

Susan Dobson: *Temporary Architectures*

Colour by Numbers

*Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black.*¹ Henry Ford

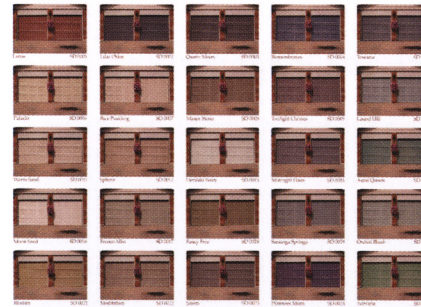
Susan Dobson's photographic art has long concerned itself with the built environment of everyday life. In particular, it considers the tension between uniformity and individualism: how different lives are lived in spaces built to the same pattern.

In her 2002 series, *Paint Palettes*, Susan Dobson produced five panels in which she groups paint colours available from various commercial distributors. In each panel, the artist digitally inserted the colours into the same photograph of a pair of garage doors, repeated in a grid of 65 – or, more precisely, two grids, one of 25 and one of 40, respectively above and below a title text: *The Black Collection*, *The Gothic Collection*, *The Heritage Collection*, *The Romance Collection* and *The White Collection*.

Dobson presents each palette like a page of swatches in a paint catalogue. By calling each a “collection,” a term she borrowed from a paint company's marketing campaign, she links it to couture, suggesting that the paints

are garments, easily substituted when mood or weather changes. The qualifying terms evoke specific cultural associations. “Black” and “White” suggest classicism and restraint – the house-paint equivalent of the wedding gown and “little black dress.” “Romance” delivers a bouquet of intense floral accents. “Heritage” conveys cultural conservatism and a vague assertion of continuity, without the demands of actual stewardship: the discomforts of maintaining something old. “Gothic” sounds more daring, offering a novelistic *frisson* of the sublime. The actual colours in that palette are murkily subdued browns and olives, never approaching the kohl-rimmed excess of the Goth.

Henry Ford, who ridiculed the notion of chromatic choice, is famous for the intensive industrial application of assembly-line methods and for the economic principle – known as Fordism – that industrial workers should receive wages sufficiently high to allow them to purchase the products they produce, thus fuelling an ever-expanding consumer market and self-repeating cycle of supply and demand. Of course, like any perpetual-motion machine, Fordist economics soon falls victim to entropy in the absence of external inputs, as friction (in the form of profit-taking) slows down the mechanism. In the post-war boom years of the 1920s, however, it allowed Ford to launch the private automobile (the Model T) as the engine, both metaphorically and literally,



THE HERITAGE COLLECTION



Samples approximate the actual paint colour.

The Heritage Collection, 2002



THE ROMANCE COLLECTION



Samples approximate the actual paint colour.

The Romance Collection, 2002

of North American consumer society.²

Car manufacturers, including Ford, soon learned to offer cars in a wide range of colours and finishes. By the 1950s, that heroic decade of consumer excess, they had introduced the concept of planned obsolescence through yearly style changes, as a way of inducing people to trade in their old models more frequently.³

Dobson's use of commercial paint palettes will remind Halifax viewers, in particular, of Garry Neill Kennedy's wall paintings of the 1990s. In works such as *The Middle East (And Beyond)* (1992), *The Four Seasons* (1996, 1998) and *An American History Painting* (1996), Kennedy juxtaposed commercial paint colours chosen for their identifying names, creating, by a textual method, chromatic abstractions of cultural conventions. Both artists mine the colour palettes of commercial paints for hidden social texts, but Dobson highlights their superficiality and interchangeability.

Each individual colour in *Paint Palettes*, like the palettes themselves, is named. *The White Collection*, for example, includes "Luminescence," "Pearly Gates" and "Breathless." This exercise in wishful thinking attempts to persuade us that this shade of off-white is not only distinguishable from its neighbours, but pregnant with a distinct perfume of emotional associations. The joke here and in *The Black Collection* is that there

is actually no difference whatsoever in the colours, yet the artist has found that viewers perceive subtle differences where they do not exist. The other colour palettes do vary, ranging from bland to vibrantly pretty, but in the end they are all just garage doors – the same five pairs of garage doors, times 65. And all the doors are closed.

Getting Nowhere Fast

It is no accident that Dobson's *Paint Palettes* are displayed on garage doors. The automobile culture that promises individual freedom and self-expression paradoxically binds consumers to the wage labour required to pay for their gadgets. Furthermore, it imposes a deadening uniformity on the suburban landscape, in which humanity and aesthetics are resolutely subservient to the needs of the car, and the features that delight the eye are literally flattened to make way for more asphalt.

The second suite of works in the present exhibition, *Retail*, consists of large mural images of big-box stores, marooned in parking-lot wastelands, with the façade of each store greyed out. The resulting void reflects the spiritual emptiness of our built environment, furnished with a transient architecture that is both dull and monolithic.

