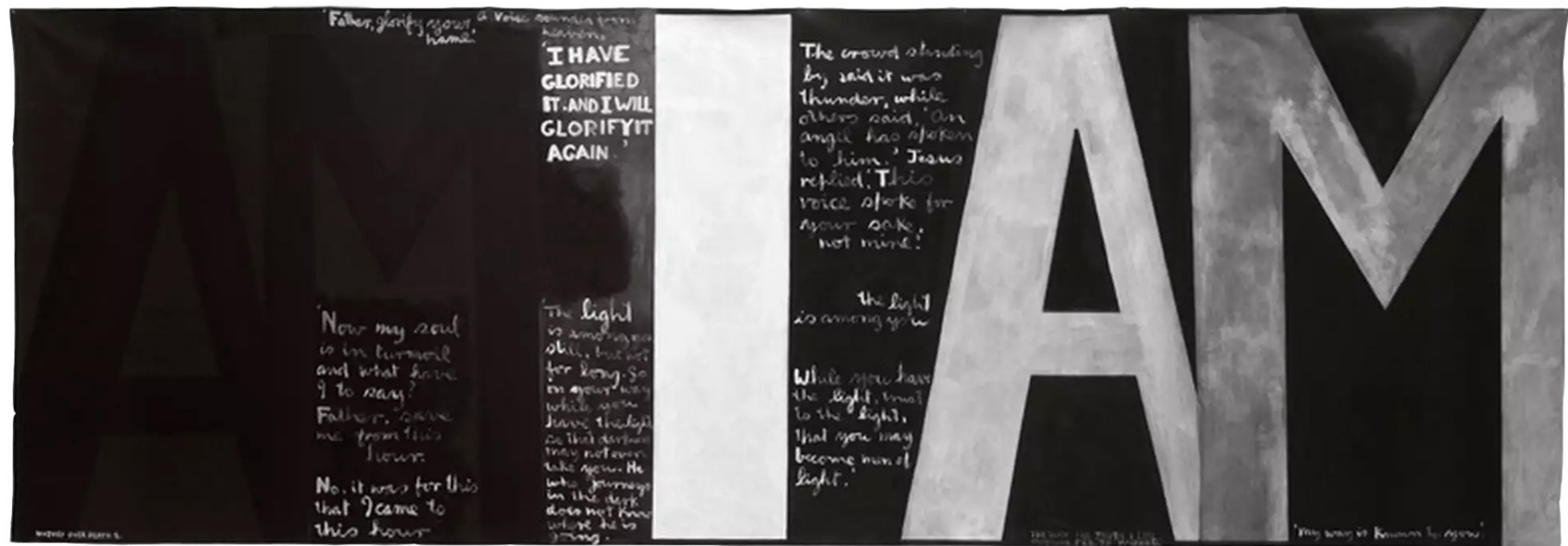


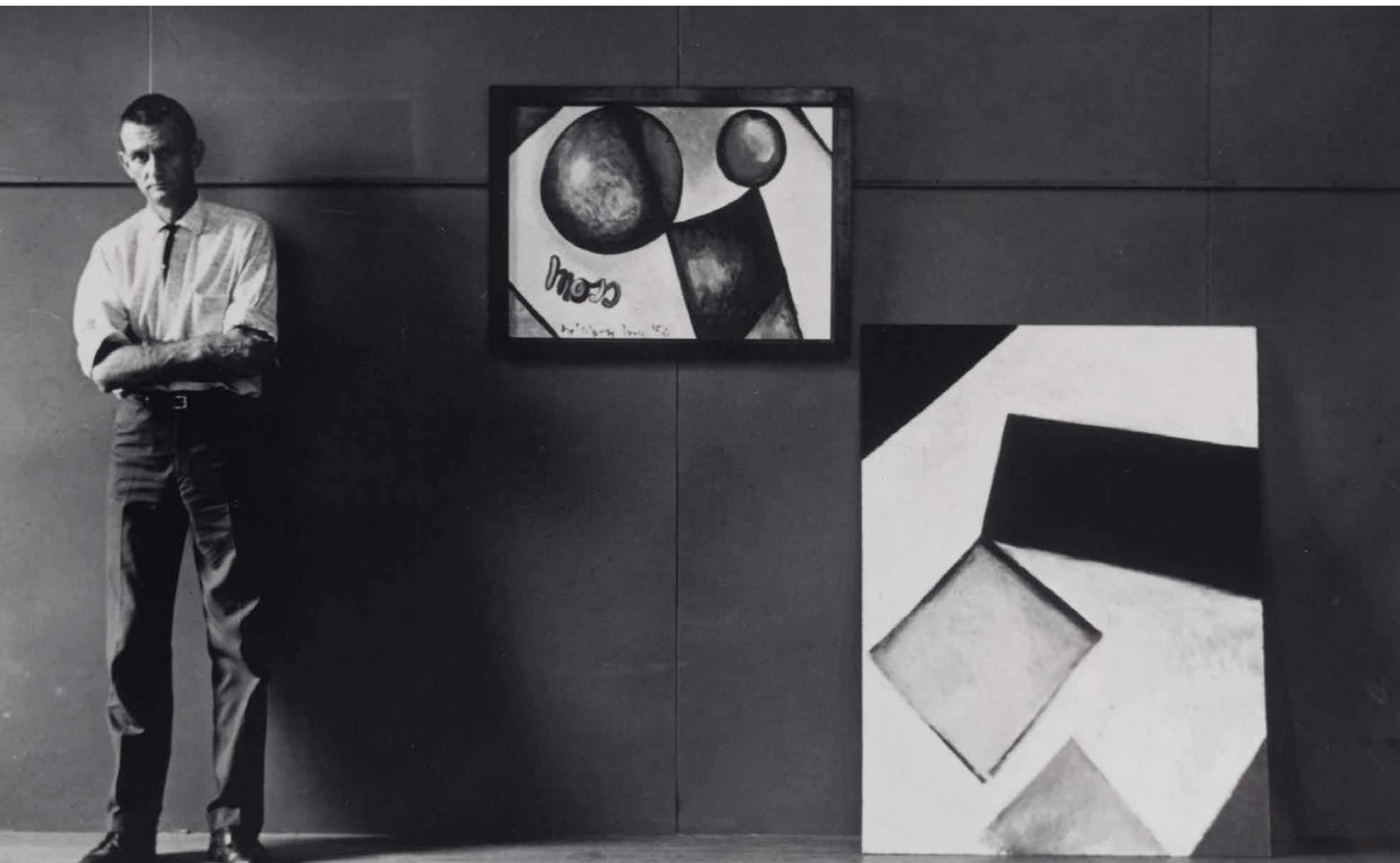
An abstract artwork featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in vibrant red and stark white. The strokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of depth and movement. The background is a mottled mix of light and dark tones, possibly representing a wall or canvas. The overall composition is dynamic and visually striking.

ALONG THREAD OF ATTENTION
COLIN McCAHON AIDA TOMESCU

FOX JENSEN & CROFT



Colin McCahon
 Victory over death 2, 1970
 synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas
 207.5 x 597.7 cm
 © Colin McCahon Trust
 Collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
 Gift of the New Zealand Government, 1978



Colin McCahon photographed in the Auckland City Art Gallery 1961
Photograph by Bernie Hill. E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

A Long Line of Sand III, 2021
Oil on Belgian linen
206 x 480 cm (triptych)
Collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



As I sat down to write an introduction to this exhibition, one that carries weight and responsibility for all involved, I am conscious of my own struggles with attention span. I grew up when acronyms were relatively few and far between. Of course there was NASA, the BBC, the UN and something to do with wildlife but PTSD, ADHD and LOL, together with the slew of ludicrous phone and computer related jargon, well that was yet to be a thing and certainly they were yet to dominate most forms of the lamentably diluted communication we suffer under.

