

## *A visual and sensory exposé: Drez blurs the line of where art ends and viewer participation begins.*

*Duro Jovicic, June 2024*

“Is it fair to say you have an obsession with colour?” I quip, referring to Drez’ oeuvre. “Aaaarh, yes,” he admits, and I can sense an inward smile. Colour, texture, place, materiality, spatial manipulation, in situ synergy and interconnectedness all seem to coalesce in formation of Drez’s artistic practice and journey. Drez considers a degree of democratisation where he straddles the line between bespoke and carefully executed pieces that hang on a gallery wall and expansive murals around Melbourne and beyond: a burst of controlled colour gradients that provide a new lease on life, so to speak, on any building, wall or ground graced by Drez’s artistic presence. Passersby delight in these artworks, pausing to take note of the dazzling colour combinations and spatial manipulation—children are often seen running up and down the lines, counting, touching, and hopping along them. Here lies the key to Drez’ underlying motivations, his drive: art isn’t to be confined, at the mercy of the elite; there is room for all to immerse themselves in what it can offer.

From ages 15 to 25—formative years in Drez’ establishment as an artist—he partook in street and graffiti art transversing continents from Australia to Europe, honing his skills. Such a starting-out story is hardly new. From the streets to the commercial legitimacy of the gallery space—and, to a degree, a level of commodification—is a pathway travelled by such now-established artists as Banksy, Invader, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. It appears that the flipside of an anti-establishment, rabble-raising art form can involve the ushering in of a level of acceptance and credibility, buoying the purchase and ownership of such artists in public opinion. Banksy’s *Love is in the Bin* (2018) is a case in point. It sold via Sotheby’s in October 2018, and within seconds a mechanism in the frame partly shredded the image. The ultimate act of rebellion. Three years later it resold for over 15 times its initial sale, redefining notions of notoriety and questioning the realities of ‘street cred’.

In passing I mentioned Drez’ murals to a friend and they said “oh there’s one near me, let’s go see it”. Two minutes’ drive away, in the thick of Richmond’s high-rise commission housing, is the mural named *Blue in Green*, 2022. Against the drab background of concrete construction and nearby multi-level car parking, it provides a visual reprieve. A rectangular abstraction going from an inky black, to green, to a middling light blue, to, at its centre, a very light blue/white tinge. At approximately five by six metres, it has the uncanny effect of standing out while simultaneously echoing the utilitarian architecture and economical lines of the buildings that inhabit the area. Its name is a reference to a Miles Davis song, one which he has used for other projects as well. Drez has an affinity for music, even recording it himself, and works as a graphic designer within the local and international music community. His creative drive can only be described as dextrous, in both execution and intent. From 2021 to the present his mural commissions escalated, coupled with group and solo exhibitions, the last two both being with or organised by MAGMA Galleries. Another mural, *Untitled, Sunshine Lane* (2021), has a tropical retro sunset feel with its gradients of red, orange, and yellow. Bordered in black, it encapsulates part of a building and its foreground, energising the tired cobbled laneway, and the nondescript building upon which it is painted. This iteration is but one of three, being refreshed each time the natural street decay takes hold, the reality of the transient nature of street art being exposed to the elements.

Drez's dedication to expansive outdoor murals is hardly a surprise. From his early (and ongoing) days as a street artist, to the present, his ethos on art accessibility has been cemented. "I really care about people having access to art, which is why I love doing public art. It's why I love this more immersive kind of works. It creates a platform for people to interact and 'get' art that isn't knowledge-based, it's experienced-based, and I care about creating work that is non-exclusive. There's a lot of work that's more at the conceptual end of contemporary art that can be quite exclusive when you don't have that understanding... That's why I do a lot of public works, because I think public space is the best place to give your work to people... It's a fundamental thing that I care about."

