



At first glance, Aida Tomescu's slight frame and gentle manners seem at odds with the size and power of her paintings. She prefers large canvases – usually working on several at once – where layers of paint are copiously applied and just as easily scraped off, the floor of her studio bearing witness to this process. Spending time in conversation with the artist, however, you begin to notice the strength in her hands, as you gradually discover that Tomescu's compelling paintings are born of quiet

dedication and endurance, not force. Since her arrival in Australia in 1980, Romanian-born Tomescu has received continuous critical acclaim, with the likes of John McDonald – as well as AGNSW curators Terence Maloon and Barry Pearce – praising her work over the years. Her reputation has been established with a series of awards, including the Art Gallery of NSW Sulman (1996), Wynne (2001) and Dobell (2003) prizes. In 2008 the Gallery acquired Tomescu's painting *Aqua alta*, which was part of her latest

exhibition, *Ravel*, held in Melbourne last December. *Look* met with the artist at the dawn of *Ravel*'s opening and found Tomescu's energy unaffected by months of demanding work.

"It was really fortunate that I knew very early on I wanted to be a painter," says Tomescu. The first art book she bought – as a young girl, with saved pocket money – was on Raphael: "Even with its black and white illustrations, the power of those pages stayed with me." Having studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest, Tomescu is

Infinitely subtle threads: the art of Aida Tomescu



grateful for her rigorous training: “Most of all it gave me the discipline of daily work, which I’ve never lost,” she told us, “the joy of staying with the work every day without necessarily expecting results.” Painting is to Tomescu “a form of questioning on canvas” and the artist, as well as the viewer, must be willing to allow all possibilities: “I think the trouble sometimes is that we expect a painting to explain too much and conclude too much ...” she wonders, then resolves “if anything, you want it to be alive, to stay open, until it reaches a point where nothing feels arbitrary any more.”

Tomescu talks about painting in terms of precise and strong structure: “I’ve always been fascinated by the intelligence in a painting, the tight logic of it ... yet, paradoxically, it always feels as though held together by such infinitely subtle threads.” As

she finds her way through the work, the surface she has been working on slows down, entering a space which feels approachable, full of potential, vulnerable. She is interested in painting which exists independently of the artist, whose task is not to force but simply reveal the nature of each work: “At a certain point a painting is determining itself, its own character, and ultimately it is as remote as it could be from spontaneity and self-expression.”

Ravel is arguably Tomescu’s most compelling and evocative series to date. Though the vibrancy of her current palette developed through the imposing tableaux of her previous show (*Campi Flegrei*, 2006), with *Ravel* the painter appears to have reached higher levels of intensity and nuance. There is perhaps a greater sense of balance and dialogue to be found in her brushwork, as in her drawing, and greater subtlety in

the way layers are revealed in places and hidden in others. “At times I feel I could touch the precise moment when an image grows out of the canvas ... you begin to inhabit the surface in a way that allows you to be everywhere at once.”

Tomescu is adamant about the fundamental importance of delay in her practice, the ability to live in the work, holding off external disturbances: “I don’t know if you can ever go too far, but you can certainly stop too soon, and that’s more dangerous. Scraping everything off and starting again can only be a possibility of achieving more.” She talks of “honouring the work” and “fulfilling a responsibility”, her devotion to painting imbued with such humility and integrity as to almost resemble faith. “There are no half measures in painting,” she states, “your absolute

best is the minimum requirement and the starting point of it all.”

Australia has proven to be the ideal home for Tomescu, who quotes the distances, quality of light and isolation as key factors for her work: “The changes in scale and medium chosen for the work evolved as a result. I’m sure I couldn’t have done this anywhere else.” Though she still needs to visit Europe regularly for brief periods, she is aware that the success she enjoys here has granted her the freedom she needs to concentrate on her work: “Support is vital to a painter,” she explains, “as the work I do asks for everything I’ve got ... but the possibilities seem gloriously endless.”

LAURA PIA

Aida Tomescu *Aqua alta* (detail) 2008. Oil on linen 184 x 154 cm. AGNSW collection © the artist. Previous spread: Aida Tomescu’s studio, photo Jenni Carter, portrait of the artist by Sonia Payes.