AIDA TOMESCU ON ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTING

Abstract artist Aida Tomescu has spent the better part of four decades closely studying Italian masters. Here, in conversation with Museum's Editor in Chief, Tomescu revisits works from Giotto di Bondone, Piero della Francesca, Giovanni Bellini and her most enduring fascination, Titian.

Photography JEDD COONEY

To reach the apartment of Aida Tomescu you must travel via two elevators. The first is at the end of a short corridor, where wood-panelling in the art deco style reaches almost to the ceiling, interrupted by understated stained glass windows (a residential take on commercial palazzo). Once you reach Tomescu's door, the artist extends a gracious welcome, offering water and tea, and allowing you to choose the best spot for The Interview. When you begin—together pouring over reproductions of Giotto's frescos and Venetian altarpieces—it becomes necessary to internally step into a second elevator. Ride it to the top floor. Try reaching the roof via the fire escape stairs. Find an isolated mental pocket where you can work intently for a few hours, walking in and around spaces in painting.

Tomescu relishes painting. She approaches works of this era with the purity and openness she believes they necessitate. We quickly beyond immediate narrative content and into realms of questioning; to the folds in a garment and gaps of sky revealed through crevasses. "The subject of their work is recognisable, visible, yet the content is more. It is in the complexity of their content, quite outside the subject and narrative of the work that my interest lays. Everything stands for more. More than its subject."

AIDA TOMESCU Even during my school years, and later at university, I don't think I've ever been interested in their story. I responded to the great power they generate, the way they spread their energy even through a black and white projection. An entirely different world opened up to me. I was captivated. They've never just been pictures to me. They are always concentrated, intense, memorable experiences. My love of Titian started sometime during school, though in those days I am not sure what distinctions I made between Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese.

The difficulty with paintings of this era is that we can reduce them to their subject; see them simply as narratives. They are the opposite of that. Works by Titian and Giotto are places we wander into, realms we can spatially enter. We can walk into them as we do in life. When we experience them, we engage with the whole of the painting. We explore all of its relationships and the passages where the painting comes to a halt, the passages around, between and behind the figures. And as a viewer, these spaces slow us down. We enter them, we pause. They carry a near contemporary sense of doubt.

MUSEUM Where does that doubt stem from?

TOMESCU It stems from questioning the location of forms in space. Where is each protagonist, each element to be located and under what conditions can each exist? What relationships are developing between them and within the configuration of the painting?

To extend Walt Whitman's words to renaissance painting, the works "contain multitudes." They are open to multiple readings. Take a painter like Titian. In the last 20 years of his life, when his dark paintings began to emerge, he increasingly approached his work as a space of questioning. We can see it clearly when we look at x-rays of his paintings, observing him editing and shifting forms, changing the identities of his protagonists, altering the structure through a series of infinitely subtle adjustments. It is only in this space, where nothing is assumed in advance, that a painter can actually discover and learn.

Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-1518, oil on panel

Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*

1516-1518, OIL ON PANEL

Located at the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

TOMESCU When standing in front of *Assunta*, we might be tempted to assume every element was planned. And the reason it doesn't stop generating life is that painting broke through many of the artist's plans, and this kept changing its structure and with this, its content.

According to x-rays, the Virgin was first dressed in an intense blue robe. We can assume the figure was not projecting enough or didn't relate to the other elements in the painting. She was then clothed in red, though red was also not the answer the painting wanted, it may not have allowed for the spiraling ascending movement Titian was after. As this one element in the work changed for the unity and life of the final altarpiece, everything around it had to adjust. A single change generated shifts, both subtle and manifest, down to the direction of the Virgin's arms and the tiny pauses between her fingers. It is still the figure of the Virgin ascending into the sky, and equally, a newly formed entity.

MUSEUM So you feel every change necessitated other changes, in order for Titian to redress the work's 'balance'?

TOMESCU Yes. There's always a unified presence, though I avoid using words like 'balance.' I see it more as a question of the *right* relationships, the right rapport between all in the painting. There is tension, there is life born somewhere in the connections here—nothing exists in itself, everything relates and connects to everything else. Titian's contemporaries often said he was a great example of 'sprezzatura,' the art of concealing the effort that goes into great painting. The x-rays give us some indication of how significant Titian's effort really was—he was constantly changing the structure and colour as a work dictated. It's as though the subject really began to be enriched when Titian responded to the demands of the painting itself, rather than only those of the subject. I take great heart in realising that his changes to the *Assumption* were so precise and at times, hardly detectable, yet fundamentally reconfigured the work.

