

TOMISLAV NIKOLIC

In 10 Questions, *VAULT* quizzes artists on life, process and the whole shebang. This issue, Melbourne artist Tomislav Nikolic opens up.

By Yasmin Nguyen

TOMISLAV NIKOLIC
Tainted hearts heal with time, 2013
acrylic, marble dust, 22ct moon
gold on canvas and wood
153 x 140 x 7.5 cm

Private Collection Sydney
Courtesy the artist
and Jensen Gallery, Sydney



TOMISLAV NIKOLIC
From left to right:
Hear the passion in their voices see the heaven in their eyes, 2012;
Their hopes and schemes are waiting dreams for less than paradise, 2012
acrylic and marble dust on
canvas and wood
190 x 220.5 x 10.5 cm each
Private Collection Sydney
Right:
TN Studio, 2012
Courtesy the artist
and Jensen Gallery, Sydney



1. HOW DID YOU FIRST GET INTO PAINTING?

It was a long time ago and I'm not certain that there is ever a watershed moment that signals a starting point, but I do remember sensing that paintings offered a very special kind of sensation. There were certain folk who introduced me to art – a preparatory school teacher Lillias Lovett. Perhaps she is responsible!

2. YOU HAD YOUR FIRST SHOW IN 1996. WHAT DID PAINTING MEAN TO YOU BACK THEN COMPARED TO NOW? AND WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM PAINTING?

I'm sure it meant a great deal to me back then and I'm sure it means even more now. Painting offers me access to a sensate world that I can't approach any other way. I would like to think that it has the capacity to offer the viewer something of that same experience.

3. ACCORDING TO TOLSTOY, THE ARTIST'S VALUE COMES FROM THE ABILITY TO AFFECT OR EMOTIONALLY ENGAGE THE VIEWER. THE ARTISTIC VALUES ARE NOT DETERMINED NOR JUDGED BY THE ARTIST'S ABILITY TO LITERALLY REPLICATE NATURE ITSELF. IN AUSTRALIA, WE HAVE SEEN A LOT OF ART PRIZES BEING TAKEN OUT BY PHOTOREALIST ARTISTS. WHY DO YOU THINK AUSTRALIA IS OBSESSED WITH CELEBRATING THIS SORT OF AESTHETIC IN 21ST CENTURY?

I'm unsure of where the question is in this... As I said before, I want to be engaged with a material and intellectual process that, of course, can be emotional. However, I'm not setting out to make emotionally driven paintings. That kind of aspiration seems fraught with pitfalls and, equally, work that seeks to replicate what is in front of the viewer is of little interest. I'm interested in what is not in front of us.

4. WHEN I VIEW YOUR WORKS, I SEE STRONG INFLUENCES FROM AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN ABSTRACTIONIST PAINTERS SUCH AS IMI KNOEBEL, MARK GROTHJAHN AND JOSEF ALBERS. DO YOU IDENTIFY YOURSELF MORE WITH AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN ARTISTS THAN AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS? HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR WORKS FIT INTO THE AUSTRALIAN VERNACULAR?

Recently, I was included in an exhibition titled *Points of Orientation* at Jensen in Sydney. The pieces in the exhibition straddled almost 5000 years. My work was presented beside a small Japanese votive painting on wood and a Gunter Umberg on its other side. What was apparent was that there was an aesthetic thread that emerged out of these juxtapositions that interested me. Yes, Imi Knoebel and Josef Albers were also in the exhibition, but the relationships are more convoluted, less direct. I think that the notion of the vernacular, as it exists in this place is worrisome. Justifying work on its ability to fit it within local dialect is a desperately provincial idea.

5. I RECENTLY SAW YOUR EXHIBITION, BY AN ENDEAVOUR TO UNDERSTAND: B & C AT JENSEN GALLERY. THESE WORKS ARE ON A SMALL, INTIMATE SCALE, THEY COULD ESSENTIALLY BE DESCRIBED AS 'MODEST PAINTINGS'. WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WORKING ON SUCH A MODEST SCALE? DOES SIZE MATTER?

I agree they were small, but seldom are my paintings described as modest. Paintings assert their own requirements, it seems, both materially and in terms of scale. I don't think there are advantages in either position. The advantages become apparent when you get it right and of course the disadvantages when you don't.

6. WHICH ARTISTS, ALIVE OR DEAD, HAVE HAD A STRONG INFLUENCE ON YOU?

I'm just embarking on my largest project to date. Central to it is a group of long admired paintings by Titian. I am smitten by them. In recent times, I have looked back to works as diverse as Cezanne, Barbara Hepworth and Sydney Long. It's not so much that they have influenced me but I have sought to make work that reflects something of their atmosphere.

7. IS THERE ANY SPECIFIC IDEOLOGY OR MODE OF THINKING THAT COULD BE CONNECTED WITH YOUR PRACTICE?

I like to investigate numerous theories, especially those that relate to colour as cultural or symbolic metaphor. I read about these ideas a lot, then I go to the studio and in many ways they are set aside during the making. I suppose I want to remain cognizant of them but not foreground them. As I said earlier, the painting process brings about its own demands and it makes no sense to set about trying to illustrate those ideas when making work offers its own possibilities.

8. WHAT IS THE MOST INDISPENSABLE ITEM IN YOUR STUDIO?

Time, space and quiet.

9. YOU REFERENCE POP MUSIC AND POETRY IN THE TITLES OF YOUR WORKS. WHAT DO THE TITLES MEAN TO YOU? DO THESE TITLES HAVE A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL FUNCTION?

There is a gentle irreverence in the titling. I don't want to be ironic or clever but I also don't want to labour over words. It is not my responsibility to make the title some literal pathway into the work, so I don't. I listen to music a lot, so perhaps it just gets in by osmosis.

10. YOU CHOOSE COLOURED FRAMES FOR YOUR WORKS. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OR FUNCTION OF FRAMING YOUR WORK IN SUCH A WAY?

The decisions about the frames seldom come after the fact. To me, they are as fundamental to the composition as the middle of the canvas. One can't exist without the other – or at least their implications for the way in which we regard the entire painting as an object rather than a picture. This seems very important to me. Using a frame to define and close down colour feels wrong so I let them remain open to the larger process. **V**

Tomislav Nikolic is represented by Jensen Gallery, Sydney.

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