

## AIDA TOMESCU: STATES OF BECOMING

*The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceased the moment life appeared.*

*All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what anyone supposed and luckier.*

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), from *Song of myself*<sup>1</sup>

Aida Tomescu's art is paradoxical. Like blooms that appear quite startlingly before winter's end, only to be ravaged by frost and wind and then renewed when the season of their being arrives, Tomescu's works are in a constant state of becoming. Over the years she has developed her own distinctive, continually evolving visual language, working from one group or ensemble of works to the next. Each series, irrespective of media, is like a new beginning; informed by previous experience and yet restlessly, determinedly eschewing the easy, known path in search of new life.

There is so *much* life in Tomescu's drawings. At first glance a large series of evocative drawings such as *Fumetti* 2007 or *Fons* 2009, may appear like impassioned expressions – fast and spontaneous. Yet each work in the series has evolved gradually over time: built up layer upon layer, the drawn lines probing space and overlapping, rubbed back into soft veils, continually remade afresh. The vibrant force-fields are there, certainly, but this is a compressed energy that has emerged after a considerable genesis – made possible as a result of what has come before.

We carry our pasts with us and within us, yet we are constantly being remade in the present. Born in 1955 in Bucharest, Romania, where she lived for the first twenty-three years of her life, Tomescu's beginnings were part of a place quite different from Australia. Among her early memories of art are appreciating the images in a book on Raphael while her sister was more interested in the text. From the start the power of visual images was important to her. Text would become important in different ways. Finding a non-literal visual language would become paramount.

At sixteen Tomescu met her first art teacher. 'He was tough, sharp and uncompromising. His strict daily discipline made me realise that what was needed was to roll up my sleeves and set myself up for a lifetime of work.' He showed her the way that a work might appear deceptively simple, yet incredibly precise. Each part of a painting mattered: the height of the hat of one of the figures in Paul Cézanne's

opposite: Installation view of drawings at *Campi Flegrei* exhibition, Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney, 2007

famous *The card players* c.1893.<sup>2</sup> Every touch of the brush, every shape and colour belonged. Nothing needed to be added. Nothing could be taken away. It was a world of strength and clarity, inspiration and aspiration.

At the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest where Tomescu studied, students spent years drawing from plaster casts. Initially pencil was the main drawing medium but later on charcoal and better paper provided an early taste of the enjoyment of working with materials. The approach was to focus on gently shading in delicate layers and to observe how the planes connected. One of the challenges of this early training was the emphasis on drawing the same subject. In time Tomescu found that the experience of repeatedly drawing the same subject over and over again, allowed her to discover new ways of looking, taking into account subtle shifts and nuances. 'After two years one of my greatest pleasures was to set myself up with the cast in front of me. You could fill them with joy once you began to get involved with what the work was trying to express.' It was also about taking time in the making. As she says:

Perhaps what my training gave me were the seeds of understanding to slow down with an image. It was about allowing the image to work on you, finding answers from the act of looking repeatedly. It sowed the idea of questioning on canvas.

A memorable experience of Tomescu's course was the aesthetics of authentic and faked art works. Students were shown, for instance, a painting purporting to be a Modigliani that was a fake. 'The fake was the one that spelled everything out. It was about the result. It was too perfect.' Tomescu has remained wary of notions of perfection and technical facility, recognising instead the potent interdependence of construction and destruction, tenacity and anxiety. Returning to her appreciation of the complexity of Cézanne, she recalls: 'Picasso said that it was the anxiety in Cézanne that we in the contemporary world needed. In part it is the anxiety that we are drawn to. For me this is the anxiety of the questioning where everything can be located, under what conditions everything can exist. I think that Pollock is part of that same family.'

In her early work Tomescu wanted to be direct, to be true to the image. Although initially she focussed on still life and landscape, over time levels of abstraction opened up. Then as now what mattered to Tomescu was not how abstract or figurative a painting might be, but how it reflects a deeper level of experience. 'The subject was one thing', she notes, 'but the content is much more complex.' Although Tomescu's art is not overtly autobiographical, her work is about experience. It is about states of being informed by memory while also engaging actively in the present. As Tomescu says, 'We are made from everything we do; formed from all those things we have endured.'

Prior to her departure from Bucharest, Tomescu recalls a rare, memorable exhibition of the work of Willem de Kooning at the National Museum. She felt on the whole that the Bucharest art scene was closed in, as though they were always waiting for something to come in from the outside. Through a chain of circumstances she became the one to move 'outside', to a new life in Sydney. Each departure incurs losses and promises of new beginnings. Dark and light intermingle.