Notice the intervals between the Virgin's fingers and their rhythm! The distinct way they are split doesn't serve an illustrative purpose, it is not necessary to the story, and in places the way her fingers separate or come together may not be anatomically possible, the painting demanded that interval. Titian's forms are often non-realistic, yet we don't question them, because they make perfect, complete sense in the context of the work. Look at the apostles along the lower register of the altarpiece. The flesh of a figure can fold

like a piece of cloth. A fold of cloth can carry the strength of a column. Forms keep changing identity. They can lead a double life.

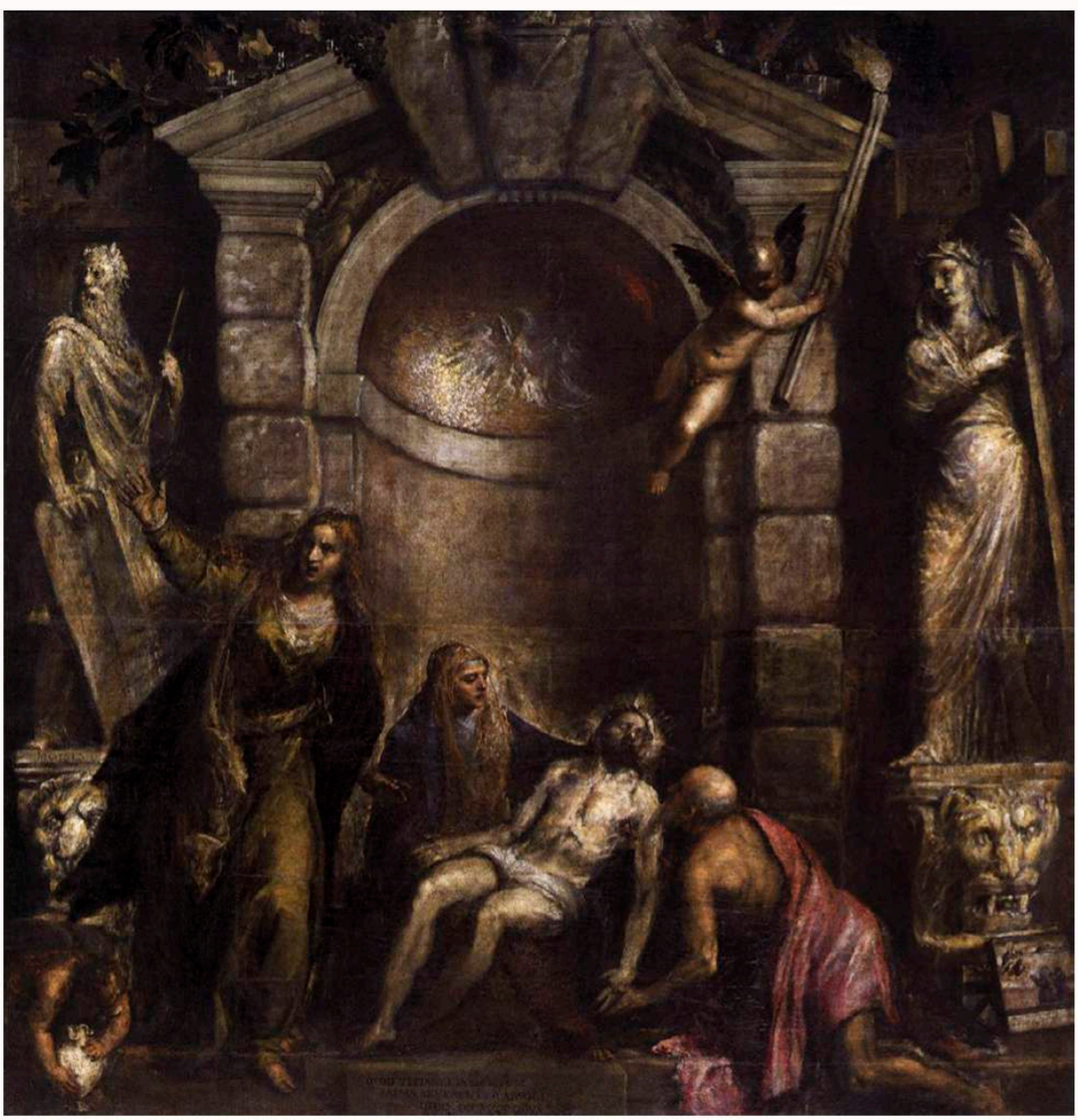
MUSEUM The cherubic angel bodies both absorb and radiate a certain luminosity.