Yet, let it not be assumed that there is nothing here for the art critic. Drez's command of colour, its nuances, and space is especially evident in his more intimate pieces, such as *Cycles* (2024), an octagram measuring 71cm by 71cm and two inches thick. Its construction is a testament to its artist. It presents as an engineered sculptural object, a giant jigsaw piece that happens to also be something that can hang comfortably on a wall. Made from timber with an aluminium surface, with applied iron powder and acrylic, it is a push-and-pull of the past, present and future. The silver lines appear to interweave and cut across at varying angles, always respectful of the structure encased in, and complimented by a caustic rust-like colour that evokes a typical snapshot of Australiana—a dirt-covered and rust-strewn outback. It further references architecture such as ACCA's rusted patina. The use of silver and its unique sheen points towards a technologically driven future. In distilling the rust-like element juxtaposed with silver, Drez creates a work indelibly imbued with local qualities, yet universal in its graphic appreciation.

*Echo Haze* (2024), too, is a triumph of colour, complexity, and movement. Orange, blue, black, brown and a light pastel green compete, cajole, clash—yet, strangely, sit in a contained harmony with each other. Lines begin with a solid colour, then fade into another altogether. The lines seem to link arms and dance, presenting a symphonic use of colour with movement being the key between the constructed space and flattened diamond like geometry of the work. Neurobiologist Margaret Livingstone, in the book *Vision and Art (The Biology of Seeing)* sums up the effect as such: "color and luminance responses at any point in visual space are opposed by responses of the same color or luminance from surrounding points in space... in luminance this means that an area looks larger when it is surrounded by dark and darker when surrounded by light." Drez uses this phenomenon to beguiling effect in this piece. Of *Echo Haze*, he says that he uses the word 'echo' as it is "referencing the way colours bounce through my works. The reflective reverberative nature of colour in the work and in our external environments."

A particularly prominent artistic iteration in Drez's works are the pieces constructed from painted slim line metal rods encased in a thick metal frame, which, when placed together, form a vivid and everchanging colour palette that leaves the audience enmeshed. Inside it, and individually invested in how the work is experienced. *Hearth* (2024), being 70cm by 70cm and 8cm in depth, is made from solid steel painted in wine-red, tangerine, yellow and, the background, solid black. Comprising ninety-nine rods in all, of varying thickness, three layers deep, placed in evenly spaced rows—the contrast between each rod and the others is where the interactive visual dance upon the eye begins. Up close, from afar, walking parallel to the piece... it shifts, changes colour, stripes and lines jump and contort like an untuned television. There is a lenticular effect, like spilt petrol in water, expanding with its coloured unpredictability. In some ways this is where Drez is at his best. Is it a painting? A sculpture? A vehicle for trickery and intrigue? It keeps us guessing; it forms an alluring deception that we can't help but expose ourselves to witness, yet one more

time. Of his sculptural-like works Drez says that: "The ability to affect change and create the environment we wish to live in comes from an internal recognition of our abilities to make action. These sculptural works force an interaction of control over one's perceived environment, encouraging introspection in our ability to affect public and private change."

In Drez I see the titans of op art: Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley and, closer to home, Lesley Dumbrell. Their respective command of line, colour and movement could be called without parallel, or close to; Drez, however, has the benefit of a colour language that is more contemporaneous. That sense of the 'here and now' which material technology inevitably provides. During discussion, he makes mention of artists Carlos Cruz Diez, Mark Rothko, James Turrell, Tomislav Topic, Nelio, Felipe Pantone and Katherine Grosse. What many of the artists have in common is challenging the notion of colour being a static entity, a fixed property of matter. As in the case of Drez's work, the viewer is an active participant in each piece, whether it be a mural or a more contained work placed inside the confines of a gallery.

Mark Rothko has asserted thus: "I'm not interested in color. It's light I'm after." Art historian and critic Ricardo Venturi theorises, on this, that "Compared to color, this light is simultaneously within and outside the canvases, involving the space in which we perceive them." Though this is an emphatic statement, it can be argued that, beyond colour, Drez's works are an expression of light, movement, and connection, aided by colour as the vehicle though not as the end point of discovery. Drez has proven, time and again, that his work can move, reach out, and compel people to see things from a differing perspective to the everyday.