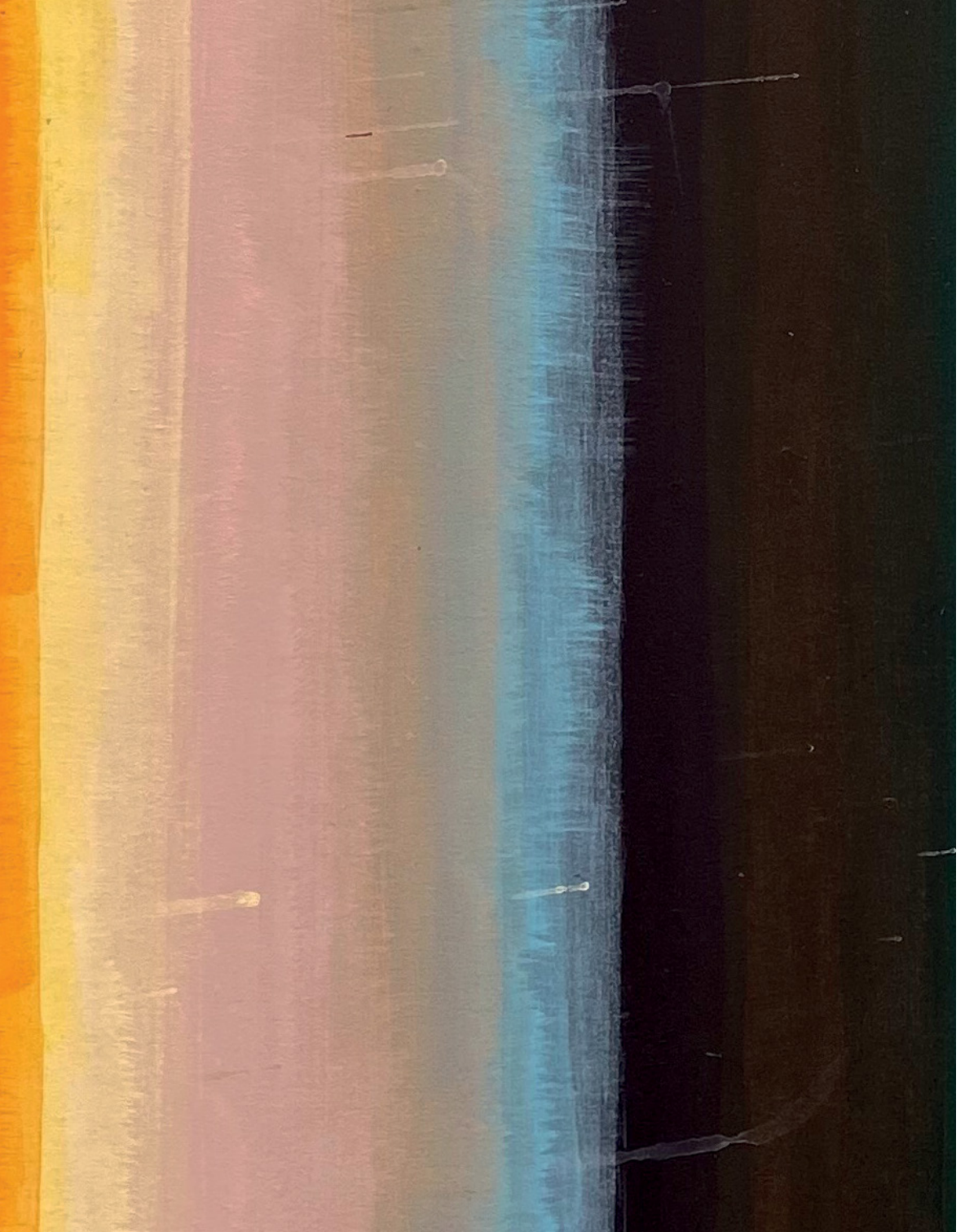
Tomislav Nikolic



Tomislav Nikolic *initiation of intuition*

A glorious contradiction

The paintings of Tomislav Nikolic offer a multitude of contradictions. Their respect for precedent is signalled overtly in their enthusiastic adoption of the 'garb' of history painting. At times this outfit can feel like a costume worn to celebrate the role that painting might still be capable of assuming in the marking of social and cultural change. But there is also irreverence in this aim for Nikolic, evident in the way in which he can flirt with structural profligacy, with chromatic folly to a nigh-on reckless extent. These paradoxes infiltrate every aspect of their making, their atmosphere and even their reception...and they are magical because of it.

