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“Handbook of Unknowing” paintings by Jackie Tileston

By Bruce Thorn

“Handbook of Unknowing” is Jackie Tileston’s sixth exhibition at Zg Gallery since joining their roster in 2004. The works in this show continue on the path that she’s been forging since the start of her artistic career and offer a consistent follow-up to her 2014 exhibition, “Field Guide to Elsewhere.”

Tileston’s personal history is an international mix-up of intercultural experiences that have become her template for making abstract, visionary paintings. She has developed her own pictorial vocabulary and symbolism; a semiotics that incorporates references to Eastern philosophies and her multinational upbringing in the Philippines, India, California, and France.

Tileston takes inspiration from Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga as points of departure. Like Takashi Murakami, her discourse on Oriental memes wears psychedelic, pop threads. Her paintings are more fluid than Mark Tobey’s linear reflections on Chinese calligraphy and Baha’i cosmogony; her strength is in expansiveness and enthusiasm.

Personal experiences, memories, beliefs and dreams all help to form self-identity. It’s as if the separate components of Tileston’s works each signify various pieces of her history and sense of self. These self-referential abstractions might be described as unusual selfies.



Tileston almost always works over a background of raw linen coated with rabbit skin glue (with an occasional sprinkle of glitter and dry pigment). She masters atmospheric, misty washes that emulate J.M.W. Turner’s ecclesiastic skies and sets these to drift across the linen picture plane over which she superimposes bouquets of multi-colored liquid fireworks of unknown hybrid shapes that float and orbit like a pleasant, bright, Walt Disney universe. It’s very operatic and Reckoner of Bliss, 2017, (left) is classic Tileston.

There are tactile forms built from thick globs of paint, thin washes, wet fluxes, hard edges, flat brushwork, linear meanders, occasional spray paint and a few collage elements here and there, some of them cloned from the other pictures. Tileston’s works often reference one another and she frequently repeats motifs.



Steep Tempest, 2015, (left) is a little different from the other works here. The abstract shapes all seem to join together out of the linen expanse to form a single entity with suggestions that it could be human, animal, deity or inner self.

There is no tonal modeling; washes and mists create the illusion of shading and take the place of chiaroscuro modeling effects. Tileston’s method of approaching a painting follows a pre-determined, step-by-step manufacturing process. Whatever is spontaneous in each painting is also controlled in its placement.

Unified field theory in physics refers to fundamental forces and elementary particles in a single, universal field. This is where physics and metaphysics intersect, but Einstein’s theory has never been proven. Tileston’s works are not “field painting,” like Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman. Her paintings aren’t so much about a

unified field as they are about energy, shapes and forms that pass over and through the field. Her game is eclectic, like the artist's identity.



Tileston has it all—the fundamentals of painting, engaging material, beautiful colors and surfaces, dreamscapes, but she too often adds predictability. There's the linen background, then glitter washes and wisps of Turner, all followed by other forms and shapes that get sent hurtling through space. She claims to be after what she calls "contemplative space."

It's easy to imagine forms, characters and faces coming out of the misty void, but the didactic and repetitive use of visual devices can corral and discourage exploration beyond recognition of ambiguous possibilities.

For this exhibition, Tileston has added painterly atmospheric washes and shorthand brushwork directly to sections of the gallery walls. This touch doesn't add much to the overall effect of the show. There are also three small cutout MDF shapes with digital laminations that regenerate details from other works.



Hypnotic Blur, 2015, (left) presents a digital transfer of an altered photo showing a detail from a previous work, mounted on a scroll-sawed panel that resembles a jumbled thought bubble where any ideas are hopelessly entangled. The new cutouts do not have the lush surface and careful finishing of the linen paintings.

This might point to new directions in the future and hints that this artist might be ready to toss out her old rulebook. There are many fun things happening in the three cutout pieces. Expect good things when the artist approaches these with more ambition.

"Handbook of Unknowing" intends to be positive, light, colorful, contemplative and safe, but the plentiful and earnest references to Eastern philosophies seem overtly quixotic and new age. Unknowingness doesn't jive with habitual self-reference. Is it possible to forget, or to "un-know" the self?

What would happen if Tileston tried working without her usual methods and really came to terms with unknowing? Would she face the possible horrors, along with the delights, of a blank slate, or would she still inhabit a consistently pretty, intergalactic stage set of tamable, candy-colored cosmic storms?

By bravely discarding fallback devices and exploring more of the exhibition concept of Unknowing, Tileston could possibly shift from being a very good abstract painter to being a giant among modern painters.

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