TOMESCU It's staggering how much light this painting generates. When we enter the Franciscan Frari, the great gothic church it hangs in, the sheer scale of it is breathtaking. It is the largest altarpiece ever attempted in Venice, at seven meters in height with support made from 21 cedar panels. A golden glow takes hold of the upper area of the painting and spreads its energy and warmth throughout. And I respond to the faint amendments in the sky. To continue certain patches of sky logically would flatten the form of a figure. Each punctuation mark, each halt in the sky, directs our eye around or has us pause. It helps us navigate between all the protagonists here, we experience the way they relate to one another and the surrounding spaces. Titian was only 24 when he painted his *Assumption*.

"Inspiration is such a weak word. To think of them as inspiration would be to downplay their importance. I fill up on them after a year of solid painting. They fortify me. I tune into a different kind of knowing that deals in the medium of uncertainties, and this is the space in which I can question, the space in which I can always learn."

"Painting is unity, clarity and fullness. Form doesn't need to be trapped by lines, it has to breathe, which is what the Venetians understood so well. They began to paint directly onto canvas, at times working without drawing all together (especially late Titian). They understood painting as freedom from the very start.

William de Kooning saw painting as a means through which an artist practiced their intuition—intuition not taken for granted, not assumed. Emerson referred to intuition as primary wisdom. And a great part of intuition is experience. The paintings of the Venetians open into subtle, vulnerable spaces that can't be calculated or measured in advance. They remain open, unfixed, slowly discovered. There is an absolute intelligence in their work through which everything comes together."



Titian, *Pietà*, 1575, oil on canvas

[1]*Titian painted the* Pietà *for his tomb and died before he could complete it. I am eternally grateful to Palma il Giovane, the younger artist who undertook its completion, for understanding Titian's late paintings in particular* Pietà *so well, and choosing to add very minimally (at the periphery of the image) to the work of the master, leaving most of the painting in Titian's hand. In 2008 some scholars were still debating how finished or unfinished Titian's late paintings are; it is refreshing to know that in 1576, when Titian died, such concerns were irrelevant.*

[2]*The* Pietà *is a common subject in Christian art of this era, a form of the* Lamentation *illustrating the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus. As was the habit of renaissance painters, Titian likely inserted his own face in those of the protagonists. It's assumed he here stands in for the kneeling Nicodemus.*

Titian, *Pietà*

1575, OIL ON CANVAS

Located at the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

TOMESCU Titian often reused his canvases, sometimes painting new subjects on top of earlier, unfinished works. He was known to work paintings in rotation, turning canvases face to the wall and returning to them after a number of years. X-rays detect the layers of dust which accumulated between each layer of paint, showing us just how slow, how delayed his process really was. And I like knowing this.

All the evidence we have points to the fact that Titian changed the configuration of his paintings directly on the canvas constantly as he worked. He would draw on the surface directly with either paint or black chalk and then ignore his drawing anyway.

When I first came face to face with Titian's last work[1], his *Pietà*[2] in Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, nothing I'd seen before prepared me for it. It is a canvas of monumental proportions, yet intensely intimate. A painting that remains spectacularly unconcerned with virtuosity. There is something infinitely quiet in the face of this *Pietà*. It is painted with a love, with a knowing.

