

Installation at gbk: *Cover up*, 2006, synthetic fabric, 1020 x 550 cm
Far left: *Cover up #3*, 2006, Mulberry paper, 138 x 70 cm unframed
Left: *Cover up #4*, 2006, Mulberry paper, 138 x 70 cm unframed
Inside: *Cover up #7*, 2006, Mulberry paper, 138 x 70 cm unframed
All photos: Paul Green

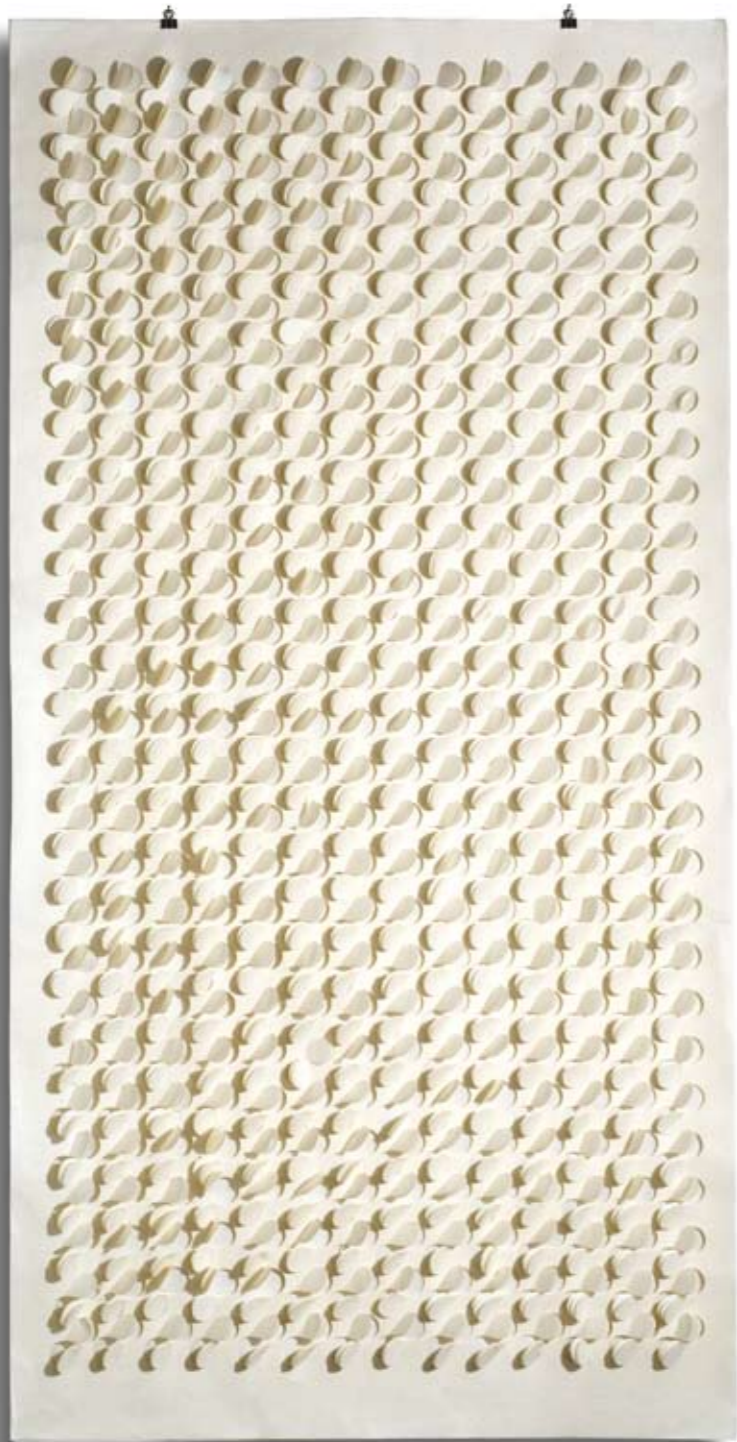


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Debra Dawes



Cover Up / Terror Wars

In the last ten years we have all come to well-understand the meaning of the phrase 'to dog whistle'. It is a very apt term to describe a range of hidden messages enunciated clearly but inaudibly by politicians. Debra Dawes has revealed to us in these works the visual equivalent of the dog-whistle: camouflage.

