

AIDA
TOMESCU

The Poetics of resistance

*“Art begins with resistance -
at the point where resistance is
overcome. No human
masterpiece has ever been created
without great labour”*

André Gide

Everywhere in Tomescu’s studio are signs of resistance... some of it on the floor. This resistance isn’t driven by the kind of muscular flex that some painters seek to swell their paintings with, rather Tomescu’s resistance dovetails with André Gide’s policy that without great labour, the membrane surrounding creativity will not be broken.

One can sense that this is not a game for the weak-hearted – these paintings are made at paintings’ anaerobic threshold. The material carries evidence aplenty of desire and endeavour, of contention and striving. The sense that Tomescu wants to push her paintings beyond a comfortable frontier for both her and the viewer is palpable in the painting’s ultimate reconciliation.

I am fascinated by the experience of Tomescu’s work over time, how its true character emerges more patiently than one might imagine. The physicality of the paintings might insinuate alacrity, however visiting her studio over a period of months we are witness to quiet, contemplated adjustment rather than briskness. Doubtless the paintings character is driven significantly by colour, its lightness and its density; its emotional clout and its delicacy, but it is form that Tomescu seeks. As with Cezanne there is an unflinching dedication to structure and to drawing.

Matisse said that “cutting into colour reminds me of the sculptor’s direct carving” and certainly there are passages in Tomescu’s work where we see her probing and cutting at the body of the paint, getting under its skin, as if to affirm its foundations.

Let’s also not confuse the determined and committed way that Tomescu works her material and gesture with enactment. Her paintwork studiously avoids flourish - preferring instead a dense and granular body. The open and excavated areas, even the shards of script that trace the tooth of the linen - all are complicit in their duties to drawing and form. It strikes me too that one of Tomescu’s capacities is the way in which collage, a long-trusted process for her, is invoked in the way she lays material down, stroke upon stroke, colour upon colour, all the while building a substrate that she is willing to disrupt in order to unearth and further assert form.

Tomescu is alive to the complementary ambitions that painters, writers, and poets in particular can share in. One thinks of Titian’s *Poesie* series based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and of painters like Philip Guston and Anselm Kiefer who responded to the humanist themes of poets such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Elliot and Paul Celan.

For Tomescu the poetry of Celan and Thomas Bernhard have roused a significant and poignant response in her work.



Aida Tomescu's studio, 2019



In Thomas Bernhard's *Under the Iron of the Moon*, the title of Tomescu's 2017 exhibition, we see him exploring themes of nature and death, faith and meaninglessness. His writing too, is a kind of collage - a gritty caustic expressionism, layering love and loathing, sweetness and acidity in equal measure.

As much as Bernhard's writing wrestles with the pathos and desolation of post-Nazi Europe, my sense is, it is to the materiality of his language that Tomescu responds and to the hope and fundamentally redemptive possibility of endeavour. Humour can unexpectedly leaven the atmosphere in Bernhard's writing and there is a warmth and humanity that finds a corollary in Tomescu's painting. Her work sidesteps the wry, sardonic demeanour that infects much contemporary painting, favouring compassion and joy in the way that she paints. Amidst the energy and power there is tenderness... and there is time and space for the gentlest mark - small, discreet and vital.

It has been said that Romanian poet Celan's wish was to dismantle the German language so that it might be remade – in order to testify to the horrors of the holocaust. Celan's belief in language's capacity to exist on either side of the horrors of Auschwitz, to silently endure “the thousand darknesses of murderous speech” but to “resurface, enriched by it all” demonstrates language and indeed art's obligation to bear witness “...to remain secure against loss.”

The paintings that comprised the 2017 exhibition *Under the Iron of the Moon* and the 2019 exhibition *The Open Wounds Of White Clouds* are dramatic and forceful. Colour is corporeal, gesture is authoritative. These qualities are given most latitude where the scale allows maximum opportunity for the cadence and command to amplify. *Sewn onto Stones in the Sky* is a heroic triptych, the largest painting Tomescu has ever made and follows a clutch of diptychs painted since 2017 that initiated this new expansiveness. The triptych has a grand musical action about it. A series of forceful passages build tone and density across the breadth of its score. Each panel confers with the others in a composition that has both delicacy and power. Layers of colour and gesture collude in an unexpected collage that sustains the intensity of the rich magenta crescendos.

Other paintings in this new group such as *Into the Folds of White I* and *The Open Wounds of White Clouds*, remind us again how much Tomescu's gesture is grounded in drawing and excavation. Her angular calligraphy ducks in and out of the broader brushstrokes of white, its legibility abandoned long ago. Tomescu's script acts as a metaphor for a rapport, a fundamental mark making that is axiomatic, beyond dialect and tongue.

The communicative weight of Aida Tomescu's paintings, like Celan's poetry, rests then on the dismantling of language. Tomescu unfastens painting from depiction so that the reconstruction of form is unfettered by illusion. Seldom do we see painting that is sufficiently brave as to disentangle itself from the comfort of what we know and determinedly pose what we fear.

Andrew Jensen, September 2019

Sewn onto Stones in the Sky, 2019

oil on Belgian linen

triptych 200 x 460 cm





The Tongue Set Free, 2019
oil on Belgian linen
diptych 183 x 306 cm
installation view: *Wet, Wet, Wet*
Fox Jensen McCrory, Auckland 2019

*“Pure drawing is an abstraction.
Drawing and colour are not distinct,
everything in nature is coloured.”*

Cezanne



Into the Folds of White, 2019

oil on Belgian linen

183 x 153 cm



Folded into the White of my Words I & II, 2019

oil on Belgian linen

190 x 153 cm each panel





Argent I & Argent II, 2018
oil and silver pigment on Belgian linen
60 x 40 cm each panel



*“...where the moon
shudders before the linen screen.”*

*Thomas Bernhard
In Hora Mortis: Under the Iron of the Moon (1958)*



Folded into the White of my Words III, 2019
oil on Belgian linen
190 x 153 cm







Under the Iron of the Moon II, 2017

oil and silver pigment on canvas

183 x 306 cm

private collection

*“The doves are wild
the moon is on edge
its sickle pierces my flesh”*

*Thomas Bernhard
In Hora Mortis: Under the Iron of the Moon (1958)*

The Torch In My Ear I—VI, 2018

oil on Belgian linen

80 x 60 cm each panel



The Heart was a Place made Fast, 2019
oil on canvas
183 x 153 cm



Into the Throat of the Snow I, 2019

oil and crayon on canvas

183 x 153 cm



“Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand”
Paul Celan, Corona (1948)



The Open Wounds of White Clouds, 2019

oil on Belgian linen

200 x 306 cm





The Open Wounds of White Clouds I, 2019
oil on Belgian linen
183 x 153 cm

*“we sleep like wine in the conches,
like the sea in the moon’s blood ray.”
Paul Celan, Corona (1948)*





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