

PAINTING AS PROCESS

For acclaimed Sydney abstractionist Aida Tomescu painting is more about the process than the product. According to **John McDonald**, her latest canvases take colour to a higher pitch than ever before. Portrait by **Nikki Short**.

Aida Tomescu's new paintings capture the eye with fiery tones of yellow and orange, dreamy blues and pinks. It seems hardly conceivable these pictures were created by the same artist whose 1999 show in Melbourne was made up of canvases covered in dense layers of grey oils, bearing down like storm clouds.

If we assume that Tomescu's abstract paintings are a reflection of her own moods, the new works must be seen as demonstrations of energy and self-confidence. By contrast, the paintings of 1999 to 2000 were so dark it seemed as if the artist had gone into a cave from which she might never emerge. "There are times," she says, "when the painting asks for a certain economy, it asks for restraint".

There are those who prefer the dark, "restrained" paintings, perhaps believing that darkness equates with seriousness, while colour is somehow frivolous. These are not Tomescu's terms. She sees each phase of her work as a necessary preparation for the next step, more of an evolution than a choice. The painting tells the artist where she must go – it

doesn't conform to a plan.

Tomescu never set out to be an abstract artist; she simply found that the pursuit of a subject eroded her concern with appearances. She identifies with **Mondrian**, who once said: "Even without knowing it an artist is forced into abstraction."

Most abstract artists will agree there is a feeling that transcends identifiable forms, although form remains crucial to the success of a work. Accordingly, content is important to Tomescu, although she sees it as indivisible from the structure of a painting. This is not easy to explain, but most viewers can accept that while some abstract pictures are exercises in surface decoration, others exert an attraction that probes beneath the level of conscious taste.

The need for structure was instilled in Tomescu during her early training at the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest, from which she graduated in 1977. Although Romania was still suffering under the **Ceaucescu** dictatorship, the art schools were more progressive than those in other Communist countries. Students practised the familiar disciplines of drawing from the plaster cast and the model, but there was no blanket rejection of Modernism.





1. // Aida Tomescu, *Bribie*, 2015. Oil on Belgian linen, 183 x 153cm.

2. // Aida Tomescu, *Hellas*, 2015. Oil on linen, 183 x 153cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN + STRUMPF, SYDNEY



Tomescu, who had always wanted to be an artist, despite her father's objections, was a dedicated student.

Soon after graduating in 1977 she began to show her work and says she might have gone on that way for years. She was, she recalls, quite unlike her peers who were desperate for passports that would enable them to leave Romania. Once they had cleared the border, almost nobody came back.

Tomescu applied for a passport too, with little expectation, and was approved. She still doesn't know why she was allowed the precious document her friends were refused. She left Romania with some reluctance, recognising that she had to take the opportunity to live and work in another part of the world.

Travelling in the Greek islands, Tomescu decided her new home should be Australia. She had been influenced by the many Australians she had met, who were warm, friendly and full of praise for their native land. She waited for a year to get approval, which seemed like a long time at the end of the 1970s.

Upon arriving in Sydney in 1980, at the age of 24, she took up a series of part-time jobs. The most consistent was for the Department of Immigration, teaching new arrivals about Australia. This helped Tomescu with her own understanding of the country and allowed her to meet people from all over the world. Her aim was always to work in jobs that didn't impinge on her desire to be a painter. She deliberately avoided anything that required artistic ability, while painting at night and on weekends.

In 1982 her work appeared in a Women Artists Group Exhibition at Gallery A in Sydney. The following year she was included in a show at Artspace, called *A Different Perspective*, which featured work by migrant artists. By 1985, Tomescu held a well-received solo exhibition in the downstairs room at Coventry Gallery and two years later was promoted to the main exhibition space, where she showed much larger paintings.

These pictures still contained vestiges of landscape. The colour was subdued, with large areas of grey, broken by the occasional flash of pale red or dark green. The appeal of the show lay in heavily worked surfaces covered in vigorous brushstrokes. Painted fragments had been collaged onto the canvases, adding complexity to the picture plane.

The paintings were tough, but the Coventry show enjoyed positive reviews and healthy sales. This was probably the point at which Tomescu's Australian career was launched.

There would be biennial shows at the Coventry Gallery until 1995 and solo exhibitions at galleries in Melbourne such as Reconnaissance, Deutscher Brunswick, and Christine Abrahams. With each show the work continued to evolve. The collage



3. // Aida Tomescu, *Depart, White Roses and Camdenville*, 2011-12. Mixed media and collage on paper, 122 x 82cm.

