



Consciousness & Experimentation: Talking with Jackie Tileston
by [Colette Copeland](#) July 16, 2024

I've followed [Jackie Tileston's](#) work since the early 2000s when we co-taught in the newly developed interdisciplinary Visual Studies program at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Her abstract paintings have a distinctive style — one that I would recognize anywhere. Her career trajectory reflects her global upbringing. She received the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2006, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 2011, and has been awarded the prestigious residencies of the Dora Maar House in France, the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy, and Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, among many others. She has exhibited with Holly Johnson Gallery in Dallas since 2005; I wrote about her 2012 exhibition there, [Free Fall](#). We had the opportunity to catch up recently on the occasion of her current show in Dallas. We spent the day looking and talking about art, yoga, mindfulness, psychedelics, and expanding consciousness.

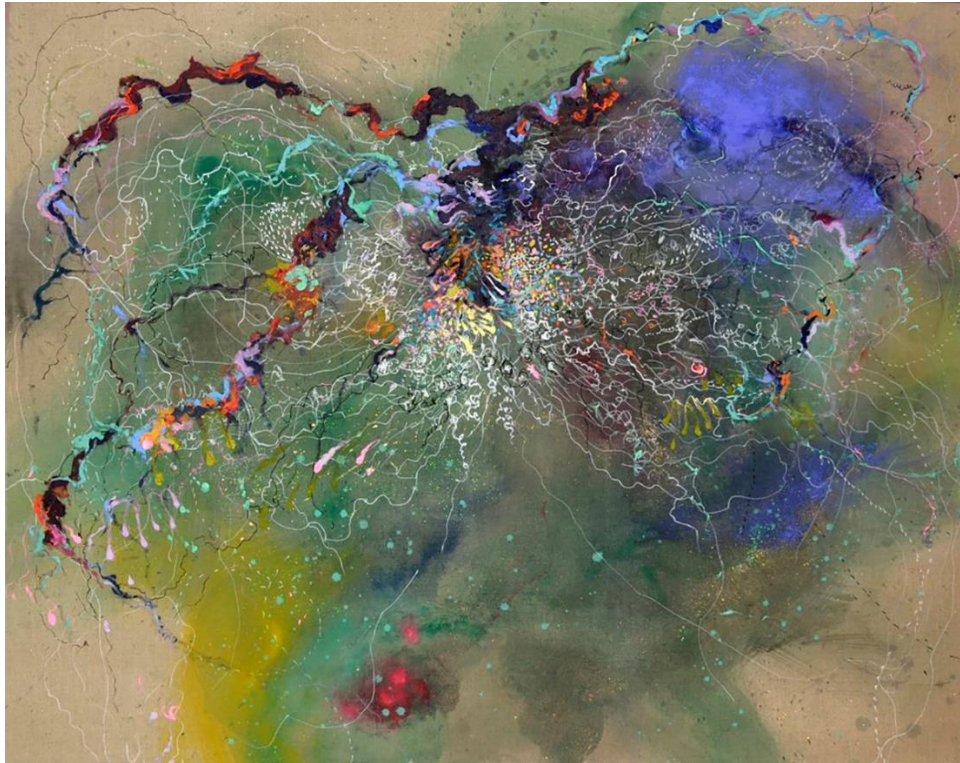
Jackie Tileston, "Wavelengths festooned (With this)," 2024, oil and marker on linen, 30 x 24 inches



Installation view of "Just This" at Holly Johnson Gallery

Colette Copeland (CC): In rereading my 2012 article about your work, I was struck by the continued relevance of my observations from that time period. I wrote about the coexistence of harmony and discord, your inspiration from a variety of disparate sources including critical theory, ancient Indian culture, and contemporary visual culture, as well as

the playful abandon with which you acknowledge and then break traditional rules of painting, rupturing viewer's expectations both conceptually and pictorially. The current work explores a new process inspired by your practices in yoga, meditation, trance techniques, and entheogenic experiences. How have these practices and experiences inspired your new work and shifted your process to include automatic drawing?