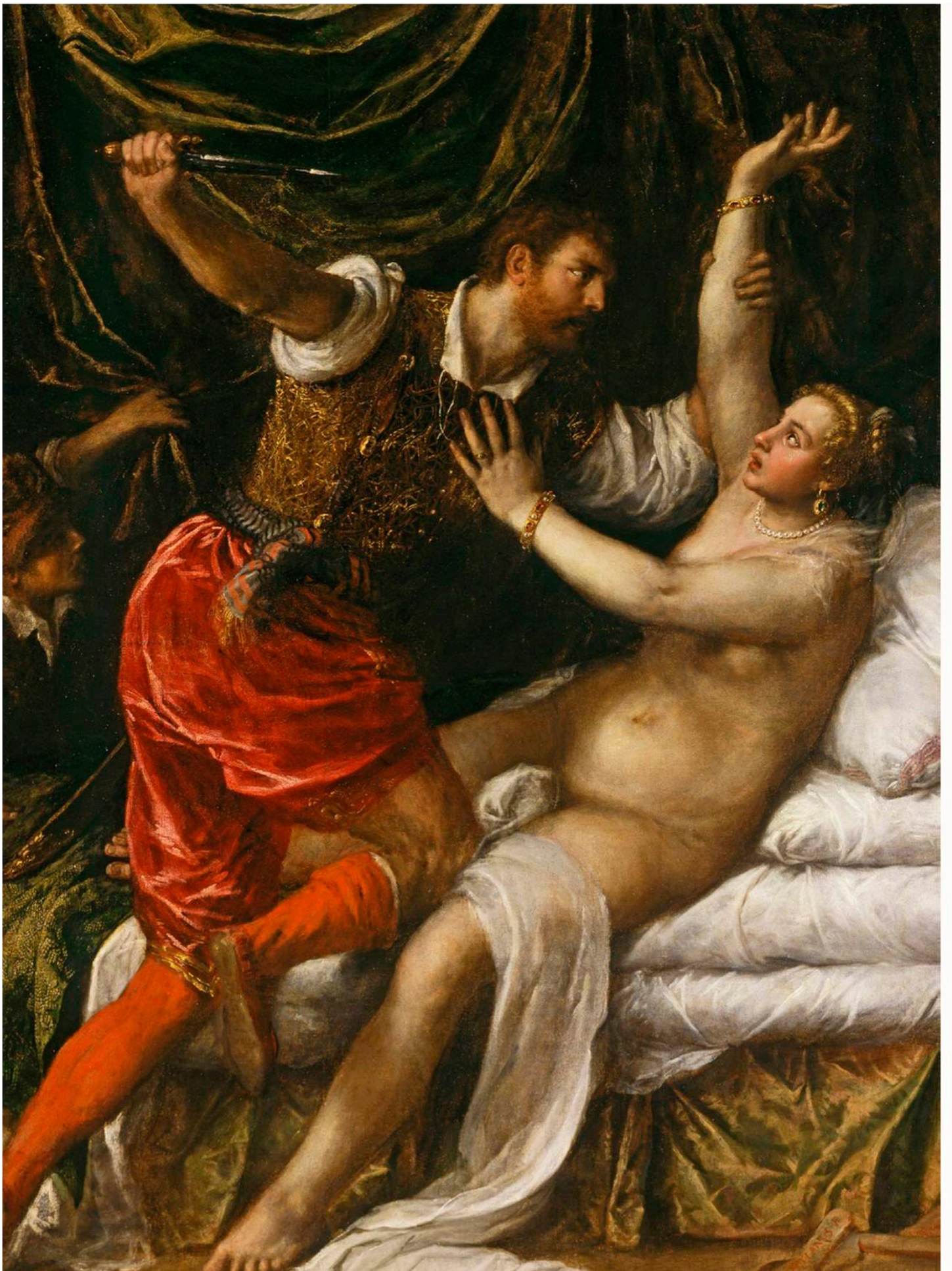
The first thing we notice is the strong architecture of the work, the bold diagonals. The figures are pushed to the peripheries. Three quarters of the work is enveloped in a grey, shimmering presence; a substance built from paint. It's almost a separate structure, a hovering other identity in front of the narrative. Everything else in this room in the Accademia feels fixed, contained, by comparison.

Nothing is used descriptively in the *Pietà*. There are no lines, no entrapments, only transitions and free floating form. Drawing exists to separate elements or at the service of making a connection. Everything we see revolves, stays open. Nothing is fixed.