Mostly I dislike it because of its false convenience or rather I'm suspicious of it because of its casual, disrespectful approach to considered communication. I'm all for brevity, for clarity, in the spirit of Hemmingway, but doing away with vowels to the point where abbreviating OK to becomes "K" seems too, too much.

So when I sit down to write something about good painting I am all too aware that words will likely fail, even if they're the right ones. As much as I love words, poignant lyrics especially, words can only do so much up against the potency of colour and form. I appreciate that this is not true for everyone and that visual illiteracy is all too common given the digital avalanche.

Colin McCahon's paintings openly declare a love of language. He wrote/painted/said "I will need words" and he used them frequently. In his paintings they function a structural tool and as a supplementary communicative lever that secures the attention, even of the "attention deficient" (AD). The sensory potency of colour and form that shoulders the burden of philosophical and spiritual intent that we see in Malevich and Rothko is there in McCahon but buttressed by words that are folded into the fabric of the painting, complete with all their insinuations and attachments to ceremony. So compositionally seamless, one absorbs them rather than reads them.

Aida Tomescu has an ecumenical faith in the capacity of art, literature and music to alter our lived experience. Her devotion to painting is unquestioned but so too is her faith in Dostoevsky, Celan, in Shostakovich. These shared convictions demonstrate an uncommon sensibility, one that celebrates the metaphysical, the abstract and the profound and she was to find this in the work of Colin McCahon more than thirty years ago.

Aida speaks about McCahon with the same thrill and reverence that she speaks of Giotto and Titian, of Cezanne and Guston.. What they hold is an intellectual weight and a profound content freed of illustration and description.

This capacity to hold a long thread of attention is fundamental to the making of good art, music and literature. It is a long arc and those of us saddled with deficits are less likely to contribute to it, but we ought to sit still, look and listen. AJ

Colin McCahon has become Tomescu's antipodean window, one she didn't expect to see through let alone open for us all.

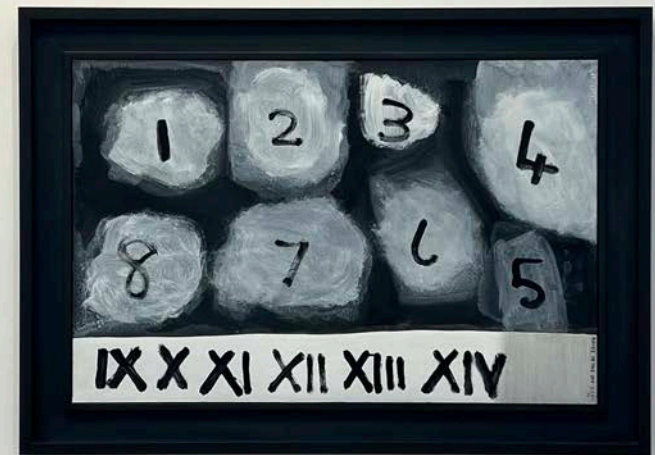




*the art of the future will... be an art that
is abstract yet full of feeling.*
Barnett Newman



Barnett Newman
The Stations of the Cross / Lema Sabachthani (detail)
National Gallery of the Arts, Washington D.C.
Gift of Robert and Jane Meyerhoff
Opposite: Colin McCahon
Rocks in the sky, series 1, no. 3, 1976,
synthetic polymer paint on paper, 72.3 x 109.5 cm
Private Collection
© Colin McCahon Trust



Colin McCahon
A Song for Rua, Prophet, 1979
Acrylic on paper, 77.5 x 100 cm each
The Fletcher Trust Collection
© Colin McCahon Trust





This exhibition 'A long thread of attention' presents the paintings of Colin McCahon and yours together for the first time. Placing these works in such proximity gives us the opportunity to see both artists paintings through a lens tinted by the other. What might it reveal?

I have only experienced a proximity between works in 1994 (at UNSW Ivan Dougherty gallery) when I chose Colin McCahon's work as my companion for the exhibition 'Drawing on inspiration'. I could not have predicted then that "Angels and Bed" would trigger thematic material for my own painting, more than twenty years later in 2017.