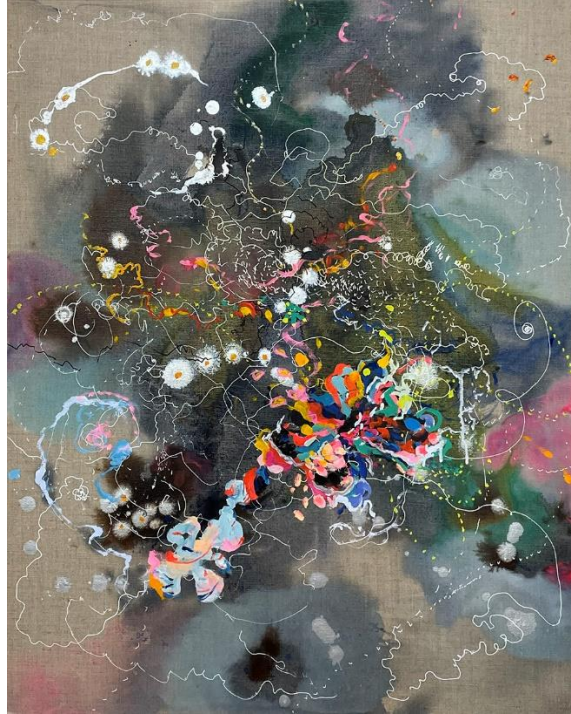


Jackie Tileston, "Orphic Glimmer," 2023, oil, acrylic, enamel, marker, glitter, pigment on linen, 48 x 60 inches

Jackie Tileston (JT): My meditation practice has long been centered in nondual tantric lineages,* ones that see everything as an emanation of consciousness, and the manifest universe as an embodiment of this creative play — it's really a fantastic philosophy for an artist! I've always thought of the ground in my paintings as the field from which everything arises (the forms, colors, movements, images, etc.) and then dissolves into. The paintings are moments in this flux.

About a year and a half ago I started experimenting with various methods in the studio that might allow for more direct participation in these energetic processes. After laying down the washes and veils of color over a period of a few days, I do an automatic drawing session on the paintings with paint markers. I usually do 10-15 minutes of trance breathwork to shift my state, then meditate with the intention of connecting to the widest state of awareness possible. I have a playlist of music that is aligned with that, and then I begin to respond to the impulse to move through drawing, eyes closed for the duration of the session and sometimes a pen in each hand, until it feels complete. Then, I'll continue working on the paintings as I always have, using the trance drawing as a sort of scaffolding upon which to build the rest of the painting, adding details, thicker paint, or other accumulations of structure and reference and visual meaning.

I'm interested in the kinds of knowledge that can be accessed through "non-ordinary" states of consciousness — I've been teaching a seminar for the past five years called "Mystics and Visionaries: Art and Other Ways of Knowing" that uses [Hilma af Klint](#) as a hub from which we explore various alternative ways of making work, seeing all of it as just different forms of research, different ways of accessing knowledge. (*Sri Vidya and Shaiva Tantra, if we want to get specific)



Jackie Tileston, "Things in Themselves," 2024, oil and marker on linen, 30 x 24 inches

CC: In looking at the evolution of your work visually, I notice that the color palette is bolder and brighter in many of the paintings. The invented cosmologies have gotten more chaotic and complex. You refer to these as “topographic energy maps.” I’ve always thought of them as vast, imagined, unseen universes — a macro perspective. In thinking about the term personal energy maps, they resonate as micro views into the interior spaces of the body and brain — aspects that affect consciousness and the larger connection outside of oneself which you describe as “new paradigms of interconnectedness.” Please expand on any of these ideas and how they relate to the current work.

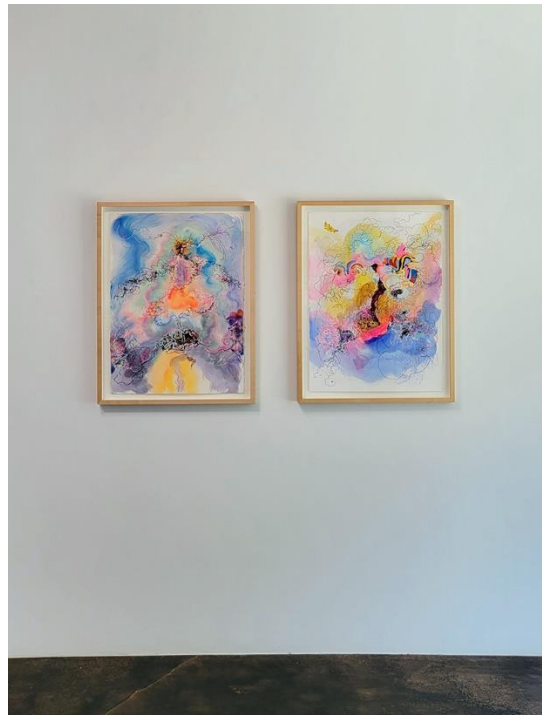
JT: I think the macro/micro element has always been operating in my work — patterns rhyme and repeat throughout, and yes, I have a fairly high thrill threshold for color. These most recent pieces feel to me as if I’ve zoomed way out, rather than in, but they are all interconnected, whether in complexity or singularity, spaciousness or density. Patterns of energy and information pulsing and transmitting and coalescing into forms, movements, things, and then dissolving. I love this idea I read in a book on Taoist landscape by David Hinton that everything is “an adornment of existence.”