When Titian picks up a line of white, it is never continuous. It interrupts, it stops. It is used to find, to reshape; used to feel, never to describe. I am attracted to the way cloth folds, allowing for movement, and how waves of colour form the flesh of Christ. Christ's figure is something that I keep returning to, marveling at the fact that loose paint forms a chest. Loose paint forms an arm, bringing it into being. In the latter stages of his life, Titian increasingly painted with his hands.

The more I look at this painting, the warmer, more embracing it becomes. I follow through the course of a fold in the green-ochre robe of Mary Magdalene, or along the strong wall of blue in the Virgin's embracing arm as Titian paints more fullness in a form, and more direction in a movement.

There's nothing like *Pietà* in the whole of painting I think, let alone in the renaissance.



Titian, *Tarquin and Lucretia*

1571, OIL ON CANVAS

Located at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Editor's note: *This documents the rape of Lucretia, a popular episode dating back to the early Roman Republic. It's a scene of great potency. In it, Sextus Tarquinius, son of the last Roman king, forces himself upon the virtuous Lucretia. If she does not permit his advances, he threatens to kill her, along with a slave, telling her husband she was found in an act of adultery. According to historians—such as the Roman Livy and the Greek Dionysius of Halicarnassus—the violent assault and Lucretia's resulting suicide played a significant role in the overthrowing of the elder Tarquinius. In composition, it draws on a Giulio Mantuan fresco and engravings by Heinrich Aldegraver, yet under Titian the arrangement is given new life.*

TOMESCU It's fascinating how in Titian, matter and flesh take on the fluidity of water or the transparency of air and light, while background drapery fills up with the tension of an entire scene. The protagonists are given strength by forces external to themselves. And notice that one of Tarquin's stockings is rolled halfway up. Why do you think this is?

MUSEUM Perhaps it is the force of his knee, pushed against the mattress.

TOMESCU Titian *needed* the bare knee in the painting. Imagine this right leg immersed in red! He needed it to be fluid, to fold back into the drapery. Titian had to connect all the elements here. A full red stocking on that leg would isolate Tarquin, and all the unity of the work would come to pieces. There are intense, charged passages and passages where we slow down, get redirected, experience the quiet spaces in between. Despite all the energy and vitality in the work, paradoxically the sense of pause, of delay, also increases.

MUSEUM You believe Tarquin's exposed knee to be essential to the work's success?

TOMESCU Vital. So too, are Tarquin's arms. The folded sleeve and the other, which relaxes, are at ease. To arrive at the unity he was after, he couldn't respond to descriptive elements.

MUSEUM It's interesting that the unity arises through the coexistence of stark opposites. There's Tarquin's form, with its burly, angular qualities, and then Lucretia's body, which possesses roundness, non-preciseness.

TOMESCU It's good you said non-preciseness, it reminds me of an important point. Her form is not fixed. It's full, not confined by line. There is solidness to the figure; and sometimes this comes from elsewhere, from the distribution of weight somewhere else in the work, though we read it as strength in her form... If Lucretia's face is more emphasised than the rest of her body, more 'detailed' you might say, the question we should be asking is why? What purpose does this serve? The detail gives her face expressive power, but that could have occurred with a looser approach as well. It allows our eye to slow down, even to pause, and travel through the intricacies. We forever move through slow passages, and passages that are more activated and charged.

Here painting is somewhere at the intersection between restraint and intensity. There is always editing in Titian. He edited the red stocking out, he edited the full right sleeve of Tarquin out too, allowing the dagger to be wielded with greater force. If the sleeve was softer, more ample, fuller, there is no way the hand and weapon could be charged with such energy.

The drapery that closes in on the figures participates so powerfully in the action between them. It pushes them in and increases the sense of fervency. If anything, the tension in the scene is amplified outside of the figures, with the acute stop-and-start brushwork.

MUSEUM In a strange way, the drapery has some of the savage, almost scratchy lines that Picasso's early cubist women do. It's a tenuous link, but there's a bit of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in it.

TOMESCU The complexity of a painting such as this and of works of the renaissance (or earlier) announces much that is to come. Giotto definitely does, you see his influence everywhere. Picasso didn't need to look at Titian to arrive at those lines. It is a constant source of wonder how linked it all becomes by the concerns of painting. It changes and evolves yet its concerns remain the same.

