

Dear Patricia, Dear Dinah

Launching speech for 'Faces and Flowers—poems by Dinah Hawken, paintings by Patricia France', Mahara Gallery, 20 September 2024

The first word of the first poem in FACES AND FLOWERS is, not surprisingly perhaps, the word 'dear'. A lot rides upon this word. Dinah sets forth: 'Dear Patricia...' In fact, the whole book pivots on this particular 'dear' or 'dearest'—a statement of affinity, closeness, affection. The word is a bringing together, the establishment of contact between writer and artist, as well as between the book's creators and the reader. We too are drawn in by it, this word which hints at what we hold dear, what we value and cherish.

And then there is the word 'endearment'—an expansion of, or elaboration upon, 'dear'. This word lodges in the depths of FACES AND FLOWERS, at its whirring, sparking, humming, singing heart. Friendship and its expression are a pervasive subject of these images and words. Kinship is also part of the equation, in a number of ways. Patricia, who died in 1995, was Dinah's first cousin once removed. So the two are kin in genetic terms.... But, more importantly in terms of the present enterprise, they are kindred spirits.

For Dinah, poetry has always been a conversation rather than a broadcast or monologue. Her voice is itself a summoning forth of a great many voices—drawn from the natural world as from the human sphere. In her many nature-inspired poems, and in the aptly titled OH THERE YOU ARE TUI!, Dinah speaks directly to the natural world of which we, humans, are but one, not particularly well-functioning part. Dinah asks questions of the world and the role we play in it. She writes: 'We have all had our breaking / to do. Breaking down, breaking out, breaking away.' Yet, despite its tenacity and occasional

ferocity, Dinah's poetry has always been fundamentally an act of reconstruction, an act of preservation and nurture.

Communicating across great distances by way of a sonnet sequence is the crux of Dinah's contribution to *FACES AND FLOWERS*. In this book, she is talking affectionately, concernedly with someone now gone from the physical world. In this regard, Dinah's poetry executes a perfect arc, the new sequence taking us back to her first book *IT HAS NO SOUND AND IS BLUE*, which also featured a series of conversational sonnets written across immense distance—in that case to a friend Bev, here in Aotearoa, while Dinah was living in New York.

Here at the Mahara Gallery, we witness the poems coming into play as a vital part of the afterlife of Pat France's paintings. Here we find words and images in magnificent proximity to each other, as they are in the wonderfully proportioned, thoughtfully designed book.

There is so much to be said about Pat France's paintings, the interplay of faces—with enigmatic, camera-like aperture-eyes—and flowers. Her paintings *almost* shouldn't work, with their softened areas, dissolving faces, their smears of paint and unstable arrangements. What is it that holds them together? They have no robust placement in the nation's art history to prop them up, nor any compositional or optical tricks. There's something inexplicable... A state of grace maybe, a state of disarming humility, a metaphysical cast... Something art history doesn't account for. I'll leave each of you to find your own answer.

Pat France's paintings are gorgeously, unapologetically 'literary' in their register... they hint at short stories, vignettes and poems. In my mind's eye, Pat's paintings have much of Katherine Mansfield in them, so much Janet Frame. I also find, amongst their assembled company the warm, waving figure of Barbara Anderson. Not to mention Dinah Hawken too — all a part of this gracious, vulnerable yet resolute sisterhood.

Inversely, I now find that Dinah's poetry has much Patricia France in it. And there are other benevolent painterly spirits in attendance too—Frances Hodgkins, Rita Angus, Edith Collier, Joanna Paul...all of them native birds singing in Dinah Hawken's tree.

Dinah is a 'necessary' poet, and this latest book is more than necessary, it is essential. Like Patricia France, she argues for quiet, lyrical attentiveness in opposition to the imposing noise and hype of a world that feels as if it is losing the ability to respond, to reflect. In this book the shared creative life of Dinah and Pat now finds a congenial and regenerative home, as it does in the exhibition, beautifully curated by Vicki Robson. If the world beyond wasn't so imposingly problematic and invasive, we might think that we have arrived at a tentative state of almost-heaven.

I will conclude with Pat France's flowers—a conscious manifestation of endearment, of love, as they are of mourning and remembrance. And, never far from them, the painted faces of the beloved, spinning, ferris-wheeling with life and potentiality, a part of what Dinah calls 'the cyclical spirit of the planet'.

She goes on to quote T. S. Eliot, 'The dancers are all gone under the hill...' But, in this book and exhibition, the dancers have come back up again. Painter and poet, poet and painter, endlessly spiralling together. Dinah and Patricia. Dear and dearest. This is what Girl Power really looks like—'a harder, more delicate dream,' to quote one of Dinah's earlier poems, 'opening slowly / out towards a place where each of us can breathe'.

Gregory O'Brien