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A UNIFIED THEORY OF PAINTING :: JACKIE TILESTON

Painter Jackie Tileston explores both the self and creativity as never-ending processes of transformation. Her abstract work portrays the malleable nature of identity, illustrating how human perception is constantly twisted and redefined with each new idea, interaction, and experience that it encounters. Every element upon the canvas is in motion. Things come into being, they declare themselves, deceive, seduce, enlighten, and then dissolve. Atmospheric and figural worlds collide as soft, nebulae of color drift, fall, and collapse into phantom geometries, before disappearing into luminous, iridescent dusts.



The work feeds from a myriad of influences. Fragments of inspiration from modern physics, neuroscience, haptics, fractals and astronomy are mixed with traditions from ancient yoga philosophy, Western Romanticism, and Eastern landscape painting. Tileston's technique and use of materials is also multi-dimensional. On a single canvas, reflective particulates of powdered pigment and glitter are scattered across airy washes of turpentine and paint. Thick, glossy spirals of enamel diffuse into sputters of spray-paint and slick figural geometries merge with slathered densities of color.

"I think abstraction, from its inception – whether it's the western history of abstraction or its use in tantra or zen – is attempting to make, manifest, embody, or picture as a vehicle for us to even begin to enter or entertain the experience of concepts which we can't yet see, or name, or picture."

"My identity will not ever be able to be defined in any kind of pure or singular way—culturally, spiritually—that's just not available to me, it's not an option."

Tileston refers to herself as a "third culture kid." She was born in the Philippines and then spent her youth moving to India, California, England, and France, all before receiving her B.A. in Fine Arts from Yale University. Her father had studied Chinese language and philosophy, and became a banker in the late 1940s so that he could move to Asia. He was sent to Philippines, where he met Tileston's mother, grand-daughter of a German woman who, on her Grande Tour, fell in love with the ship's engineer and moved with him to Shanghai in the late 1800s. Tileston's mother left Shanghai in 1938, moving to the Philippines, where she and her family were interned by the Japanese until after the war.

Despite an American passport and accent, actually living in the US was a huge culture shock. Tileston had grown up with people, who, like her, came from many different places, had lived in many more, and held diverse cultural backgrounds. But in America, she felt unmoored. So she turned to yoga and philosophy to better understand how the mind perceives identity. She began using meditation as a way to dissolve social and cultural constructs in the search for a deeper sense of self.

"Cultures come together, interact, fuse, feed off each other, and form new hybrids."



An open mindset enables Tileston to expand her understanding of identity. Furthermore, it enables ideas to flow, shift, gel, and amalgamate without bias or impediment. She follows the Taoist idea of everything and nothing and describes her work as an attempt at knitting the world together through a “unified field theory” of painting. Dualities of tangible and abstract, empirical and transcendent, intellectual and instinctive are upended and refused. The canvas provides a space where different locations and places are made to coexist. Within this arena, disparate logics and sensations coalesce with one another to take the shape of new hybrid forms. The paintings suspend a viewer’s mind within an ethereal space of transience, a cohesive yet discordant whole.

“I am interested in the ability to see and experience and know something without language being able to name the experience for us.”

In 2014, a fascinating opportunity arose for Tileston when she was commissioned to create an artwork for the exterior of ACTpol, a polarization-sensitive receiver upgrade on the Atacama Cosmology Telescope in northern Chile. ACTpol is used to enable the telescope to detect the Cosmic Microwave Background (CMB) of the universe, thermal radiation emitted billions of years ago during its earliest stages of development. These microwaves are present throughout the cosmos, but they have stretched so far and so thin in their travels that they are unperceivable to any traditional optical telescope. Yet, through the use of sensitive radio receivers like ACTpol, scientists are now able to capture thermal imagery of these ancient vibrations. For Tileston, there was something profoundly intriguing about this project.

ACTpol provides the portrait of a previously unseen universe. Without the use of such highly advanced technology, its findings would not be made possible. Yet the story that ACTpol describes of how the universe has come to be and the destiny that it may likely be heading towards immediately reminded Tileston of the poetic descriptions of a fluctuating universe versed by Buddhist monks and in Vedic cosmology centuries ago. To see that their intuitively derived concepts were now being confirmed by empirical scientific research provided inspiration to her imagination.



There is so much to the human experience which cannot be expressed through words. Internally, visceral sensations, complex emotions, scattered thoughts, and the illusive ideas that circulate in and out of our minds often transcend limits of verbal language. Externally, astronomers admit that 96% of the universe is compromised of a mysterious, unidentified substances referred to as dark matter and dark energy. This implies that all that we currently know about the makeup of our universe is a scant 4%. For areas such as quantum mechanics, the uncertainty principle suggests much of what we may yet learn will at best be approximate—real in mathematics, but uncertain in reality. How do we engage these unknowns? For Tileston, abstraction provides intuition the freedom to postulate and express concepts that words and narratives often take longer to reach. It has the ability to translate, “the nonverbal and not quite visible realities into perceivable, material form.”

Abstraction is a place for understanding right before

language takes over. Tileston relates this to the Sanskrit term Sandhya bhasha (“Twilight Language”), which is half expressed and half concealed, poetic language that “deliberately exists in the liminal spaces of dusk and the edge of actualization.” For her, painting is both nonverbal and interlingual, it translates from one level of experience into another.

Tileston aims to express through painting what cannot be expressed through any other medium, asking what is it that this kind of visual technology can do that others still cannot? For her, painting is a different way of working and processing information, as much as it is a different way of being in the world. She believes that, “paintings can function as runners between realms, physical and philosophical both.” Within the abstract realm of painting, multiple worlds can coexist in one space; different aesthetics and realities can collide and cooperate. Painting’s vitality, from Tileston’s perspective, lies in its ability to, “absorb, ingest, and transform multiple sources,” as our understanding of reality becomes more complex.

“There were ways of knowing and understanding and constructing a model of the world and the universe and how things work, but until we have the instruments to measure that and see it, we cannot subscribe to that – or at least the science world can’t.”

“Art is one area in which there is nothing that you could think about, engineer, dream up, or research today that can’t be incorporated into your studio practice the next day. There’s no limit to what kinds of ideas can feed your work as an artist.”

Art is not an end. It is a catalyst that intends to make things happen. It is an endless process of gathering, processing, researching, synthesizing, and weaving together diverse imageries and ideas as perceptions continue to transform. For Jackie Tileston, art provides a method to bring into being “unattainable presences and sticky realities,” things that exist beyond or despite our understanding. Her work shows us how to remain open to the new, to act more intuitively and improvise, to grab at what emerges, and to avoid the restrictions of names, identifications or categories.