There have been some very good exponents of the dog-whistle. Peter Reith was the Minister for Industrial Relations who conspired with right-wing ideologues to smash unionised labour on the waterfronts in 1996. He called this "industry reform". The hounds could hear the true message and responded.

Phillip Ruddock abolished many procedural safeguards for refugees and asylum seekers and made an art of incarcerating innocent men, women and children who had committed no crime. He called this "border protection". The dogs knew what he really meant.

John Howard talked of 'the type of people who would throw their children overboard' and the dogs heard it clearly as a signal to keep callous and dangerous Muslims out of Australia.

Politicians can disguise their true message by draping it in rhetoric. The thinly disguised deception only really works when the disguise can be seen through so that the true message can be properly identified by the audience it is meant for. The message shouldn't be camouflaged too thoroughly because then the deception might completely fool the intended audience.

Governments of all types in Australia and in most western democracies have been camouflaging their policies on terrorism for the last five years. In an attempt to convince people that they are working towards the creation of a stable, just and secure political environment, governments have declared a seemingly never ending 'war on terror'. In reality what they are doing is establishing the basis for a never-ending state of fear where supposedly only those in power have the ability to keep people safe and secure. John Howard has won government comfortably several times already using the 'Politics of Fear'. The 2007 Federal Election will continue this pattern. It will be fought in the context of a thinly camouflaged 'War on Muslims'.

Artists should be familiar with conceptual camouflage – they invented it. A French academic painter introduced military camouflage in 1915. He was probably influenced by Picasso's geometric Cubist forms. Picasso thought so.

In Gertrude Stein's autobiography, cunningly called *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, she related an event in the early months of World War I, when she and Toklas, accompanied by Picasso, were strolling in Paris on the Boulevard Raspail: "All of a sudden down the street came some big cannon, the first any of us had seen painted, that is camouflaged. Picasso stopped, he was spellbound. He said, 'it is we that have created that'. And he was right, he had. From Cezanne through him they had come to that"¹.

I've spent a long time observing how Debra Dawes constructs space in her paintings as social commentary. Every day I look at her *Abstract Painting, Two Objects* (1988/89). Like much of her work made over the last two decades it is a minimal grid pattern, yet is not just about optical relationships. I also look daily at one of her Moree landscapes, *Lifting the Sky* (1999), a homage to the place where her Irish great-grandmother raised Debra's grandmother.

Debra's work often also incorporates political messages, sometimes overtly, such as the significant major reconciliation statement *Unfinished Business* shown at S. H. Ervin Gallery in 1998, and sometimes more subtly, such as in *Starlite* (1993), one of my all-time favourite Australian paintings. Ross Gibson described *Starlite* as "sly politics"². It looks at first blush like a decorative rendering of a suburban 'bessa-block' wall, but, on closer viewing it stimulates the viewer to analyse middle-Australian life, culture and values.

So too the works around us stem from Debra's oeuvre. They deal with abstraction. There is a grid. There is an optical effect. But there is a much more important thread. These are works that are meant to challenge. They contain barely disguised political statements.

The camouflage net is an obvious, almost literal, metaphor for a deception – a cover up. The 'deception' is a political ethos shaping public life and popular culture. Camouflage masks actions and disguises responsibilities that are attached to every act a person does. The cover up is the ingrained pattern of political denial. "I wasn't told". "I never knew that". "It was the AWB not me".

But if you bother looking, you can see through it. If you go past your first impression its true pattern will reveal itself.

I have been involved in a hands-on way as a 'warrior' in the War on Terror. I have defended a number of people charged with terrorism and others who have been interrogated by ASIO.