What I would like this exhibition to reveal is painting's intense reliance on structures that are subtle, fragile, an approach to painting as questioning, with content at its essence... and on two occasions, the workings of 'collateral imagination' - the use of one kind of material to create another.

Aida Tomescu
Angels and Bed I
Mixed media on paper
120 x 81 cm



Aida Tomescu
Negru II / A Candle in a Dark Room
white pastel, drawn on lift-ground aquatint, printed
in black ink, 120 x 81 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, Australia

Can you tell us about the first time that you became aware of McCahon's work and what impact it had on you?

In 1990, at the UNSW Ivan Dougherty gallery, in an exhibition 'A sense of place.'

McCahon was an instant revelation and became a major source on two occasions... so far. His painting revealed a creative intelligence that brought back memories of artists I gravitate towards: Piero, Bellini, Titian, Mondrian... Malevich, and retained the essential fundamental truth about painting- that it does not suspend the past to make room for the new. To call his work a vision would not be enough, a vision can be brief, and he built a visual language that kept evolving until the very end.

There is always an anticipatory process at work in the course of painting that prepares a painter for what is to come. Without knowing you pave the way for the new, though you might not always accept it at the time. It can give you a glimpse of what is to come long before you start discovering it in other paintings, in other artists. Then you are prepared, open to discover it elsewhere.

When you left Europe in 1980 did you expect to discover a painter such as McCahon in the southernmost antipodes and what did it tell you about the way that the European Modernism had itself migrated to the ends of the earth?

Not in a million years could I have predicted a phenomenon like McCahon. In fact, I went to the Ivan Dougherty show on its last day, at the insistence of my friends. I went with zero expectations and that visit changed everything. Finally, there was a painter, a near contemporary, (he passed two or so years earlier) who did everything I wanted painting to do, aimed at profound content, connected everything I was drawn to.

I never see separate categories; I am interested in experiencing how it all connects. What we call Modernism, builds on Cezanne. Every single painter, Mondrian first among them, was changed by Cezanne, while Cezanne studied in the Louvre, and was mad about Rubens, who in turn couldn't do without Titian. They are all along the line of artists, that exist above time, and I can't categorise, though I know this is necessary for historians, for writers... Perhaps not for painters. I instantly added McCahon to the painters I've always felt a strong allegiance with; he became part of my inheritance.



Your classical European education and training remains fundamental to the works that you make today despite the extraordinary developments that are evident. Your gaze returns to Europe, and you yourself return to Giotto, Piero and to Titian regularly. You travel back to these “points of orientation” often. McCahon’s travel was irregular and seldom far. Does it surprise you just how much knowledge he was able to glean at such a great distance?

It is always a source of wonder how everything is there in McCahon’s work. It came to him from painting, from the experience of the work. Painting connected him back - except I don’t want to say ‘back’... like a continually evolving circle that grew and allowed in what went before. A great wisdom of humanity shines through in his work.

You mention my travels and returning to Giotto, to Fra Angelico, Bellini, Piero, Titian. There is something infinitely subtle in the face of their work, a sense of pause, of suspension of time, a sense of infinite continuity, renewing my experience every time.

Much of the narrative that is foregrounded in discussions about the works of McCahon focus on his evident questioning of religious faith. I sense for you that these questions might be less important than more existential question about his own relevance and indeed the communicative possibility for painting.

McCahon used biblical text to give utterance to the most profound feelings, questionings, ideas... to bring his multifaceted subjects into a whole, unified thought, that includes everything.

Giotto, No. 36 Scenes from the Life of Christ: 20.
Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ) 1304 - 1306
Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy
Opposite: Aida Tomescu
Installation: Paintings and Drawings
Australian National University, Drill Hall Gallery,
Canberra, 2009

I become more and more interested in the work as I engage with the subtle passages where he edits, reworks, dissolves, interrupts in the most unsuspecting ways.

