

## Not recommended for children

By [Eamon Evans](#) ArtsHub | Friday, September 22, 2006

Juan Davila's paintings are full of personality.

As London critic Guy Brett puts it, they're "rude, libidinal, uncomfortable, complex, uncontained and fastidious." Not to mention "unschooled, highly schooled, erudite and argumentative".

Elizabeth Macgregor, the Director of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), has an entirely fresh set of adjectives. For her, Davila is "provocative, probing, witty and unpalatable".

Yet we all seem to hunger for more. In the four decades since he arrived in Australia (only to have a painting impounded by the NSW vice squad), every state gallery in the country has acquired at least one Davila. Visitors to Canberra's National Gallery – and to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, for that matter – also get to sample the Chilean-born artist's uniquely scatological charms.

"There has never been an artist in Australia who represented sexuality as brazenly", says art historian Roger Benjamin of the man who often signs off "Juana" or "Bum".

He has given us Mary McKillop with a penis, and Bob Hawke with breasts. A flatulent Paul Keating gets to wear a swastika; Governor Arthur Phillip gets oral sex from a small boy. Burke and Wills bend over for a kangaroo; the grim reaper prefers a fish.

And that's just a sample. Whether they involve an anus on someone's face, or an axe in someone's back, Davila's colourful output is not recommended for children.

Officially. The MCA's new Davila exhibition – a distillation of his 30-year career that includes new work and some rarely seen Chilean pieces – actually comes with a warning.

Lock up your kids, Sydneysiders, until 12 November. And Melbourne parents should do the same between 30 November and 4 February, when the exhibition comes to the NGV.

Libraries may be off limits too: Melbourne University Publishing has produced a book to accompany the touring exhibition. With full colour plates of over 150 works (and text by Davila, Brett and Benjamin), it contains even more saucy stuff – most noticeably the artist's depiction of Simon Bolivar as a black transvestite, which caused a diplomatic crisis between Chile, Bolivia and Venezuela.

This comprehensive, two-pronged festival of Davila is long overdue, says MCA director, Macgregor. Despite widespread exposure, "there have been few opportunities to see his work in depth".

"We were delighted when he said yes, because he's very particular about the ways he wants his work to be shown and he doesn't just accept any opportunity that's given to him."

For an artist with so much personality, he is also surprisingly reluctant to talk.

"He's very reticent. He doesn't like giving interviews and doesn't like speaking publicly," says Macgregor.

"He thinks he's done his job. He's made the paintings. It's up to the rest of us to make what we can of them."

Davila's paintings ostentatiously draw on other sources – many are essentially montages – and, in true postmodern style, he seems slightly distrustful of words.

“Before entering language,” he once wrote, “the child communicates totally and directly. On entering language, something is lost.”

But given it's Davila himself writing that – as he's written a great deal else – he must have some faith in language.

In fact, he seems to revel in it. The average Davila sentence is 15 words long and requires at least as many readings. “Western postmodernism usurps the subject of the margin using regionalism as an expression of its own sensitivity to difference,” is a fairly typical offering.

Perhaps then his refusal to talk is a practical decision. “I need to be able to come to a point in my response and that takes time to dwell on things,” the artist recently emailed *The Age*.

Postmodern or not, Davila certainly isn't postethical. “He's not an artist that believes he should sit in a studio and make esoteric work that doesn't communicate very much about the world,” says Macgregor.

“He believes that the artist should be critiquing things that happen within political life and in individual lives too.”

What sorts of things? For a start, try Australia's political system, the cultural impact of capitalism, the iniquities of art establishment, stunted attitudes towards sexuality, and the treatment of indigenous peoples in Australia and Chile.

“I've never asked him if he thinks we should all be out manning the barricades again,” says Macgregor, “but he certainly wants to draw attention to the fact that, in his view, very terrible things are happening in society that are not really being addressed in the mainstream media or the political system.”

Most recently, Davila has turned his brush to refugees – his *Woomera* series graphically depicts their suffering in outback detention centres – and the government's enthusiastic war on terror.

“You've also got to remember that he lived in Chile under the dictatorship, which was a very overt way of a regime taking control,” says Macgregor.

With the recent increases in censorship and detention without trial, “he feels ... governments are bringing in other forms of control that make life and our individual freedoms more and more curtailed.”

Davila writes a great deal about the “culture of indifference”. “I think he feels that we're all a bit complacent about the way the world has developed... (That Western) society's become very bland and one-dimensional and that there's not enough responsibility taken for the bad things, and that not enough notice is taken of what the governments are doing to us.”

“I supposed he's calling for more awareness and more activism, in a way. His method of being an activist is through his paintings.”

So if people remain indifferent – if don't leave the exhibition “with a lingering sense of unease”, as the MCA confidently promises – have they missed something crucial? Can one appreciate Davila's work without actually taking in the messages behind it?

”There are moments in the exhibition of extraordinary beauty, is how I would put it. He’s not just a conceptual artist. He has an incredible ability to apply paint to canvas in an exciting and dynamic way.”

“So there are some paintings that are simply beautiful paintings, and there are other paintings that have a bit more of an agenda, or are making a particular point.”

“You’re not going to miss it, I’ll tell you that. It’s very full-on.”