist states as recycled paint as her material. This is an ongoing constraint or implied control that sets a cohesion across the series. Here we see a slightly higher key of colour and with reds and intermingling blues reminding us of the show's impetus.

Writing about this show feels a little strange, the artist is unable to attend once again due to the chaos and uncertainty in the world. I look at the works and am reminded of Davidson's positivity. The vibrancy and marks are so appealing and full to the brim with calligraphic energy. This show feels like the Viking boat is clearing the treacherous stormy seas and coming into port in the sun, ready to feast in the great halls with family and friends. I feel so proud to present a show that has such soul and power, paintings that say something about living through hard times, testing experiences and taking them on the chin and getting on with it. I have seen strength of character in all that Davidson has faced over the last year and see a wonderful authenticity in the painting. These marks are coming from somewhere deep down, they are a way through all the devastation, a way to hold the hands of her ancestors and to sing in memory of those lost. It is distinctive in mark, celebratory in colour and gesture but most importantly these works have come out of struggle and pain, mud and blood, but push us forward and remind us that the seas will settle. I was blown away by Imbi Davidson's first show at the gallery last year and I have been caught in the swell of emotion in this room. This is great painting in so many ways but these works needed to be painted, the swirls and push and pull on the surfaces tell a great story of survival and perseverance.

James Kerr, 2022