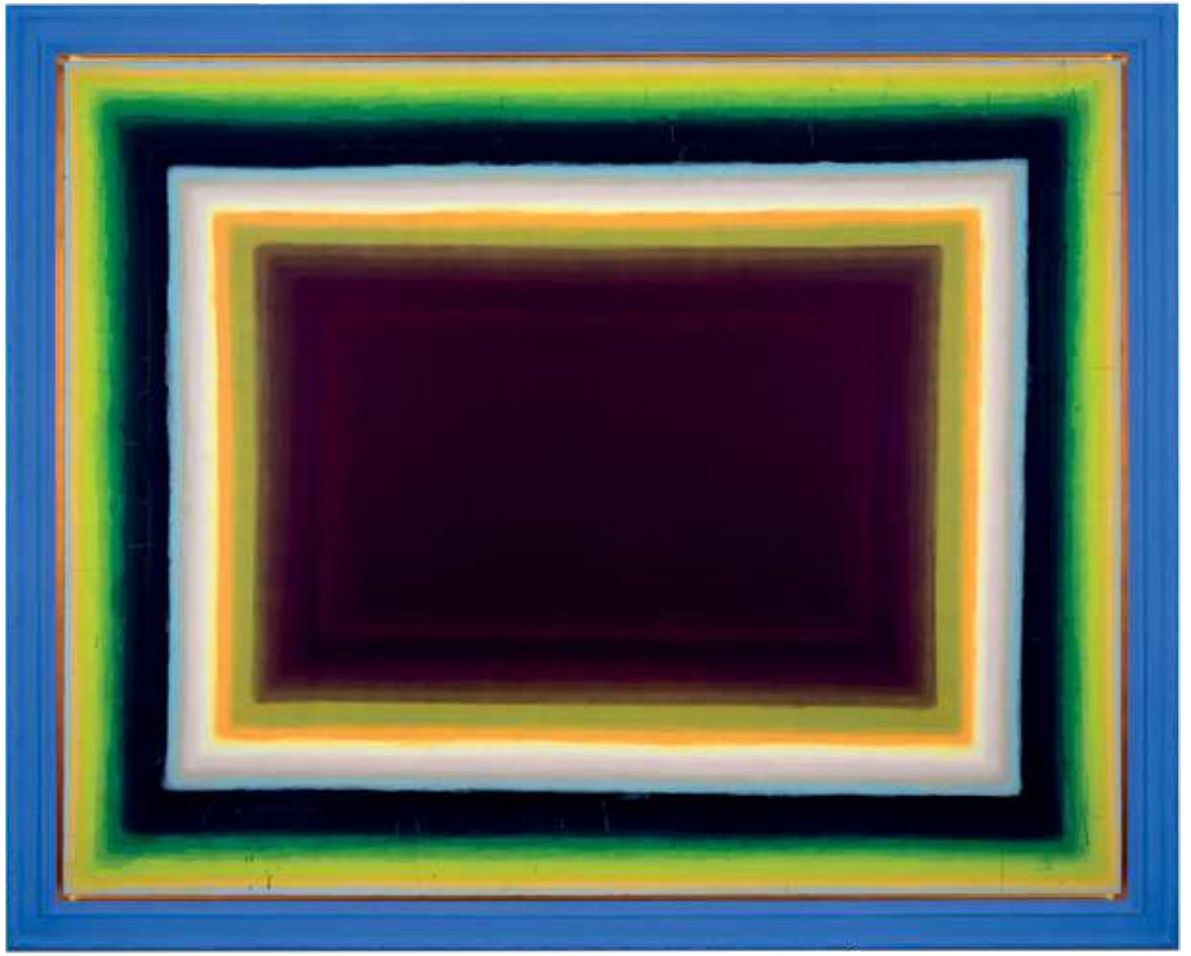
I find myself often asking "how is it that he reached those decisions?". What unrestraint has he exercised this time? Can I live with a painting that stamps its feet with such immoderation? Am I not seeking the reverse in all other aspects of my life...or at least is this not what I'm supposed to do? The answer to all my reservations is trust...trust in Tomislav's extraordinary capacity to make sense of the illogical, trust in his ability to find dignity in the absurd, trust in his desire to renew painting's all too often squandered obligation to be intelligent and poetic, to be sensuous and abrasive.