4. // Aida Tomescu, *Spiegelgasse*, 2012. Mixed media on woodpanel, 183 x 91.5cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN + STRUMPF, SYDNEY

5. // Aida Tomescu, *Tethys II*, 2010. Mixed media on linen, 183 x 152cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND KAREN WOODBURY GALLERY, MELBOURNE



If we assume that Tomescu's abstract paintings are a reflection of her own moods, **the new works must be seen as demonstrations of energy and self-confidence.**

disappeared; the surfaces grew denser, with frequent use of the palette knife. Surprising glimmers of light and colour would open up in the midst of a heavily impastoed canvas. One of the most fruitful developments of these years was working with the Victorian Print Workshop, following an invitation from the Myer Art Foundation.

After a decade Tomescu gave up many jobs and began teaching part-time at Sydney's National Art School, but the day was fast approaching when she would be able to live from the sale of her work.

One important landmark was winning the inaugural Lowenstein Sharp Feiglin Ades Arts 21 Fellowship in 1996, ahead of 10 well-respected contenders. The fellowship enabled Tomescu to travel to Europe, and culminated in a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art at Heide in November 1997. The paintings in this show had become concentrated fields of colour, with marks of previous workings visible at the edges.

Over the next few years Tomescu would pursue and develop this approach in exhibitions at Niagara

Galleries in Melbourne and Martin Browne Fine Art in Sydney. The brighter shades would gradually be transformed into a sombre range of blacks and greys, or a heavy black-green skin as forbidding as a primeval swamp. It was also a time for prizes. Tomescu had already won the Sulman Prize in 1996. In 2001 she collected the Wynne Prize and in 2003 the Dobell Prize for Drawing.

Works on paper had become a prominent part of every exhibition. These pictures seemed much looser than the canvases, distinguished by a wide variety of marks and lines, along with teasing fragments of text.

In 2007 Tomescu held her first exhibition with the Liverpool Street Gallery in Sydney and in 2009 was the subject of a survey at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra. It had been apparent from 2003 to 2004 that the colour was returning to her work in a spectacular fashion. The new paintings were more vibrant than ever before, although just as heavily layered.

The paintings Tomescu has subsequently shown with Sullivan+Strumpf in Sydney and Karen

Woodbury in Melbourne, have been brighter and bolder than anything previously produced. The surfaces are more complicated and varied than before, with the calligraphic marks of the works on paper finding their way into the large oils. Sullivan+Strumpf has also found a new market for Tomescu's work, selling her recent paintings at art fairs in Singapore and Hong Kong.

Tomescu may look back on her career since 1980 and feel pleased it has progressed to the point where many would see her as the finest abstract painter in Australia today, but it's not a title she covets. For Tomescu there is only the work in the studio, and the struggle with each new painting. She is not a painter of iconic masterpieces but of powerful sequences of canvases. She may never be known for a particular work, but for her commitment to a singular, uncompromising vision – to a view of painting as process rather than product. In her new canvases she takes colour to a higher pitch than ever before.



6.

URSULA SULLIVAN
Director, Sullivan + Strumpf

"Aida Tomescu's work is exceptional and people instinctively see and feel this. As a result, her prices have been going up wonderfully steadily over the years, with a few encouraging spikes, such as in the recent auction sale of the Lavery Collection. She's one of the few Australian artists who has a good auction record, with collectors prepared to pay top prices for great works. She represents excellent buying. There has always been great demand for her work and since showing her work in Hong Kong and Singapore earlier this year it has increased even more. She's an established contemporary artist, always pushing painting forward and inspiring audiences. Her collectors are very passionate about her work and feel a strong connection with it. Additionally, she is collected in depth by many institutions that recognise the importance of her work and contribution to the history of Australian art. Just this year she's been in great, curated shows at the Heide, Tarrawarra and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She is simply an extraordinary artist that many collectors want to own and many institutions want to show. In Hong Kong and Singapore her work was read as very dynamic and exciting – there is a clarity and power in the work that is easily transferable to international audiences so it's exciting to introduce completely new audiences to her and see the success that is coming from it. Her work speaks a language that is truly international."

Naomi Gall



7.



8.