Reduced to a grey silhouette, some of the buildings remain recognisable by their outline shapes: *The Home Depot*, for example, or *Sleep Country* or *Chuck E Cheese*. The three *Smart*

Centre images share a common horizon line but have contrasting crenellations along their rooflines. *Sears* offers the most severely minimal of the images: a single horizontal bar of grey separates heaven from parking lot, while vertically interrupted by a single light pole.

British-born Canadian artist Robin Collyer has explored similar landscapes in photographic works from the mid 1990s. Collyer digitally removed all text – notably, that of commercial signage – from his images of banal strip-mall streetscapes, reducing them to the non-verbal iconography of branded colours and graphics. In *Yonge St., Willowdale #4* (1995), we know the nameless Tim Hortons by its stripes.

In Dobson's *Retail*, it is the buildings that are silenced, reduced to silhouettes of a middle grey. They occupy an ambiguous zone between presence and absence, glowing like otherworldly visitors on their (also grey) asphalt landing pads. Dobson's chromatic choice recalls the convention of 18% grey card, used by photographers to calibrate their light meters and ensure proper exposure. A surface in 18% grey should always photograph correctly when automatically metered. Of course, in this case, there is nothing on the virtually rendered surface to photograph. The

buildings are not so much negated as effaced, withdrawn from view as if behind a screen, leaving snow, a straggle of forlorn plantings, a pair of trademarked waste receptacles (in *Harvey's*), or a strewing of garbage (in *Value Village*), between itself and the viewer. In *Quiznos*, Dobson leaves a trace of the original façade visible, but only as a reflection in the undulating smear of a puddle across the asphalt.

As I have noted elsewhere, the architecture of the mall derives in part from that of the World's Fair.⁴ That architecture provided an important prototype, not only in its technologies of spectacle but also in its temporary nature. Whereas, as recently as 60 years ago, the façades of public and corporate buildings such as post offices, factories and banks physically incorporated coats of arms, company names, even heroic and allegorical figures, such cultural messages are now conveyed by signage and false fronts, essentially ephemeral and easily replaced as the IKEA becomes a car dealership or a call centre, the Walmart a community college. The buildings themselves are flat-roofed sheds on concrete pads, whose character, institutional, commercial or industrial, cannot be deduced from their structure.

Their means of architectural expression

Images, next panel, clockwise from top left: *Retail: Bank of Montreal, Chuck E Cheese, Sleep Country, The Beer Store, Mark's Work Wearhouse, Williams*, 2008



Ode to Fancy SD 0313



Wuthering Heights SD 0314



Mystery Mansion SD 0315



Quasimodo SD 0318



Legacy SD 0319



Icon SD 0320



House of the Past SD 0323



Messenger SD 0324



Old English Baron SD 0325

The Gothic Collection, 2002 (detail)

are essentially theatrical – flimsy instruments of stagecraft that allow us the illusion that this steel and concrete barn is a chateau or a village market. Like theatres, these structures are chiefly concerned with illusory space, providing only the minimum external cues necessary to find the entrance from the parking lot.

Dobson has grouped the images in *Retail* so that the horizon is aligned across groups of images. That, and their foursquare, face-on orientation in the photographs, emphasises their monumentality even as Dobson redacts away all distinguishing features other than their profiles, seen always against the clear blue sky of consumer optimism. Like temples of some alien cult, they both command and deny our gaze.

Of course, these cancelled storefronts also suggest bankruptcy, recalling the ubiquitous sight of the abandoned strip mall or insolvent former chain store. In both *Retail* and *Paint Palettes*, Dobson has consciously engaged issues of ephemerality. In the latter, she deliberately presents images of garage doors and driveways that are soiled and imperfect. She sees the paint colours as “cosmetic disguise for architectural decline,” something that “ties into my interest in box stores, which are, of course, shoddily constructed buildings with a limited life span.”⁵

As I write this essay, the effects of the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States have triggered a seismic upheaval in financial institutions, threatening the middle-class home ownership whose fondest fantasies provide the raw material of *Paint Palettes*. That crisis may come to be seen as a subset of the far vaster crisis of a collapsing oil economy and its associated environmental catastrophe. Dobson’s ghostly big-box stores glisten like a digital mirage, prescient images of a doomed landscape.

Robin Metcalfe
Director/Curator
Saint Mary’s University Art Gallery

1 Ford made this famous remark about the Model T in 1909. It was subsequently published in Chapter IV of his autobiography; Henry Ford with Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc, 1922). Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7213>

2 See Jim Stanford, *Economics for Everyone: A Short Guide to the Economics of Capitalism* (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), pp. 158-159.

3 See Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

4 This section draws in part on my earlier essay, “Specular Towers: Architecture and the Aerial View,” *Prefix Photo* Number 7, May 2003, pp. 16-23.

5 E-mail conversation with the artist, 7 October 2008.