

BORDERLINE

the unruly paintings of Tomislav Nikolic

Colour is sensibility in material form, matter in its primordial state.

Yves Klein

It is not the form that dictates the colour, but the colour that brings out the form.

Hans Hoffman

Tomislav Nikolic colludes with colour. This knowing and willing partnership draws upon philosophical notions that assert, in varying degrees, the centrality of colour - not just to symbolism but to belief systems whose structures and manifestos co-opt the extraordinary capacity of colour itself to give form and carry meaning.

The fundamentalism that leaches life from much reductive painting has no place in Nikolic's practice. His interest in colour theories, their historical and philosophical utility might appear to frame his process, though however much each painting anticipates the implied structures of a theory, such as the Seven Rays for example, each work is ultimately driven by the insistence of colour itself and Nikolic's finesse. He continues to investigate the properties of colour with a scrutiny that positions colour as both subject and content. And rather than affirming the orthodoxy of most Colourfield Painting Nikolic's work can shock with its unforeseen chromatic collisions, especially at the multiple edges. The paintings celebrate edge; internal, exterior, structural and chromatic. Each radiating zone is treated with specificity but ultimately coalesce to form a cocktail of colour and form.

For Nikolic, colour is a wilful entity that at times folds beautifully into adjacent pigments but is also capable of being bolshie and obstreperous in its conjunctions. Whatever the behaviour of colour, the paintings resolve themselves through his handling of material and careful negotiation of relationships. These paintings manage to be both joyful and introspective, aware of their own seductive irony and yet always push a disconcerting edge. They flirt with the softer belly of popular culture and yet remain dignified and capable of carrying something of the responsibility they ought to.

Nikolic is making works that transcend the apparent complexity of its structure and process. Process, in and of itself is insufficient and the pursuit of an emanation or atmosphere gives his paintings a poetry that more formalist practice runs from and less capable practice renders sentimental. Working from the centre of the canvas towards the edges Nikolic builds up multiple layers of pigment and marble dust in a slow and sensuous progression towards a body of paint that suffuses colour with light, opacity with translucence. It is in this interior space "...that colour brings out the form" - the gradations of material bend and shape the field of and the behaviour of vision.

Though his paintings often take their cue from the chromatic DNA in his favoured historical paintings, this eulogy is heartfelt but brief as each work asserts its own character. In, Follow: "The almost imperceptible directions of the heart", 2009-11, from the series titled Eidos, the work acknowledges The Bathers 1926-1933, by painter Duncan Grant as an inspiration both visually and conceptually. This painting, which he has admired for years is held in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria in Nikolic's hometown of Melbourne. The shifting hues that describe the light and bestow form in Grant's Bathers, recalling Cezanne's series of paintings of the same subject, is further diffused in Nikolic's beautiful abstraction. The colour palette has a pH level that drifts either side of neutrality depending on the light available for the painting. At times the soft interior feels emptied out of almost all colour, certainly against the avidity of the frame but with time, ones' eyes adjust and colour seems to seep back to the interior from the flanks and the central field swells with a luminescence, with a sensibility that is Nikolic's own.

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The playful eroticism of Grant's nude bathers remains subtly in Nikolic's own painting but it is implied through the sensuality of his touch and caress of pigments. The soft embrace of this wistful interior, the joyful drift it offers, is more than hinted at in the original.

Though the interior plane of Nikolic's paintings remains the primary field upon which his gentle accretions of colour are evident, especially in the tidal retreat where vestiges of earlier layers remain visible, each flanking element is treated with comparable consideration. Nikolic involves the structure of the stretcher and the frame in his attempt to 'hold' colour. This might include the sliver of space between folded linen and wooden support, the substrate of the frame itself, even the back of the work might be painted. Such is colours' volatility of the chromatic relationships he generates that each barricade and trough, each "borderline" succumbs to colour's inevitable tidal surge.

Nikolic's embrace of the entire object or rather his dissatisfaction with the notion of a contained pictorial space and his own mistrust of orthodoxy - allows the wilfulness he releases in colour to continue in this complicity. Nikolic's robust frames can be visually startling, their scale and at times extravagant behaviour is at odds with the delicate manners of much minimalist painting. But then his deep scepticism for the Calvinism that such austerity presents is a vital ingredient in his lush practice - he is more maximalist than minimalist.

In Nikolic's newest works painted for his Sydney exhibition "by an endeavour to understand, b & c" he presents two suites of paintings. Each group comprises seven elements and the chromatic logic that applies in one is inverted in the other. The saturation of the colour is as intense as any paintings he has made. The physical presence of the painted frames is extreme. Their objectness alters their relationship to both the wall and to us. In the way that the paintings of Imi Knoebel, especially those made of complex grids of aluminium refute an obligation on painting to 'describe' space in favour of the possibility to be 'in' it, these paintings push out like children's magical pop out books - two dimensional images suddenly sparked into life. It is as if they are simply discontent to stay chained to the wall - they seem to want to join in.

Andrew Jensen 2014