MUSEUM And what of the observer in the corner, who witnesses the activities? What is their function?

TOMESCU Interesting you spotted this, I'd forgotten all about it. I like suggesting omissions to myself. Imagine if this figure wasn't there? They keep our eye within the work, constantly leading us back in, pushing us into the drama and the hopelessness of Lucretia's fate. You can't pinpoint a single meaning, that's why the content is such a difficult thing to explain. We can explore subtleties forever.

Titian, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1571, oil on canvas

Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna of the Meadow*

c. 1500, OIL AND TEMPERA ON PANEL

Located at (and copyright to) the National Gallery, London

TOMESCU A late Bellini, a sublimely beautiful, reassuring scene and yet the resulting feeling is one that's cautious, underscored by uncertainty. A dark premonition enters the idyllic scene, a silent, almost undetectable threat: the black bird perched on a leafless branch right at the edge of the work.

All linear aspects surrounding the figure of the Virgin and the infant in her lap are simultaneously precise and open, they remain unconfined. There is such inner logic in all connections here and such tension, a world to still discover. I respond to the clarity and subtlety of every form here, the fluidity of the Virgin's gown as Bellini dissolves paint into the shape of a garment or a figure. The Virgin's deep blue dress commands our full attention; we identify it as a known object. We identify each character here, and yet they are constantly reshaped, not only to establish themselves but also to accommodate all others in the work.

We notice the very strong diagonal direction of the Virgin's shawl, a sculptural form with its unexpected sharp angle. It detaches from the background, and at the same time it can only exist because of the tension and contrast to it, it adds strength and power to the watery presence of Mary's skirt. And we pause with the very subtle transitions between the two. In fact the folds of the dress acquire the depth of an entire landscape. As we experience all the intricacies of the connections we can not help but notice a deep, pronounced abstract folding in the bodice of her dress, parading as if it belonged to the Virgin's attire, yet all along projecting forward and acting independently of it.

And as the vitality in the painting increases, with all the activity of the rushing clouds, the sense of stillness and silence only deepens.

Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna of the Meadow*, c. 1500, oil and tempera on panel

Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1448-1450, tempera on panel

Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ*

C. 1450S, TEMPERA ON PANEL

Located at (and copyright to) the National Gallery, London

TOMESCU Going through art school I developed a veneration for Piero della Francesca. Yet, when I walked towards *The Baptism* for the first time, the majesty and purity of his painting took me completely by surprise. Nothing I'd studied prepared me for it.

A warm, diffuse light envelops the spaces here, making them approachable, open. I'm attracted to the way Piero's rigorous, impeccable construction is softened by a reddish glow. A touch of unexpected, iridescent rose colour shimmers on the body of Christ. It warms up the flesh slightly, almost undetectably, and also warms up the painting, changing the structure of the work, [as] it passes into something more vulnerable and fragile. We experience passages where the eye is struggling to distinguish forms and begin to discern that which is not immediately visible; we notice the discreet presence of golden rays above Christ's head. So much clarity of colour emerges out of the subtle tones here. Everything is aired. It is as if Piero painted with more air than paint.

A calm atmosphere of reflection develops, simultaneously grave and delicate. It is a majestic painting. A feeling of wisdom is everywhere. We have a sense of pause, of suspension of time and a sense of infinite continuity.

I respond to the powerful presence of the tree, it adds strength to the figure of Christ. Every detail is precise, yet with a lightness of touch, down to the background landscape and economic use of vegetation.

MUSEUM Speaking of the verdant landscape, where did it originate? I know landscapes in these works were often localised.

TOMESCU Perhaps somewhere between Borgo San Sepolcro, where Piero was born and Monterchi. What really interests me about it is the fullness of the vegetation. Even though it is suggested the trees in this painting might belong to a walnut grove, Piero rendered their identities increasingly ambiguous. They are of a certain kind and a certain age, yet those we see in the distance remain unidentifiable. They make perfect sense in the painting—their life is in the painting, not outside of it.

Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the Life of Christ*

c. 1305, FRESCO

Located in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

TOMESCU You know, I really do believe that everything painting ever needed is here, in the Scrovegni Chapel. They hold the promise of everything that's still to come in Western art. The promise of a painter like Matisse feels palpably close, so rich yet minimal in execution are the details, so concentrated is their critical intelligence.

