

THE SKINNY

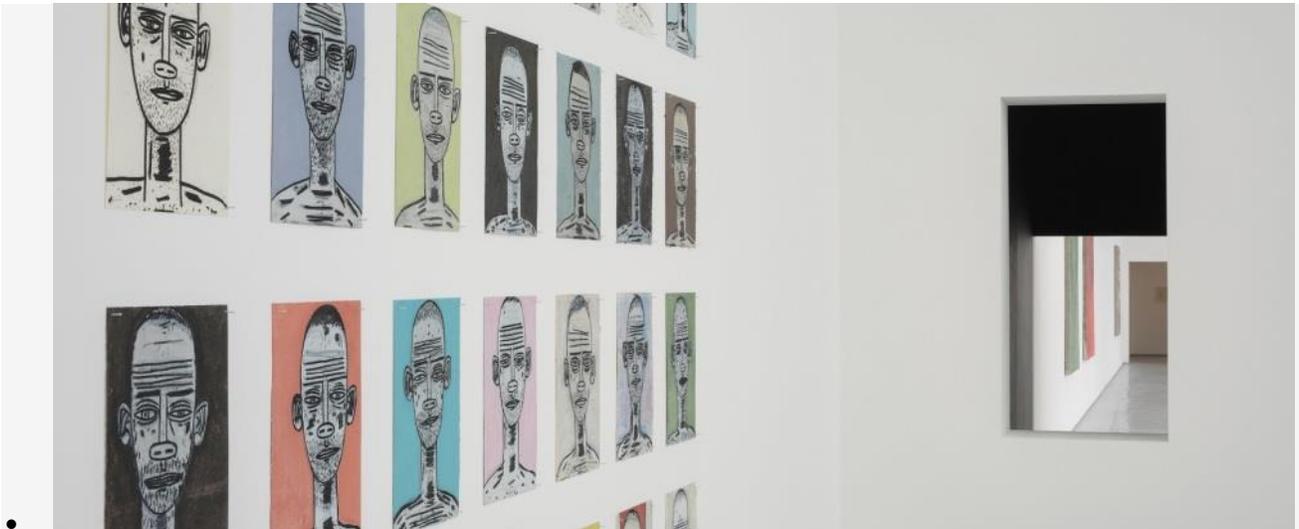
INDEPENDENT CULTURAL JOURNALISM

David Austen @ Dundee Contemporary Arts

David Austen's solo show *Underworld* astutely observes the human condition, at the same time as he creates other worlds in dreamlike drawings, sculptures, video and paintings



Review by Kate McLeod | 23 May 2019



David Austen, *Underworld* (installation view) by Ruth Clark

EDITOR'S CHOICE

In a short black and white film, artist David Austen tells the story of his death, while painted to mimic the found photograph of a clown (circa 1930s) that hangs at the entrance of the dark space.

The film is one way into the paintings in the surrounding galleries. They are luminous with complex planes, depths and textures, even while there is something deliberately uncomfortable about them. *The Swimmer* (2012) is a heavily outlined male figure (with lactating nipples) folding in on himself in a glorious field of cerulean blue.

DCA Gallery 2 is lit starkly by a naked bulb and holds two small drawings on paper. One of them, *Exit* (1985) depicts a wobbly cartoon of a stag-horned flasher who would not be out of place in Botticelli's upper circle of hell, and whose open mac reveals an outpouring of angelic cherubs and woodland animals. In the centre, a grid of watercolours depict figures fucking, impotent, thinking, despairing, nurturing children, dying. Their simplicity reveals great skill in capturing everything you might expect from a human being.

In Gallery 1 there's a large yellow sculptural object like an orbiting cutout, repeated as an orange object in the main gallery and unpainted steel in the foyer. Holding the space successfully, they also speak to elements of Austen's collages. A grid of repeated heads underneath is perhaps an insight into a daily task of the artist, running from 2016-19 showing stylistic and material shifts. The steady expression remains.

As a whole, the exhibition Underworld is like a dream that requires the visitor to piece parts together. It is non-linear and out-of-focus but with an internal logic. The exhibition notes present Austen as a 'creator of worlds' and this seems true, in a quiet way.

Until 9 Jun, at Dundee Contemporary Arts <https://www.dca.org.uk/whats-on/event/david-austen>