Top Row: *Ardoise I*, 2006  
mixed media on paper  
120 x 80cm

*Ardoise IV*, 2007  
mixed media on paper  
120 x 80cm

*Ardoise II*, 2006  
mixed media on paper  
120 x 80cm

Bottom Row: *Fumetti I*, 2007  
mixed media on paper  
120 x 80cm

*Fumetti II*, 2007  
mixed media on paper  
120 x 80cm

*Ardoise III*, 2006  
mixed media on paper  
120 x 80cm



The move to Australia was right for me. The distance and the isolation are crucial for my work. From feeling closed in, I stepped outside. Even though I need to travel in Europe, gaining strength and clarity from revisiting works I love, I wouldn't want to paint there. I need the space. I don't think I could have done this work living anywhere else.

Soon after her arrival in Australia, Tomescu went to the forward-looking Gallery A in Sydney where she later showed work. She was struck by how powerful, wild and courageous the works were. 'The work was very liberating in its scale.' To begin with Tomescu felt that she was retracing her steps too much. In the process of discovering her own artistic language, she turned to working with collage as a way of freeing herself up. 'Changing material helped. Tearing the paper and not worrying about the edges. I began ripping bits of paper and also stapling unstretched canvas onto the wall. I was able to allow the edges of the canvas to participate in the making of the image without closing it in. I began re-working old paintings. It was a way of breaking out of being a captive of previous habits.' Keeping things fluid, layered and evolving have been constants in Tomescu's use of mixed media and collage from those formative days through to works like *Alb I-III* 2002. Here the restricted palette and richness of materials and gestures suggest an uncanny sense of something old, accumulated over time, and something fresh and vital in the present.

The rich surfaces of Tomescu's early collages in the 1980s had come to the attention of John Loane, master printer and founding director of the Victorian Print Workshop, who encouraged her to make prints. Among the important aspects of printmaking to her artistic development as a whole, was the idea of working successively from one plate to the next – of working in series. For her the experience of printmaking was about working in an open-ended way, being alert to the myriad possibilities that present themselves.

I began to see drawing as more in tune with [Paul] Klee's idea of taking a line for a walk. You are looking for form that stays open and carries within it unending possibilities for renewal. It is about resisting pinning down one thing. You find what you need in the making of it.

A number of Tomescu's earliest works in the current exhibition, the *Seria Unu* prints undertaken in 1993 and the *Seria Neagra* works of 1999, are characterised by bold, black mark-making against light grounds. The thick dark presences against luminous grounds contrast with the drawings in which light traverses dark, like her diptych *Negru III* and *Negru IV (A candle in a dark room)* which was awarded the Dobell Prize for Drawing at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2003. These drawings were directly triggered by a small work of New Zealand artist Colin McCahon, *A candle in a dark room* 1947, which was in turn inspired by a poem.<sup>3</sup> In parallel with his approach, light and dark are physically and metaphorically embedded in Tomescu's work, the dramatic movement of crisp white lines probing their way over a rich, velvety black ground in the *Negru* series ('Negru' is Romanian for 'black'). The richness of feeling in Tomescu's work of this period of maturity, reveals what would continue as a deep engagement with the complexities and subtle nuances of experience – of being and becoming.



*Windhover*, 2005  
oil on linen  
184 x 154cm



For Tomescu the idea of experience is more pertinent to her ways of working than a purely practical idea of 'process'. 'Experience is like an accumulation of processes in the making of the work.' She will often begin with drawing because the immediacy of charcoal or soft pastel allows her a way in. 'It is a way of generating energy for a new working cycle. It develops associative thinking and allows connections to be made more readily.' She begins with a multiplicity of materials and over the years has always enjoyed the excitement of trying something new as a series of work opens up. Gradually the sense of fullness moves the work to a great focus and compression of materials, ideas and energies. The engagement in the work is deeply intuitive, 'working towards reducing the distance between thinking and doing'. It is not about making a work of art as such but rather about discovering possibilities that take on a life of their own, becoming honed to the precision of a unified whole that feels inevitable.

Even though you have a glimpse of what the work might become, it needs to travel the distance towards its own reality. In the end it feels quite precise even if you have been through dark alleys and into no-man's land...

Matisse gave such a truthful definition of painting when he said that it was a means by which he practiced his intuition. This meant intuition not taken for granted, not assumed in advance ... The more you tap into it, the deeper the layers that emerge.

