

Campi Flegrei by Terence Maloon

Campi Flegrei (“burning fields”) is the name of a geologically unstable area, 150 square kilometres in extent, between Naples and Cumae in Southern Italy. The region is known for its susceptibility to earthquakes and occasional, unpredictable rising and sinking of the ground level. It is dotted with more than fifty centres of volcanic activity. According to ancient legend, the Olympian gods defeated the Giants on the Campi Flegrei, and when one of the giants stirs in his grave, the ground shudders. The fiery colour of Aida Tomescu’s recent paintings and the eruptive fumaroles, fireworks and ebullient brews of her recent drawings have recommended the title of *Campi Flegrei* for this exhibition.

Over the past decade, Aida Tomescu’s exhibitions have been ensembles which have evolved gradually and have been carefully thought-out in the studio. While they are in the studio, her works are continually moved into different groupings and sequences, with the most energizing effects and telling relationships being sought. While this shuffling goes on, flaws are identified in paintings and weaker works are sent for rehabilitation, turned to the wall or put back in a drawer. As the works start to fill the studio space, some of the largest paintings begin to preponderate, suggesting a tonal “key” and a psychological tenor for the ensemble, while other works assume a complementary role as foils, harmonies and attenuations of the mood that the larger paintings establish. This is the way her exhibitions develop, and so Tomescu’s works emerge as highly socialized entities: they have the independence to speak for themselves, but they also obviously form a community.

This point is worth emphasising, because each of Tomescu’s exhibitions has a particular tenor, and the current exhibition differs in important ways from its predecessors. The predominance of fiery colour (cadmium scarlet, cadmium red, cadmium red deep, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium yellow light, cadmium maroon, permanent crimson, cobalt violet – all extremely intense hues, used abundantly, usually with very little admixture of white), and the introduction of coloured pastels in Tomescu’s new drawings, signal some notable shifts away from precedent. There are also changes on a more subtle level: the paintings and drawings no longer constitute separate blocs; they have begun to overlap and cross-fertilize.

Tomescu’s *Campi Flegrei* paintings are generally less congested and monolithic than their precursors. Bigger gaps have opened up in the paint structure; the distribution of visual weight is more uneven and irregular; and the paintings tend to be more explicitly *drawn*. It is hard to think of a precedent in Tomescu’s work for the high-energy, heat-of-the-moment articulation of *Thor*, with its raw, maroon brushmarks building a dramatic profile against a ragged yellow ground, like a gathering of storm-clouds scudding across a lurid sky. Precedents for it might be found in her drawings and etchings, but not in her recent paintings. Likewise, a suite of smaller paintings called *Paroi* approximates the layered effects of her drawings, featuring flurries of line incised with the pointed end of a brush.

It is always impressive to see how, even in her most densely worked canvases, Tomescu’s paintings never grow turgid and muscle-bound: there is always a sense of the elasticity of organically related touches and an impulsiveness and nerviness of gesture. A sort of lilt lightens and energizes her touch.

Cézanne was once asked to explain what particular considerations were involved in the way he painted, and he replied with a gesture: he held up both hands and wove his fingers together. “A motif is *that*”, he told Joachim Gasquet: “There shouldn’t be a single link too loose, a hole through which the emotion, the light, the truth can escape. I work all of my canvas at once, all together. [...] I join [nature’s] straying hands.”¹

Matisse, similarly, chose the image of weaving to explain his drawings: “A good drawing is like a wicker basket, or a hamper. (I prefer hamper, because it gives the idea of a larger

¹ Joachim Gasquet: *Cézanne*, Cynara, Paris, 1988, p. 130.

surface.) You can't remove a cane from it without making a hole. Yet why call it *good* drawing, why not just say: a drawing ought to be...?"²

Tomescu's dedicates her art to similar ideals of integrity and irreducibility. Whenever gaps in the impasto and glimpses of the bare ground occur in her paintings, these are integral parts of the pictorial structure; in effect, Tomescu's images are hole-proof too. The image, the orientation of the brushmarks, the configuration of colour, the surface and the substance of the painting seem to be one and the same thing, yet to create an illusion of this kind might entail the work of weeks and months, requiring extraordinary resources of ingenuity and critical acumen to achieve their synthesis.