A subtle, fragile structure hovers in front of any narrative in all McCahon; its logic is not representational.

Religion is a common theme in most paintings I am drawn to, but religion never limits the work... it opens it... filling it with the breath of humanity. In McCahon’s case it becomes a form of questioning, in the best sense of purification.

As we are accustomed to narratives, to a sequential life, we see things in sequence... What happens later once the work arrives at its unity and resolution, is that we give a narrative structure to an image that is multifaceted, open, with multiple meanings.



Can you talk about the function of drawing in your work and what you observe about drawing in McCahon’s work.

Drawing is an extension of the painting and works in synchronicity building form and content. It connects me to the work, at a pace that brings in something fresh and unexpected. It also concentrates the inner energy of each work. I don’t use pastel lines to describe the edges of forms; they have to both penetrate, become part of that surface, connect to its history and ‘lift’ and generate space - they have to be constructed.

I can never see drawing as ‘mark- making’ or of being ‘gestural’. Where one line pauses, where it interrupts, where it overlaps with another, it asserts planes of construction that build form. This is crystal clear everywhere in McCahon - they are constructed in the most surprising ways. The intelligence around his drawing or building with a brush of pigment comes through in every work. It is through this construction that we might least suspect that we are invited in, we participate, we travel in, around and behind the words, the letters, the numbers we see. We experience the veiling, the covering-over, the erasures, the traces of each work’s history and the resulting unpredictability of the relationships is both certain and fragile.

Sources and themes are swallowed up by the vortex of painting looking for living structures.
looking for an inner life. What is important about the original source is that it can spin off
completely new ideas, new material that is incorporated and has to be constructed.
Aida Tomescu



Aida Tomescu
Ithaca II & III, 1999
Oil on canvas 183 x 152 cm each panel
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Cezanne wished to move beyond the flirtations and sensations of Impressionism by bringing structure and form back in an intellectual and conscious way. Can you say something about McCahon's use of structure and form and how you share many of these aspirations.

The structure developed in the course of the work is living, not static, nor fixed or final. Form emerges gradually through all of the connections and relationships developed across the surface. It builds fullness through an intricate chain of transitions. We don't suspect its workings on the image and on us, yet it is precisely because of its elusive grace that a painting comes to life.

Form for Titian, for Cezanne, for McCahon... is a quality with the power to change, to transform.

In a late letter from 1906, the year he died, Cezanne writes to his son in Paris:

"I am becoming more clear sighted in front of nature, but the realisation of my sensations is still very laboured. I can't achieve the intensity that builds in my senses... motifs multiply, the same subject from a different angle provides a fascinating subject... so varied that I think I could occupy myself for months without moving, leaning now more to the right, more to the left..."

Doesn't this answer everything?

Cezanne also spoke about "grasping the harmony in many relationships". This notion seems vital to appreciating your painting.

Painting is a question of relationships and I've learned this best from Cezanne, very early on, looking at his 'Card Players' (one of its five versions). Nothing exists in isolation in a work, everything has to connect, to relate to everything else, and nothing is insignificant, not a smudge nor a drip, nor an open passage of canvas. Everything plays an active part in the resolution of the painting, makes very exacting demands and ultimately holds the content of the work.

Many of McCahon's most major paintings extend outwards in a panoramic manner. They are paintings that extend beyond our own physical extent and ask us to move along them. In recent years you have taken the single panels which is approximately a Vitruvian measure of your own extent and combined them into panoramic triptychs. McCahon was doubtless responding to American Modernism, to Pollock and Twombly for example. I sense that your motivations for this new expansiveness are found somewhere else.