In Tomescu's mature paintings the sheer physicality of paint, its density and the archaeology of the layers, its application and movement across the surface, is inseparable from the content. The tenor of the work is guided by its colouration and by its internal rhythms, like the variations and tonalities in music. At times the density of the paint is reminiscent of earth or old walls encrusted with layers of paint and matter over time. In relation to mood and feeling, while some of the cool, meditative paintings appear to be floating in space, others like the deep-blue *Windhover* 2005 (recalling Gerard Manley Hopkins poem of the same title) or the vibrant red-orange *Ore* 2007 are more animated, with marks leaping and scudding apace across the surface. In *Thor* 2007 there is a feeling of crescendo as though this god of Norse mythology, god of thunder and rain, was embodied in the red paint powering in a mass from the lower right to the upper left.

In many of the paintings one has a sense of scale and space, a feeling that there is room to breathe, to take in new possibilities. In the predominantly blue paintings there are analogies with the swell and expansiveness of the ocean tide, with light catching on water or a limitless sky on a clear day. In a painting like *Albastra III* 2002, there is an impression of the different layers of tides. The colour around some of the edges of the softest greenish blue becomes the dominant motif in *Cer* 2003, placed against an equally subtle tone of pale icy blue. When paintings from a particular time-frame are shown alongside one another it becomes evident that a uniform idea of a particular colour is insufficient. Instead we need to think of variations of blue: azure, aquamarine, cornflower blue, cyan, cobalt, cerulean, iceberg, Prussian blue, slate; of nuances of cadmium red, Titian red, magenta or scarlet, to mention a few. The idea of expanding our vocabularies becomes a contraction to a more focussed way of looking and experiencing the work.

In the past decade Tomescu's extraordinary sensitivity to colour comes through in work after work. In paintings from 2002 like *Trei* and *Zi*, the colour is soft and gentle. The serenity of these works contrasts with paintings of some five years later like *Lavinia*, *Parme* and *Ore* with their blazing red-orange colourations. There is a natural progression in the work from dark to light or from a cool to a fiery warm palette. Yet there is also a sense that in each work in a particular group, there is a dimension of colour being formed and found in the process of making – the underlayers informing subsequent accretions as active components of the whole.

I travel through their stages and eventually they form their own colour. I think they are very much about formed colour. All the previous layers participate in creating that particular blue or yellow. As I scrape back into the work, the previous layers also participate in the making of that colour.

In recent years to enter Tomescu's studio with works from her *Campi Flegrei* or *Ravel* series was like entering a warm space in which light and energy emanated not from some external source but from the works themselves. In paintings like the magnificent *Blue eye* 2008, we are aware of the sensuous nature of paint and colour working together. Unlike the incredibly subtle yellow of *Amras* 2004 that recalls a bee's dream of the palest, thickest pollen, in *Blue eye*, the intense golden yellow is closer to saffron. It is this deeper yellow that inspired Homer to write in the *Iliad* of Dawn or Morning clad in her robe of saffron, suffusing light over the earth. The overall warmth of the palette of *Blue eye* is increased by the warm cadmium red that underlies the whole and shows through the lively incised lines.

Among the most memorable and enduring fascinations for Tomescu is the major altar painting by Titian *The Assumption of the Virgin* 1518 in the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice – the red robes of the Virgin set against the glowing, golden-yellow space around her. When contemplating works by Tomescu like *Spora I* or *Peregrine* painted in 2008, the upward gestures and the colour recall the dominant hues and movement in the Frari altarpiece. In a playful move, the title of Tomescu's painting *Lavinia* recalls Titian's daughter's name and her flowing red hair. For Tomescu titles are always evocative rather than descriptive.

I like titles that stay open, following the same trajectory as the works; titles that tune into the general character of the image but remain elusive. Sometimes they come from different language systems and have double meanings. The title for a recent series of drawings came from a Latin word *fons* which means fountain, as it felt like an overflowing of imagery that I was dealing with.

Taking an overview of the work over more than a decade across all media there is a sense of vitality whether it be in the radiance of the paintings or the persistent, searching line in the drawings. Yet over the past few years, in series of drawings like *Sodium* 2009, it is possible to see the ways in which the drawings become increasingly layered, expansive and informed by colour like the paintings and the ways in which the aspect of drawing has increasingly entered into the paintings, particularly from 2007 and



*Palm I*, 2009  
oil on board  
80 x 61cm



*Palm II*, 2009  
oil on board  
80 x 61cm



2008. In the recent works *Palm I* and *Palm II* 2009 the delicately incised lines are etched into superimposed densities of white paint exposing the warm pinkish-red below; their animated intricacy reminiscent of leaf fossils imprinted with traces and energies of past lives.