SUSAN MCCULLOCH
Adjunct professor, College of Design &
Social Context, RMIT University

"Aida Tomescu is one of the most consistently developing painters in Australia and over the last 20 years her work has been steadily increasing in significance. I think her paintings are very beautiful, very layered and often very powerful with a great emotive quality. Even though she's an abstract expressionist I think that her work, with its strong basis in drawing, is a wonderful mix of abstraction and fine graphic quality. It's timeless. Aida is a great student of a big range of works – Medieval, European as well as abstract – so her practice has these multi-layered, multi-era references that aren't really obvious but give her work resonance and depth. I first became aware of her work in the 1990s through exhibitions in Sydney and especially at Niagara Galleries [in Melbourne] where their intensity and vibrancy set them apart from the more figurative abstractionist painters of the time. I also admire the consistency of her exhibitions, in which each work is unique but they all work together beautifully as a suite. I loved the dark, intense candle in the dark paintings from the early 2000s – such as the one that won her the Dobell Prize for Drawing in 2003 – that really were like drawing in paint, but equally the lush, sizzling intensity of her later more brilliantly coloured paintings. Her work is often compared to that of the great abstract expressionist painters, however her style is always identifiably hers, you could never mistake one of her works for anybody else's."

Naomi Gall

She may never be known for a particular work, but for her commitment to a singular, uncompromising vision – to a view of **painting as process rather than product.**

6. // Aida Tomescu, *Goldfields*, 2012. Oil and pigments on canvas, 184 x 154cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND KAREN WOODBURY GALLERY, MELBOURNE

7. // Aida Tomescu, *Phosphor*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 168 x 122cm.

8. // Portrait of Aida Tomescu from *Untitled - Portraits of Australian Artists*, Macmillan Publishing, 2007.
PHOTO: SONIA PAYES.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN + STRUMPF, SYDNEY

1955
Born in
Bucharest,
Romania

1983
Post graduate
diploma of
art, City Art
Institute,
Sydney

1997
Solo
exhibition
at Heide
Museum of
Modern Art,
Victoria



2001
Wins the
AGNSW
Wynne
Prize



Portrait of Aida Tomescu in Studio, 2007.
Photo: R. IAN LLOYD

2010
First solo
exhibition at
Karen Woodbury
Gallery,
Melbourne

2015
First exhibitions
with
Sullivan+Strumpf
at Art Stage
Singapore and
Art Basel Hong
Kong

1977
Diploma of art (painting),
Institute of Fine Arts,
Bucharest, Romania

1979
First solo exhibition
at Cenuclu Gallery,
Bucharest, Romania

1980
Immigrated to Australia

1985
First solo exhibition with
Coventry Gallery, Sydney

1987



1999
First solo exhibition at Niagara
Galleries, Melbourne



2000
First solo
exhibition at
Martin Brown
Fine Art,
Sydney



1996
Wins the AGNSW
Sir John Sulman
Prize

Awarded the
inaugural LFSA Arts
21 Fellowship at
the Heide Museum
of Modern Art,
Melbourne

1994



2003
Wins the Dobell
Prize for Drawing



2004



2005



2006-7



2007
First solo
exhibition
at Liverpool
Street Gallery,
Sydney

2008



2006



2011



1987 // Aida Tomescu, *Apia*. Mixed media on canvas, 122 x 153cm.

1994 // Aida Tomescu, *White to White Series*. Pastel, ink and acrylic on paper, each 120 x 81cm. Exhibited at Christine Abrahams Gallery

1999 // Aida Tomescu, *Unu*. Oil on canvas, 183 x 152cm.

2000 // Aida Tomescu, *Piatra*. Oil on canvas, 183 x 153cm.

2002 // Aida Tomescu, *Alb*. Mixed media and collage, 120 x 90cm.

2002 // Aida Tomescu, *Alba*. Oil on linen, 183 x 152cm.

2004 // Aida Tomescu, *Marguerite II*. Mixed media and collage, 120 x 90cm.

2005 // Aida Tomescu, *Broken April II*. Oil on canvas, 184 x 154cm.

2006 // Aida Tomescu, *Thor*. Oil on canvas, 184 x 154cm.

2006-7 // Aida Tomescu, Top row, *Ardoise*, *Ardoise IV* and *Ardoise II*; Bottom row, *Fumetti I*, *Fumetti II*, and *Ardoise III*. Mixed media on paper, each 120 x 80cm.

2008 // Aida Tomescu, *Neon I* and *Ravel I*. Mixed media on paper, each 120 x 80cm.

2011 // Aida Tomescu, *Larkspur*. Oil on linen, 183 x 153cm.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: THE ARTIST
ARTWORKS COURTESY: THE ARTIST
AND SULLIVAN + STRUMPF, SYDNEY