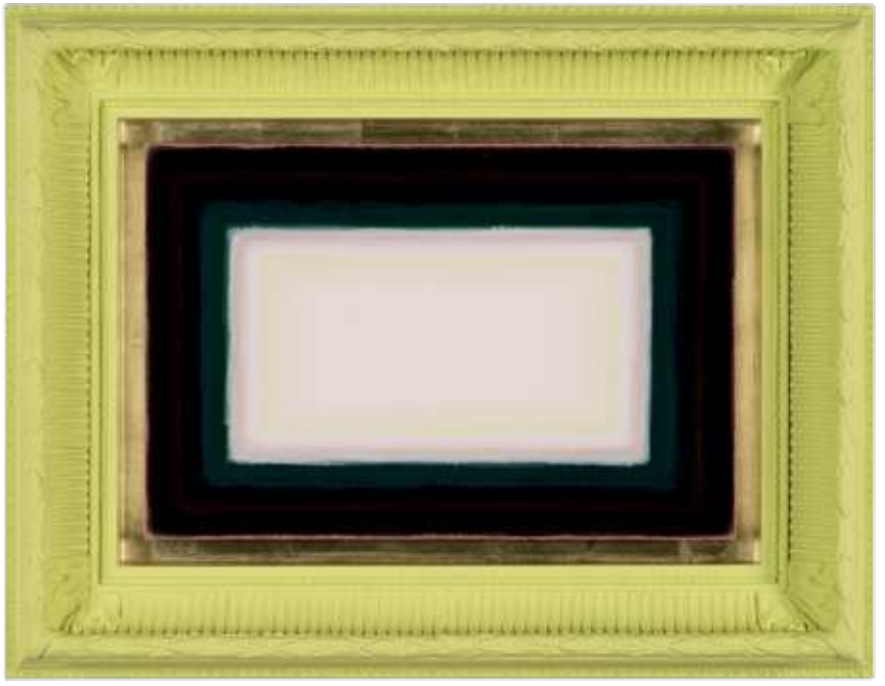
Color... thinks by itself,
independently of the object it clothes.
- Charles Baudelaire

In a popular culture that prides itself on the notion of bourgeois shock, bad behaviour and gratuitous flamboyance Tomislav reaches back to paintings' that, if not shocked him in the past, at the very least nailed his feet to the floor and asked him to look and feel, to be sensate in a world that was increasingly desensitised.

Tomislav would find both questions and answers in historical works about love and violence, about sexuality, about pleasure and pain, about responsibility and irresponsibility. But mostly he would witness other artists grappling with shared contradictions. In the act of painting he finds all the unlanguaged notes, impressions that with time would cohere into his own poignant narrative.

