

## The artist interview: Aida Tomescu

Rhana Devenport, ONZM

*In this regular column, artists respond to seven questions posed by the Director*

Aida Tomescu is one of Australia's leading and most distinctive abstractionists. Her poetic references and intensively worked surfaces are the result of a breadth of interests and a rigorous work ethic. Born in Bucharest, Romania, Tomescu has forged her acclaimed career in Australia since 1980. She studied at the Institute of Fine Arts, Bucharest, later completing a postgraduate Diploma of Art at the City Art Institute in Sydney, in 1983. The inaugural winner of the prestigious LSFA Arts 21 Fellowship in 1996, Tomescu was awarded the Sulman Prize in the same year. In 2001 she received the Wynne Prize and in 2003 won the Dobell Prize for Drawing at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Tomescu has consistently held solo exhibitions over the past forty years, including in Hong Kong and Sydney, and continues to be included in major group exhibitions, especially in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Her works are held in all major public art museums in Australia, as well as in the collections of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and the British Museum, London. Her energised and powerful painting *With the crimson word (diptych)*, 2022, was recently acquired by AGSA.

Rhana Devenport (RD): When did you first know you would be an artist?

Aida Tomescu (AT): I can't recall a time when I did not want to be a painter. I knew very early on, and then a couple of uncertain years followed, when circumstances pushed against my intentions ... everything fell into place when aged sixteen, and after some initial training in an art school running parallel to secondary studies, I met my first art tutor and began a steady diet of plaster casts and working with the model. I came to see a wealth of possibilities in the coldest plaster and everything opened up more and more as I worked. I could associate a plaster cast with joy when I became engaged with what my drawing was trying to express.

The discipline and rigour of those years agreed with me, and this continued through my time studying at the Institute

[of Fine Arts]. I based everything on observation and found sustenance in the unbreakable inner logic a painting can develop. It set me up on the course I'm on today.

RD: Who are the artists who continue to inspire you?

AT: Painters who live above time, their work remains in the present.

This list is long and always starts with Giotto, with Cimabue, with Duccio, and Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca. It takes a sharp turn into Colin McCahon, and moves through intense favourites, of Mondrian, Malevich and Popova – and there is always Cézanne, whose lessons keep looking back at me from the midst of my recent paintings.

I never think of them as inspiration; they are more important, more fundamental than that.

RD: What are you listening to?

AT: Nothing! I have to bring to painting a sustained mental energy and focus and maintain my connection to the work. I don't listen to music when I paint; I like the faint noises of the street, of birds outside my studio windows reminding me that the evening is close, though I would rather my days were longer. I often turn on the radio when in the studio but the volume is low and I work on the opposite side. Later in the evening when I pack up, I like the company of classic FM, especially when they play Shostakovich, or Mahler ... or Berg ... Debussy or Bach ... and Glenn Gould at the piano with *The Goldberg Variations*. I love the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall after a working day.

RD: What are you reading?

AT: I can't tire of Dostoyevsky, and I've just picked up the latest publication of *A Life in Letters*. I'd order, read and reread anything by him in every new translation, and have many favourites. And there is [Austrian novelist] Thomas Bernhard, who I turn to, revisit many times in anything that [has] made



Aida Tomescu in her studio, photo: Jenni Carter

it into English, which is most of it by now. Not that long ago, I went through all I could get of Henry James. I read him from cover to cover, then back again ... and happily did the same with Stendhal ... with Elias Canetti [Bulgarian-born], and with [Belgian-born French novelist] Marguerite Yourcenar earlier on.

RD: What is the sustaining question that your practice asks?

AT: Content. Finding the right (and only) content for each series. I work best in series, on a number of paintings (though one at a time, in rotation), letting them develop, gradually shaking off habits of a previous cycle and seeing something new. There is always continuation, yet it has to come through the work and the connection is always circuitous, never linear. Each series travels this distance towards an identity I don't yet know and this can only evolve gradually, even or especially when the image (once I'm through) has the appearance of a sudden leap or spontaneity. Construction, through both paint and erasure, is at its foundation.

Content always asks for: unity, clarity and fullness.

RD: If you could live with one work of art – what would it be?

AT: My first thought went to Kazimir Malevich's *Red Square*, 1915, because I long to see it again, and I'd always love to live longer with Piero's *The Baptism of Christ*, 1440–50, and if only one choice, I'll stop with the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua and spend all my time in there.

RD: What is art for?

AT: A way of thinking, discovery, transformation.

Breath, direction, life ... without closure.

A glimpse into another dimension. The works of art I'm drawn to, the paintings I return to, transcend time. They hold within them the capacity to change, to transform; they develop living structures that are always in the present.

pp. 38–9: Aida Tomescu, born Bucharest, Romania 1955, *With the crimson word (diptych)*, 2022, Sydney, oil on Belgian linen, 206.0 × 160.0 cm (each); Prudence Lee Bequest Fund 2023  
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