Lawrence Gowing's description of Cézanne's achievement inadvertently sheds light on Tomescu. Gowing claimed that Cézanne was "perhaps the first man in history to realize the necessity for the manner in which paint is handled to build up a homogeneous and consistent pictorial structure ... This is the invention of *forme* in the French modernist sense – meaning the condition of paint that constitutes a pictorial structure. It is the discovery of an intrinsic structure inherent in the medium and the material."³

"Art is a harmony parallel to nature," Cézanne declared.⁴ For him, the medium and the material of painting constituted a kind of second nature, a locus of heightened reality which was poetically linked to the other reality "out there". While Tomescu's paintings never deviate from their opaque materiality and resolute abstractness, they communicate an immediacy and intensity of sensation. That "art is a harmony parallel to nature" is a truism she takes as red.

In her hands, accumulated dabs and encrustations of paint may acquire marvellous powers of evocation and expression. Quasi-naturalistic effects are never consciously sought by her, yet they are within reach of her technique: the fretting of wind across water, a cascade of wavy hair, the rustling leaves of poplar trees, the latent electricity of an animal's pelt, the weathered face of rocks – she implies that equivalents to these phenomena are "there" in the possibilities of abstract art. The philosopher Theodor Adorno described the abstractions that occur in modern music, accounting for the analogous moments in Tomescu's painting:

"In truth, as art grew up, it moved closer to the beautiful in nature ... Pure expression in art works, freed of all interfering factors including the so-called stuff of nature, converges with nature, just as in the most authentic works of Anton Webern the pure sound to which they are all reduced by dint of subjective sensibility turns into the opposite: the sound of nature, and of an expressive, eloquent one at that, one that is language, and not a naturalistically copied chunk of it."⁵

Tomescu's *oeuvre* in prints and drawings is now so substantial that she has won an enviable reputation on their basis alone. It is curious to note that she prefers using a prepared ground to bring out the painterly qualities in her drawings, while at the same time reviving a convention of the early Renaissance, when a prepared ground was commonly used for drawings done in silverpoint and black chalk. Tomescu often draws over rejected etching proofs, parts of which may be glimpsed through the darkness, or prickling along the edges of certain works. The drawn configurations respond to the stimulus of the prepared ground, but in an ultimate sense the ground is a token of a more pressing and encompassing reality.

² Henri Matisse: Letter to André Rouveyre, in *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, Hermann, Paris, 1992, p. 201, footnote 63.

³ Lawrence Gowing, "The Early Work of Paul Cézanne" in Mary Anne Stevens (ed.): *Cézanne – The Early Years 1859-1872*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1988, p. 10. Tomescu might well want to take Gowing to task for making such claims on behalf of Cézanne rather than Titian, who is her favourite artist. Titian's compulsive way of identifying his images with the picture-plane and of eliding the people and substances he painted into his magnificent concretions of scumbling and glazing make him a distant forerunner of Cézanne in this respect. For a brilliant analysis of these aspects of Titian's art, see Richard Wollheim: *Painting as an Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987.

⁴ Gasquet: *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁵ Theodor Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984, p. 115.

There is always some precedence for a drawing – in all drawings it is always a matter of drawing-over, drawing-against, drawing-again.

When I see the unleashed energy of these extravagantly beautiful drawings, it occurs to me that they are like the dragons described by the Chinese painter Pu Yen-t'u:

“All things under heaven contain the double aspect of visible-invisible. Let us cite a dragon that leaves its watery lair to take flight in the sky. If it showed itself completely naked, what mystery would surround it? The spectator who raises his head to see it would soon have seen the entirety: here is the head, here is the tail, the beard and claws... Once the spectator's curiosity was satisfied, he or she would lose interest. So a real dragon always conceals itself behind clouds. Hauling wind and rain, he soars, blazing. He whirls, superb. Through the visible-invisible the dragon exercises his power of fascination.”⁶

⁶ Pu Yen-t'u (Qing Dynasty), in François Cheng: *Souffle-Esprit – Textes théoriques chinois sur l'art pictural*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2006, p. 50.