Two of the largest works in this group relate to nudes by Edouard Manet. One is arguably more orthodox in that *Olympia* can be found in her boudoir – rational that she might be found reclining nude in this site especially given her competency. But more surprising is her direct gaze, one that implicates us a viewer and even as a potentially interested, even gently aroused client. Much has been written on the symbolism so there is no need to unpack that further but perhaps more important is to ask what was/is Nikolic's deep visceral response to this painting about? My feeling is that it is the painting's integrity – its unflustered statement about sexuality and confidence. Take me as I am or fuck off.

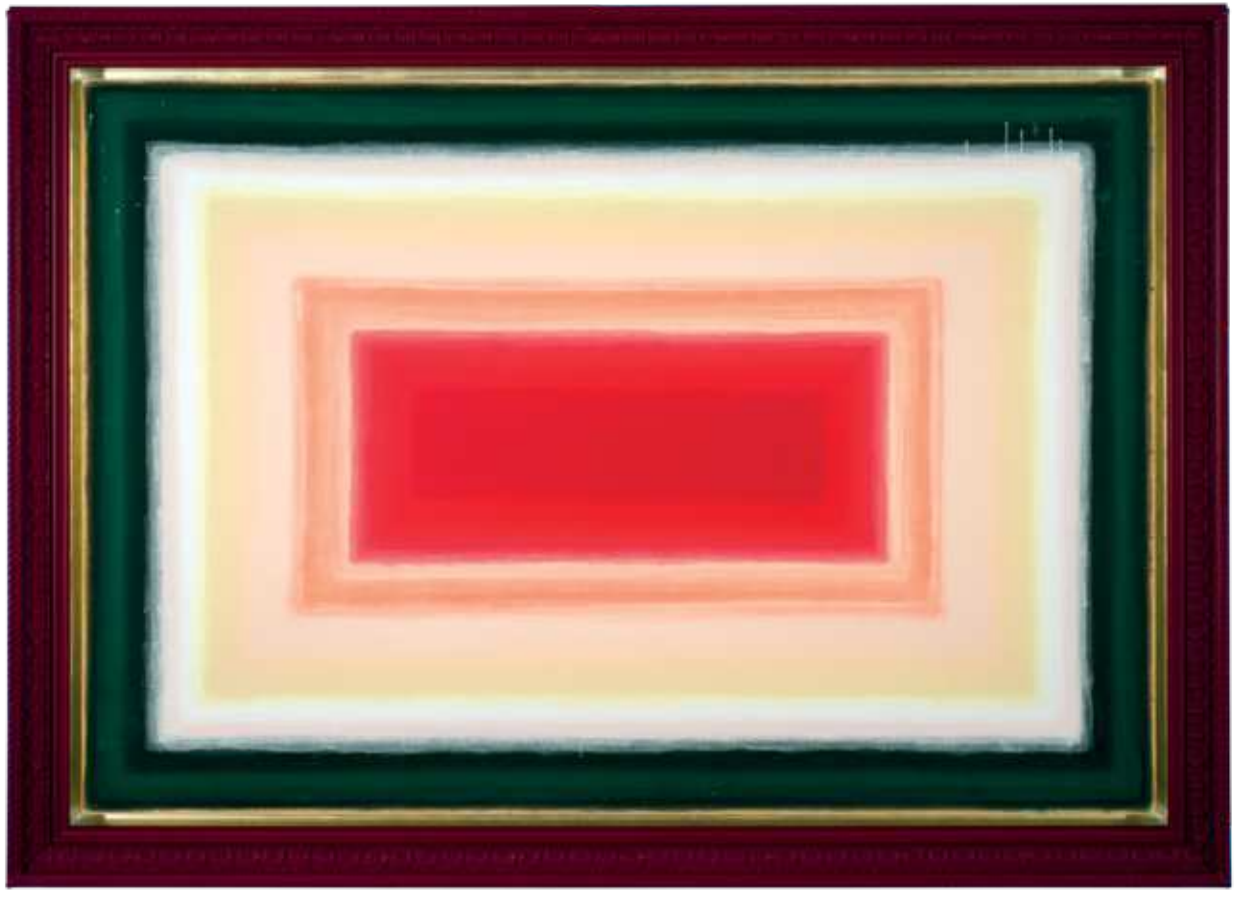




Who told you that one paints with colors? One makes use of colors, but one paints with emotions.
- Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin

Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* takes the nude out of the relative privacy of the bedroom and places her in the garden. As Nikolic does now, Manet had borrowed from history, this time from Titian and Raphael, but in this painting, we see Manet making extravagant, bold developments in the confrontations of not just the conservative manners of the audience and the radicality of the scene but in the manner in which the painting is actually painted. The soft focus of Giorgione and the cloak of mythology in Titian are gone, replaced by an oddly uncomfortable collision of form in space, contrasts in light and dark that signalled a break with the deceptive illusionism of picture making.

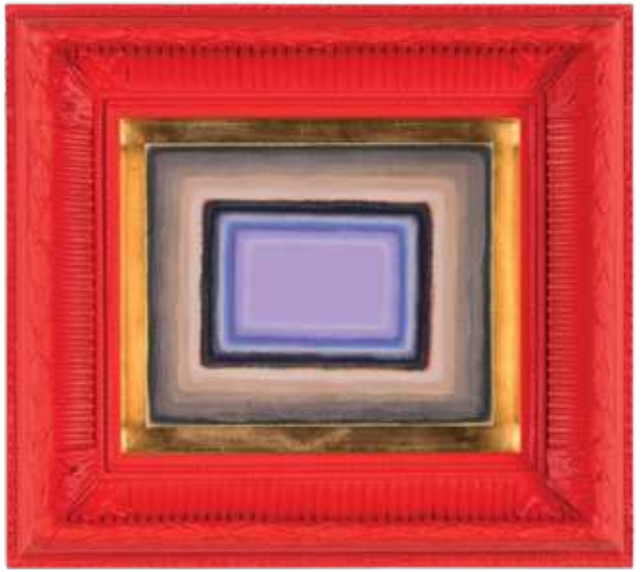
I imagine Nikolic falling for this new dislocation between form and narrative, the way that the painting now serves new masters...or mistresses. But I also know that on seeing this work he would've fallen for the background, for the upended picnic, for colour's capacity to bewitch and transport us and for the opportunity that painting provides to make the secret, the hidden, the denied visible if only we are brave enough to look.



There are no lines in nature,
only areas of colour, one against another..
- Édouard Manet

So, to the looking. What happens to the viewer in front of a Nikolic, assuming there is indeed a “front”? Such is the manner in which he treats the support that the painting never exactly ceases at the face. In all cases the sides of the support are considered along with the face of the painting and more often than not the frame itself is co-opted into an extended composition that sees each aspect of the object – linen, paint, marble dust, gilding, framing, colour, glazing as having a quality that contributes to the cumulative character of the object. This communal approach to the whole makes strikingly evident the adage that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. If Minimalism wished to prune the object to its fundamental material index – Carl Andre’s lines of bricks for example, Nikolic promotes a version of maximalism where such distilled gestures, however elegant and questioning simply don’t trigger the pit of the stomach reverberation that he has always sought from his earliest days of looking.

This is not to say that the works avoid the discreet and elegant. They can be achingly so. The gentlest gradations of colour, a pale blush of pink that becomes deliciously “humid” at the seam, ethereal blues that are only just held in place by the gauzy weave of the linen or deep plum-like magentas that seem to contain more shadow than light but nonetheless comprise a multitude of layers that are made ever so patiently - so as to sedately reveal their densities - for an equally patient viewer.



A painting is finished when the subject comes back, when what has caused the painting to be made comes back as an object.
- Howard Hodgkin

What we do experience in these more monumental works is an increasing buoyancy in the brushwork. The transitions in the overlapping fields retain a great deal of delicacy but at times we see the pigment being pushed and pulled at the edges of each tidal overlay. This liveliness adds further to the colours ferment.