I’ve been really fascinated with how many radical philosophers of science and consciousness (such as Bernardo Kastrup and his articulation of Analytic Idealism, or Donald Hoffman, Christof Koch, etc.) are coming to this idea of consciousness as the “prima materia” of the universe from which everything arises, as opposed to materialism, which proposes that consciousness somehow emerged from matter, the working hypothesis, and how this echoes so beautifully the wisdom of Indian mystics from a thousand years ago.

All of this resonates so perfectly with the metaphysics of psychedelic states — these very different approaches to thinking about the biggest questions start to converge. They all point to our interconnectedness within an interwoven cosmos. Rather than being just abstract philosophical conversations, these ideas are inherently socio-political; nothing is more political than one’s fundamental view of reality!

CC: You always bring in interesting references with the titles of your work and exhibitions. *Heterotopia* was always one of my favorite titles from the 2005 series. For the current exhibit title, I first thought it was an oxymoron. You present us with these extraordinary worlds, yet provide us with a simple two-word phrase that keeps us questioning. What’s this?? I then wondered if it was inspired by [Richard Rohr’s book, *Just This*](#)? I haven’t read it yet, but the synopsis interested me. It spoke about creating a spaciousness for the soul to grow into a kind of seeing that goes beyond looking. That tied into some of our conversations recently about expanding consciousness.

JT: I'm not familiar with Rohr's book, but it sounds good! In nondual tantric philosophy everything is an ecstatic embodied manifestation of Awareness; it is not dualistic in the sense of separating spirit from matter, or working towards a transcendence of this world. (Many Buddhist lineages and even Advaita nondualism have a sort of up-and-out ideology wherein this world is full of suffering/samskaras/illusion/delusion, and one is working to transcend all this.) Everything that exists is it, is reality, is consciousness appearing as this, right here, right now; it's glorious and weird and immanent. "Just This" contains incredible vastness and complexity, but also, just this. I was thinking about what the visual equivalent of [Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening](#) might be, and thought that perhaps it's not deep looking but Deep Perception — the invitation to the viewer to directly engage with an artwork, not only conceptually or aesthetically, but as an experience that can transport us beyond our conditioning, language, or expectations. This is why abstraction has always been so important to me — I see it as a vehicle to carry the viewer to spaces of the unknown or mysterious, circumventing our tendency to name and narrate and reference what we already know. It's why abstraction has such a strong historical association with altered states and radical perspectives.



Jackie Tileston, "Nectar Energy No. 3" and "Nectar Energy No. 6," 2023, gouache, marker, and collage on paper, 30 x 22 inches

CC: We spoke about the upcoming conference you are organizing at University of Pennsylvania, as well as your co-creating and co-teaching the first course at Penn on psychedelics. Please share more about those initiatives.

JT: I'm on the faculty advisory board of a new initiative called the Penn Psychedelic Collaborative, a transdisciplinary coalition of students, researchers, and faculty who are all interested in or researching the frontiers of psychedelic studies and their potential for healing, transformation, and discovery. I came in the side door via my Mystics seminar, since we look at the relationship of psychedelics to mystical states and their influence on creativity (though I'm not a fan of what I consider psychedelic kitsch art).

The states of awareness and insight achievable through entheogenic experiences are of immense interest to me! Next year I'll be team-teaching a survey class on psychedelic history, culture, research, etc. with someone from the Penn Program for Mindfulness. For the conference in October I'll be chairing a panel on Psychedelic Ontology and Metaphysics, which I'm super excited about. I selfishly invited the people I want to talk to who are doing the cutting-edge research about what these states of consciousness can teach us about reality.

Jackie Tileston: Just This is on view until September 28 at Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas