

## AIDA TOMESCU INTERVIEWED BY TERENCE MALOON

Several years ago, your work seemed to split up painting, drawing and collage into quite separate disciplines.

I've always seen them completely related, even though the appearance changed in different media. I tend to begin a new series by working on paper. Building up an image through successive layers of pastels and inks allows me to get involved, to find a vision for the new work. In a way you could say that collage provided the link between the painting and the drawing. I could participate more directly, experience and engage with the structure of the work by using pieces of torn paper, which kept editing the image, changing its configuration. The barrier between painting and drawing disappeared. But it wasn't premeditated, I arrived at it by necessity. It allowed for layering and spatialisation, which helped free up the way I constructed an image.

Yes, the way the image is built seems to become more transparent and the way it's made seems more direct, more immediate.

The experience affected everything. The making and the thinking could happen simultaneously. The image continued to evolve gradually, from a succession of moments and a continuous correspondence between layers. The motivation was to work towards abolishing the distance between thinking and doing, between conceiving and discovering the structure of the work and therefore also its content.

Some of the things you've seen recently seem to have had an impact on your new work. There's a volumetric fullness in works like *Sabine*, *Sunburn*, *Iris* and *Bathers* a sense of circulation and turning that seems to strike an unfamiliar note for me. Would that be attributable to, for example, Rubens or Tiepolo?

My interest has always been to arrive at a unified image with fullness and clarity, and to find a reality in the work which affirms its own existence. In the midst of the painting, when things are going well, you often feel that you are drawing on the sum of many experiences that are somehow essentially related. In other circumstances, all those experiences might seem very disparate, yet in the realm of the work they come together into complete accord.

So those influences or inspirations or allusions can creep in more or less undetected?

At times, changes can start to occur in your own work even before you are open enough or ready enough to see them elsewhere. I could only begin to look at Rubens and Tiepolo very recently, whereas Giotto and the Scrovegni Chapel, Titian, Piero della Francesca have been of enduring interest. In the 1980s when I first came face to face with Titian's *Pietà* in the Accademia in Venice I became aware of another presence in the work, a subtle structure that could be built up from the paint itself. It lifted away from the protagonists in the painting and shimmered in an indeterminate space.

It seems to be a space of pure feeling.

Yes, it is a space you can enter and you become aware of how much vulnerability there is in a strong, powerful painting. You also experience this absolute total intelligence in the work, through which everything comes together. It changes what you feel about other paintings, which can seem very illustrative by comparison.

So, Tiepolo and Rubens fall into that lesser capacity?

No, that's tough. In front of the Tiepolo in Melbourne I realised how the figurative elements in his painting keep changing identity – the drapery and the head or the torso of a figure link together to form a new entity.

*Rococco* 2012 (detail)  
mixed media and  
collage on paper  
120 x 84cm



So he announces the free play of modern art with the mobility and weightlessness of the elements in his compositions?

I feel the same applies to Titian, where matter and flesh take on the fluidity of water or the transparency of air and light, while the sky carries on the solidity of an entire landscape. When you raise the question of influence, I've always had trouble with that word as I feel the learning and level of understanding that great paintings require of you goes much deeper than the word "influence" implies.

Isn't it remarkable that in Venice you can go from Titian in the Accademia to Jackson Pollock at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, or to the wonderful Bonnard at the Ca Pesaro, and there's a profound connection. It's great that one of the Pollocks is called *Shimmering Substance* - doesn't that sum up the tradition?

I love taking that walk. Several years ago I saw an exhibition of Pollock's drawings at the Guggenheim. I love all Pollock, the early ones, the rough ones, the sand-mixed-with-paint ones, the overworked ones, the "failed" ones. It is fascinating how the eye can travel all the way back into the windows of bare canvas, experiencing the initial traces, and from there to the encrusted masses of pigment, with all the richness and complexity of the transitions and the spaces in between. But I also see abstraction in Titian, especially late Titian.

What qualities do you prize in the media you use?

Mutability - the capacity of oil paint to transform itself. I understand painting as a found structure. A painting evolves from continuous building up and erasure. The paint becomes a presence, dictating the structure, bringing in a surprising other intention to the work.

Are there advantages of specialising in a medium (as opposed to making "art"), which has no media-specificity?

I don't believe you ever get to specialise in a medium. All technical aspects are so intimately linked to the understanding of the image and its content, that somehow a new language always seems to be required every time you start again. The vocabulary you may have acquired is never adequate for the work you are dealing with; it is as if you need words you don't yet know. It is as if you have to learn a new language with each painting. If painting is like a circle that begins small and grows ever larger, then its expansion can continue without end. Specialising would mean simply persevering. I work in several media anyway. When you learn one thing, often it is applicable to something else.

What are the things that you value most in abstraction?

Its resistance to becoming a story. A work is allowed to stay open. However, paradoxically, the more open a painting is, the more precise it can become.

Like a lot of people, you have problems when people connect your work with Abstract Expressionism as a historical phenomenon, as an American phenomenon, as a stylistic phenomenon...

I've always struggled with the term Abstract Expressionism. It implies giving in to self-expression. It implies the absence of rigorous construction and can also imply an absence of content - and the assumption that painting is "mark making". I've always understood painting as image-making. There is nothing arbitrary about it.



Sabine 2011  
mixed media on linen  
183 x 153cm