

Fluid construction

Aida Tomescu on Tony Tuckson's *White Lines (vertical) on ultramarine*.

There is something infinitely subtle in the face of this painting, a clarity, a presence. It has a directness and boldness that co-exist with a tentativeness that comes from discovery. Tony Tuckson's approach to painting as a creative act is rigorous and this inevitably means innovation. Very quickly *White lines (vertical) on ultramarine 1970-73* becomes a compressed, concentrated 'other', with a light - a quiet, shimmering glow - all its own.

At first glance, the work appears grandly simple, like one continuous sweep of painting. We enter a space of broad gesture, which sets the pace for a painting that seems to gallop with energy and vitality, yet is equally calm and stilled. In the midst of rapid, successive rhythms, punctuated by subtle interruptions, there is an essential link between the precise readjustments, the measured approach and the final open structure, which has a feel of utmost spontaneity and improvisation. We can still see the faint, veiled beginnings, the erasures and cessation of other forms, the gentlest marks that lie hidden beneath the thin films of blue.

These traces of presence and absence that make Tuckson's pictures so compelling - with their layered, indeterminate, shifting and precarious structures - acquire unsuspected depth. As Tuckson shifts and layers his forms - rotating them and slightly changing their angle - he creates circulation patterns on his surface, loosens it, lets air in and fills it with breath. In one sense, the development of this image is classical abstraction; what is not, is the sheer clarity and light it generates.

White (vertical) lines on ultramarine is the result of repeated accumulation, of thorough appraisal and reappraisal and a relentless questioning of the image. The recurring white forms grow and unfold. Reinscribed and erased time and again, they flicker with wondrous variety in their unpredictable twists and turns. In Tuckson's hands, repetition becomes variation. There is a sense that something is unfolding at the precise moment we are looking.

To best experience this painting is to become engaged with its complex transitions. White diagonals tense up with a sense of

urgency, then relax again with Tuckson's brush; and the resulting unpredictability of the relationships here is fragile. The electricity we first experience where two of the sharpest diagonals collide head-on resurfaces throughout, revitalising and extending the image. Forms here turn into energy units and action emerges simultaneously.

For Tuckson, the warmth of the masonite support is allowed to come through the thin layers of blue, altering the temperature of the ultramarine, which is packed with incident and notation. The minute horizontal markings appear like a chance encounter but in fact become links between the white protagonists. Where the panels meet, we experience a yellowing of the white, and if you think it accidental, look again! These discreet films of ochre pigment are deliberately and resolutely retained, further chromatic incidents that contrast against the full breadth of the white forms.

Cézanne was the master of absences and Tuckson, too, uses absence and the incomplete form. The end of the strong white diagonal on the left performs a disappearing act. I want to know exactly what it does to the work. Try filling it in, and the flow and unity of the painting are lost.

The cluster of drips, mid work, serve in strong supporting roles. Their playfulness releases some of the tension, creating transitions between the active white protagonists and the fluid ultramarine, connecting the two. Peering into the ultramarine you realise just how considered those 'accidental' drips really are! Countless others are edited out only to exist at the deeper levels located in the blue realm. We should also engage with the differences of tone, of lightness and density of this ground, as previous white forms rub their scattered remains into the ultramarine, notably at the far left of the work. The edges of this work are slowly discovered, brush mark by brush mark; the resulting unpredictability of the relationships here is both certain and fragile.

Despite its very spontaneous appearance, Tuckson's painting can never be simply

'gestural' to me; his gesture is cumulative, overlaying and building form. Contemplation makes clearer just how slow and deliberate, how gradual the construction of this work really is. In fact, the stops and starts of each brush mark, the passages where they overlap, allows for planes of construction to assert themselves.

I am attracted by the warmth, delicacy and attention with which Tuckson models his paint, the very light touches of his brush, the suspended passages where we participate, filling in the gaps, the fluidity and the natural state the image has reached.

And with a work such as this, I am reminded of how painting seems to coalesce all those moments of time - those pauses in the painting that lie behind, between and outside the particular forms we see. As Tuckson slowly builds up his characters, he also builds time into the painting. It is this delay, in such contradiction to the physicality of his approach, that draws me back to him.

White lines (vertical) on ultramarine is utterly abstract in the way that only painting can be. We can make connections to the landscape, to the bush, to the figure, all at once, but ultimately the forms in this work, their echoes and repetitions, the openings, the pauses, don't stand for anything other than themselves.

To look for private meanings in a work as broad and abstract as this would be especially pointless. Tuckson's paintings transcend being pinned down to one meaning, one subject. What is being expressed here is painting itself; its capacity to be about everything at once, its subjects and meanings always multiple.

Aida Tomescu is a winner of the Dobell, Wynne and Sulman prizes.

» **TUCKSON: THE ABSTRACT SUBLIME**
Until 17 February

Contemporary galleries



We enter a space of broad gesture, which sets the pace for a painting that seems to gallop with energy and vitality, yet is equally calm and stilled.

Tony Tuckson
White lines (vertical) on ultramarine
1970-73

Diptych: styrene-based house paint, polyvinyl acetate and pigment on hardboard, 213.5 x 244.6 cm. Gift of Annette Dupree 1976. © Estate of the artist. Licensed by Copyright Agency.