Of course, these graceful fields may run up against a frame that seems to challenge their very discretion and diplomacy but it is this visceral jolt that Nikolic seeks to experience in painting and perhaps in life. Above all, I sense that Tomislav wants to remind us what it is to feel – love and fury, sadness and joy, ecstasy and torment. His ammunition is colour and he fires it at your solar plexus as much as your eyes. Looking at the paintings of Francis Bacon with Tomislav, their utterly idiosyncratic folding of a vertiginous giddiness, sexual and emotional violence gilded in fervent colour, I felt ever so slightly reduced, less by heterosexuality than by the recognition that my identity, sexual or otherwise was not at stake.

This is not to say that the power of Bacon or painting itself is only available to those whose empathy extends to real life experience, rather that as a painter Tomislav's ingestion of the potency of colour is something that sideswiped him so much as a young man that he has set out to leverage it for the rest of his days.

So back to this suite of Manet inspired paintings. Next to the physical and emotional torment enacted in Bacon, Manet's flowers might seem delicate and even bourgeois by comparison. Their subject matter is less confronting to be sure but contained within these temperate works are the building blocks of modernism – perhaps not the bedrock laid down by Cezanne but there is a propensity to see and to feel, a more prosaic integrity in the way that paint is applied that simultaneously refuted the academy and looked forward to a time that would ultimately allow for Mondrian to Rothko, Truitt to Judd and indeed Carl Andre's bricks are laid upon that very groundwork.

Tomislav Nikolic's paintings reveal just how visceral his response is to Manet or more pervasively to colour and its psychological and emotional portent can be. His works don't simply seek to take the chromatic alphabet evidenced in Manet's paintings nor any of the others that he looks to as the basis for his own analysis. Tomislav looks behind the skin of the colour to their Freudian personality and to their rare capacity to transcend the collateral role given to it in most painting and to assume a primary and forceful agency of transmission and connection.

- Andrew Jensen

p 2.
initiation of intuition, (detail) 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust, 22ct gold leaf,
copper leaf on linen, gesso compound
and wood
236 x 292 x 11 cm

p 5.
Édouard Manet
Manet, Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, (detail) 1862 - 1863
208 cm x 264.5 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

p 7.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust, 22ct gold leaf,
copper leaf on linen, gesso compound
and wood
236 x 292 x 11 cm

p 9.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust,
22ct gold leaf, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf,
museum glass on linen,
gesso compound and wood
47 x 40.5 x 11 cm

p 10.
Édouard Manet
Branche de pivoines blanches et secateur, 1864
31.8 x 46.5 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

p 11.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust,
16.9ct lemon gold leaf, 12ct white gold leaf,
museum glass, on linen, gesso,
on linen, gesso compound and wood
54 x 69 x 11 cm

p 12/17.
initiation of intuition, (detail) 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust, copper leaf,
24ct gold leaf, 12ct white gold leaf on linen,
compound gesso and wood
157 x 216.7 x 12.5 cm

p 14.
Édouard Manet
Olympia, 1863
130.5 x 190 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

p 15.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust, copper leaf,
24ct gold leaf, 12ct white gold leaf on linen,
compound gesso and wood
157 x 216.7 x 12.5 cm

p 19.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold
leaf, copper leaf, museum glass, on linen,
gesso compound and wood
44.5 x 49 x 11 cm

p 21/23.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust,
16.9ct lemon gold leaf, copper leaf,
museum glass on linen, gesso
compound and wood
129 x 163 x 18.5 cm

p. 22.
Édouard Manet
Un bar aux Folies-Bergère, c.1882
96 x 130 cm
The Samuel Courtauld Trust
The Courtauld Gallery, London

p 25.
initiation of intuition, 2020
synthetic polymer, marble dust,
24ct gold leaf,12ct white gold leaf
museum glass on gesso
compound and wood
79 x 68.5 x 10 cm

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