Thus far all of the people questioned under the new ASIO powers and the vast majority of those charged under the new Australian Terror Laws have all been Muslims. Offenders who might have easily been charged with terrorism offences but whose profiles do not fit the stereotypical jihadist renegade have avoided prosecution for terrorism. For instance, Alan Jones and other 'Kings of the Airwaves' incited hatred and encouraged the rioters who came to Cronulla in a manner which comfortably satisfies several serious anti-terrorist laws, but no one has seriously suggested that these media 'Kings' should be held criminally responsible. Meanwhile, the recent response to the Mufti's ill-considered and offensive comments was a tidal wave of outrage and calls from Ms Goward (still a supposedly independent, senior Government official) for Sheik al Hilali's prosecution for inciting rapists. Labor's Homeland Security spokesperson joined in the chorus for him to be charged.

The double standard is easily perceived. It is not well camouflaged. Meanwhile a picture is emerging that the Government is prepared to utilise its legislative armoury against terrorist suspects in a way that is quite exceptional. The combination of ASIO's coercive powers, the broad definition of terrorist offences, the extremely harsh conditions of custody in which terrorist suspects are held and the running commentary of politicians and the media about the arrest, prosecution and detention of terrorist suspects are all combining to create very difficult conditions for the trials of these people.

These cases are increasingly utilising provisions that enable evidence to be heard in camera, the use of pseudonyms, the suppression of evidence from publication, the use of witnesses being held in overseas prisons — including prisoners held without charge under severe security legislation and evidence extracted from suspects being held in conditions that would be regarded as illegal or tyrannical in Australia. Now the prospect is looming of non-security cleared defence lawyers being excluded from these cases. Several of my colleagues have been targeted by the Commonwealth for special treatment. A solicitor in Melbourne who acts for terrorist suspects has been baselessly accused several times by his opponents of contempt of court. Last year he gave an interview to a community radio station. He was highly critical of Mr Ruddock and ASIO. The next day the radio station was raided and the tape confiscated. For those who dare to present an alternative viewpoint on these issues there are risks.

There has been a 'whole-of-government' approach to these terrorist prosecutions. Politicians feel free to

stand side by side with police at press conferences heralding the arrests of suspects. The media attention is intense and often raucous.

The laws are rapidly evolving and can change in the course of the case. If the government is unhappy about the way the law is being interpreted, it will be changed – sometimes overnight – in a way which seemingly overcomes perceived difficulties with the prosecution case. The recent amendments to the Telecommunications Interception Act which allow the telephone services of lawyers to be tapped in order to intercept the telephone conversations of suspects have done nothing to ease the suspicions of the legal profession that they might well be the subject of ASIO attention whilst they are acting for people charged with terrorist related offences.

This is the post 9/11 reality. People can be detained in this country now for weeks on end without even a suspicion that they have committed a crime. You can be forced to answer questions, be tracked by electronic monitoring devices and have your telephones tapped all on the basis that, although no one suspects you have committed a crime or even are likely to commit a crime, it is, in various ways, in the national interest to do so.

All Australian Governments – state, federal and territory – have similar provisions. Most of these laws are unnecessary to protect us from the threat of terrorist attacks. Our police, intelligence services and criminal justice system were all very well equipped to deal with terrorist crimes before September 11, 2001. The laws' real utility, though, is as a political signal. They are the camouflage draped over the governments' real message. The unspoken signal is this: Australia is at risk. Be scared. There are violent and rapacious Muslims out there, driven by fundamentalist zealotry. Our Australian lifestyle is at risk. You could be raped or killed. Your government can save you. We will wage a successful war here and overseas that will lead to peace. But we need your votes. And be careful of those who question this new orthodoxy. They are themselves very dangerous.

So, be careful of these works and be careful of Debra Dawes. She is challenging us to look more closely. Don't be fooled by the camouflage. See through it.

*Phillip Boulten SC
Transcript of the public address given at the opening of Cover up,
8 November 2006.*

1. G. Stein *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, 1962, Penguin, 84-85.
2. R. Gibson, "A Constellation of Options" *Starlite*, Art Gallery of New South Wales & Wollongong City Gallery, 1993