Looking back, the work is full of beginnings and transitions, moving from one state to another, one series or body of works to the next. In what seem to be endings there is inevitably the promise of new beginnings, new life. There is a feeling in the work of moving in parallel with nature, with the elements of fire, water, earth and air, with the sensations of heat and cold, with darkness and luminosity, with the passions and meditative calm of the soul. The works have within them the energies of the artist and her journeys from openness to resolution in the unfolding of a particular work and from one work to the other. Yet once a body of works is completed and goes out into the world, the cycle unfolds again as the work attains its independent existence, itself open to multiple interpretations. Ultimately what Tomescu's art over more than a decade has shown us is that it can never be pinned down to one thing, that it is about open-ended associations, moving between the tangible and the intangible. It is perhaps in giving up the need for tangible certainties in favour of more subtle intimations that this fluid state of becoming is revealed. As Walt Whitman expressed in his *Leaves of grass*:

May-be the things I perceive – the animals, plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters,  
The skies of day and night – colors, densities, forms – may-be these are, (as doubtless they are) only apparitions, and the real something has yet to be known ...

When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words and reason hold not, surround and pervade us,  
Then I am charged with untold or untellable wisdom – I am silent – I require nothing further ...<sup>4</sup>

Deborah Hart  
Canberra, September 2009

#### Notes

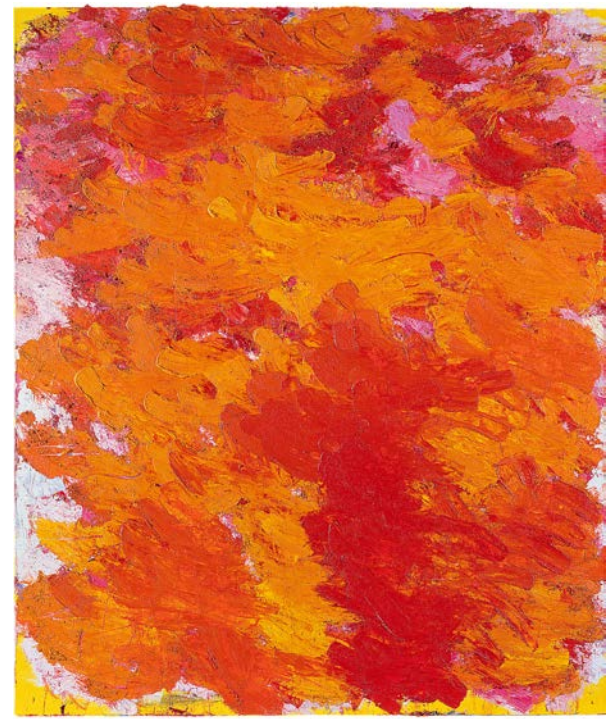
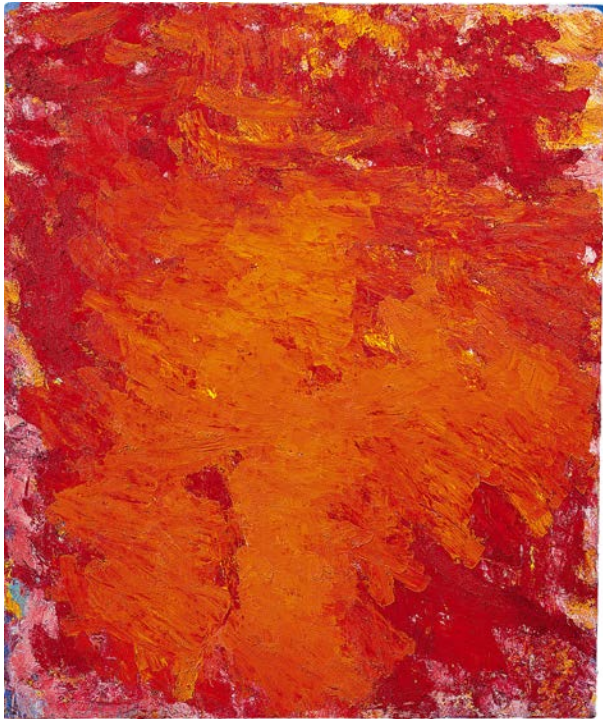
All quotes in this essay from Aida Tomescu are from an interview with Deborah Hart at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 28, August 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Song of myself', quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, New York and London, 1970 (third edition), p. 761.

<sup>2</sup> This work is in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Another painting of *The card players* is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

<sup>3</sup> McCahon's *A candle in a dark room* 1947 is in the Auckland Art Gallery in New Zealand.

<sup>4</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Of the terrible doubt of appearances' from *Leaves of grass* (1867); see The Walt Whitman Archive at the following website: [www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)



*Lavinia*, 2007  
oil on canvas  
184 x 154cm

*Parme*, 2007  
oil on canvas  
184 x 154cm

*Ore*, 2007  
oil on canvas  
184 x 154cm