The Scrovegni Chapel is in Padua, a stone's throw away from Venice. It is also known also as the Arena Chapel, as the land on which it was built is adjacent to a Roman arena. The construction began in 1303. It was to be a private chapel for the Scrovegni family, built in brick, occasionally used for public functions such as on the day of the Annunciation. Enrico degli Scrovegni—who commissioned the building and its frescos—was a well-known moneylender. His father Reginaldo was immortalised in literature, placed in Dante's seventh circle of hell for the sin of usury. Tradition has it that the chapel was built and decorated by Enrico in expiation of his father's soul.

Since the chapel's restoration, visits are timed. You get a ticket. You then watch a short film about the restoration, the building and decoration of the Chapel and Giotto's impact on the history of painting. After this, a ticket only allows you 15 minutes in the chapel. I tend to linger, holding a number of tickets as a great deal time is needed here. I'd recommend a minimum half hour—and you can easily do with more.

Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ)

TOMESCU I always find myself returning to this scene. The proportions are fascinating. Christ's outstretched body becomes fluid, elongated, reshaping to suit the image's inner logic. His form acquires added dimension through the masses of figures and the light headdresses of the two protagonists in the foreground. Their bold forms contrast with the delicate rhythm of hands and the precise, exquisite details.

Measure is everything here. I am attracted by the way folds of clothing link each figure to the one beside it. The mourner clad in pale attire to our left is cut off the picture slightly, and this extends the scene, adding an ongoing element.

The entire drama is further empowered by the tremendously expressive choir of grieving angels, wondrously scattered on the intense blue of the sky. They place everything in movement and add lightness to the masses of figures surrounding Christ. There is form, volume and fullness, yet no weight brings it down. The sharp diagonal of the landscape directs us to the drama, adding to it, pointing us towards the Virgin's last embrace. It also adds to this feeling of Christ's body expanding, not remaining fixed despite its precise form.

Notice how Giotto changes the temperature of his whites and of his colours. The back of a robe may be blue white, than turn into an warm ochre white—we experience all of the rich transitions in-between. Often complementary colours participate in the making of a district identity of colour on the one robe.

MUSEUM The anonymous figures (with their backs turned to us) are an entry point to the work, aren't they? Instead of feeling like intruders on this intimate gathering, we enter from the bottom left, completing the circle.

TOMESCU You could definitely see it that way. Like Titian will later do in *Tarquin and Lucretia*, Giotto edits details out. Sometimes he disperses with the halos altogether. And the halo of Christ—I love how it just steps forward a fraction. You don't expect it. Rationally, it should step back, but in the realm of painting this had to change. We have infinite depth here, but we're also constantly pulled back, our eye engaging with the entire scene once more, pausing, taking in details, slowing down with the spaces behind and between the protagonists here, then returning into the scene again, noticing perhaps the open passage created by the parting of a grey beard. It reminds us, like everything else in this scene that nothing is used descriptively, that everything becomes a measured interval, a pause or an opening into a space we are invited to enter, and that relationships between all the elements here are ongoing, renewing our experience every time.

The Last Supper

TOMESCU A curious thing about this panel is that it houses a disappearing act. The slender column on the right performs a double act, appearing, and then vanishing, only to make its presence more powerful through its absence. It later reappears to suit the logic of the work. I'm used to seeing this in a Cezanne; I did not expect it in Giotto.

The construction becomes more and more apparent because it is restrained, only the ingredients that are really needed survive. The play between protagonists, between false and real architecture is subtle and finally tuned.

The whole table and its guests are placed on a slant, yet somehow our eye balances it out. We participate in this, filling in the gaps. Repetitions only lead to variation. For instance, the constant and subtle changes of the dark halos, each with their own identity are reshaped to suit other elements in the scene. This changes the way we look and take in a scene, it slows our eye down as it travels, unsuspecting of the delicate changes and the complexity of variation. I have filled many notebooks on this. I must remember to look at it further.

Aida Tomescu is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf. In March this year, she will join the gallery at Art Basel Hong Kong, and will present a solo exhibition in November.

Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the Life of Christ*, c. 1305, fresco