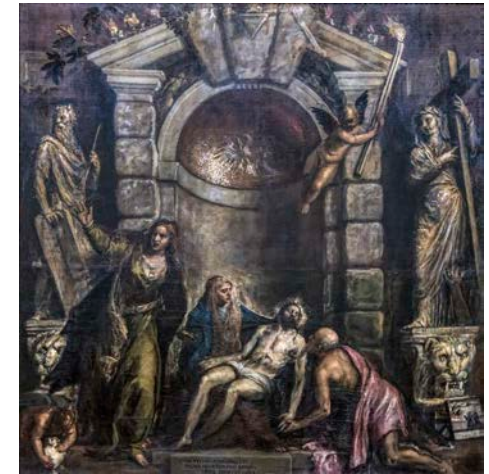
The scale is seen as panoramic... but I can't think of them this way. They develop complex structures that makes them intimate despite monumental proportions. We travel inside the work, around and behind the forms or lines of text we first see. A smudge of pigment, a singular drip can affect and hold an entire structure.



Paul Cezanne
The Card Players 1894-95
Oil on canvas, 47.5 x 57 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

There is something infinitely subtle in the face of their work, a sense of pause, of suspension of time, a sense of infinite continuity, renewing my experience every time.

Aida Tomescu



I've always felt that they are about 'found structure', discovered gradually, evolving through a progressive unveiling. I move inside the work and spend my time in there.

The growing scale in my case, came out of a need to concentrate, condense imagery, not as expansion. As recent works looked at sources from literature (and from music in the last show), this amplified my scope and broadened my direction. I have a religious temperament, and I would always feel closer to a McCahon than to a Twombly, though some of the characters in a couple of my recent large triptychs have brought him to mind. It is a case of dissimilar similarity... without knowing I've no doubt absorbed something that makes all three painters my inheritance, with a particular extra interest in McCahon and in Pollock.

The energy in the work can only come through a sustained mental energy. Curiously perhaps, the levels of physical energy they demand is only available to me through sustained concentration. Once I can sustain this, the flow of (physical) energy comes through from the painting.

The curious thing with the NY painters is how much religious imagery they made use of in the building of their paintings. Rothko drew images of Depositions and Crucifixions in the under layers of his quivering rectangles, Gorky's early works are practically Byzantine icons, self-portraits that look as if they came down from Orthodox Byzantine iconography... and in 2015 in an exhibition of Jackson Pollock's Drawings at Peggy Guggenheim in Venice, the show started with his drawings and sketches of the 'Last Supper'. In an interview his reply to a journalist who pressed him on Figuration vis-a-vis Abstraction, was that in some paintings he chose to veil figuration and in others not... what is fascinating to me is how it all connects, even when artists were not aware of each other, and worked continents and centuries away.

Aida Tomescu in conversation with Andrew Jensen, April 2026.

Titian Pieta, 1575-1576
Oil on canvas, 389 cm x 351 cm
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy.



I don't use pastel lines to describe the edges of forms; they have to both penetrate, become part of that surface, connect to its history and 'lift' and generate space - they have to be constructed. I can never see drawing as 'mark-making' or of being 'gestural'. Where one line pauses, where it interrupts, where it overlaps with another, it asserts planes of construction that build form.

Aida Tomescu

Aida Tomescu
Angels and Bed II & III
Mixed media on paper
120 x 81 cm



Aida Tomescu
Double Violette, 2024
 Oil on Belgian linen
 200 x 306 cm



Colin McCahon
Rocks in the sky, series I, no. 3, 1976
 synthetic polymer paint on paper, 72.3 x 109.5 cm
 © Colin McCahon Trust, Private Collection





Aida Tomescu
Violetta, 2024
Oil on Belgian linen
190 x 460 cm





Colin McCahon
A Song for Rua, Prophet, 1979
Acrylic on paper, 77.5 x 100 cm each
© Colin McCahon Trust, The Fletcher Trust Collection

Aida Tomescu
Double Violetta, 2024
Oil on Belgian linen
200 x 306 cm



Aida Tomescu
Angels and Bed 1, 2 & 3, 2026
Oil on linen, 46 x 36 cm each panel





Aida Tomescu
Angels and Bed 1, 2 & 3, 2026
Oil on linen, 46 x 36 cm each panel



Aida Tomescu
Phosphor I & II, 2026
oil on Belgian linen
60 x 40 cm each
Private Collection

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