

MAAKE MAGAZINE

Jackie Tileston

Jackie Tileston's paintings are heterotopic spaces in which recombinant strategies and nomadic thinking create complex images that investigate the contemporary sublime and states of being. Tileston (b. Manila, Philippines) has a B.A. from Yale University and an MFA from Indiana University. Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions in Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, and Dallas, and group exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Museum (Houston), Art in General and the Painting Center (New York), and the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art. Tileston is the recipient of the Core Fellowship Residency (1988-90), the Pew Fellowship in the Arts (2004), the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency (2005), the Guggenheim Fellowship (2006), and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award (2011). Tileston lives and works in Philadelphia, where she teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. She has an upcoming solo exhibition in November at Zg Gallery in Chicago, and is currently in a group show at Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia.

STATEMENT

My work feeds off of a multiplicity of sources which are orchestrated to create a world in which the beautiful, absurd, sacred, and mundane can coexist, an attempt at a "unified field theory" of painting. My paintings feed off of the history of abstraction, physics, traditional eastern imagery, Chinese landscape motifs, digital imaging, and other sources. There is a constant flux between atmospheric and graphic, abstract and figurative, quiet and chaotic forces. I do not find a conflict between meaning and visual opulence, between commercial culture and content, and I often purposefully cultivate an operatic sense of surface and reference. I am interested in the challenges of trying to forge a pictorial landscape in which anything could be included, but that seems to possess its own logic.

A re-reading of Foucault's 1967 *Of Other Spaces - Heterotopias* essay was a recent inspiration since it perfectly defined the intent of much of my current work - to create paintings in which several different locations or spaces are made to coexist within one space. Ideas about how we construct our realities and selves through language, social structure, geography, and belief feed into this desire to juxtapose sites and images that might themselves be somewhat incompatible. My work as a painter is to knit the world together in a kind of visual globalism. There is both a sense of idealism and anxiety that accompanies this endeavor - the desire to make a multi-layered garden of Eden, and concern about how to make sense of it and reconcile disparities.

My work integrates a range of visual sources into layered paintings that mediate the space between the unseen and material worlds. These paintings float upon a base of Western traditions; the atmospheric scumblings of Turner, the late fields of Monet, the desires of early and mid 20th century abstraction, and finally the liberations made available by postmodernism, when the distinctions between pictorial languages dissolved, scrambled, and blurred. Into this territory swirl flying apsaras from China, Taoist landscapes, floating worlds, the colors of India and tantric raptures, the infinite webs and One World theories of contemporary science, and mediated images. I am interested in visual democracies, nomadic thinking, rearranging hierarchies, and trying to fuse personal expression with shared social and cultural spaces, in full pictorial glory.



Installation view of studio with wall painting, unstretched paintings, misc. works on fabric, May 2017



Q&A with Jackie Tileston

Questions by Emily Burns

Can you walk us through your process for a large painting from beginning to end? Are you planning works out in advance or working more intuitively on the surface? There are distinctly different languages at play in your paintings—how do you navigate each of these unique visual styles and how did this overall aesthetic emerge in your work initially? I usually start with a *sense* of something I want from the painting – it might be, a color world, a mood, a movement or compositional space, or a specific image/idea. I then start laying in multiple turp washes, often with the painting on the floor, and then modulate the colors and mood, and then start experimenting with where and what I want in terms of the more complex/baroque areas. Often these will be via collages and painting on mylar that I can cut and move around the canvas until things start gelling. There's a back and forth between highly intuitive moments with strategic contemplation. In essence, the process in the studio is one of searching for the right combination of visual events that create specific and hybrid worlds within the parameters of the canvas. There is often a variety of different textures and techniques in each painting – washes, spray paint, glitter, thick impasto paint, oil enamels, powdered pigments, etc. I use a lot of different references and materials in an effort to generate a complex, informed, ecstatic space. The paintings work when this happens, and when they don't, it just feels like random elements stuck together without any meaning. I'm looking for just the right/provocative interfaces so that this alchemy can happen. An important part of my process is sitting on my couch sipping tea and staring at the paintings — there is a pretty high contemplation to action ratio.

Does drawing play a part in your practice? My works on paper are usually collages and gouaches, and are a parallel activity to the painting. Occasionally I do a painting based on a drawing, but this is often too prescriptive a way of working for me, so usually they are stand alone works. There are often things I can/would do in a drawing that I wouldn't make a painting of...

In some of your most recent work, individual paintings are installed as part of a larger installation, and interact with paintings on the wall and large-scale unstretched fabric collage. Is this a new direction for you? Can you tell us more about this particular installation? Yes! I recently had the opportunity to spend a month at the fantastic studios in New Orleans of the Joan Mitchell Foundation, and having the luxury of more space and concentrated time than usual was a great instigator. I had been thinking for some time about using fabric borders on unstretched canvas/linen; in my mind they would function sort of like Tibetan thangka, where the ornamentation framed a sacred space. I printed out a lot of digital fabrics from my own photos and images and brought them with me, and then worked with a local seamstress to actually border the canvases. A few days before the open house I decided to extend the space of the paintings onto the walls, and pretty much covered a length of about 40' in a six hour frenzy. I scattered clusters of smaller drawings, the large bordered paintings, fragments of drop clothes and collages, etc. It was very exciting to be able to create a more immersive environment, and I'm really looking forward to a chance to do this again!

Are all of your paintings on unstretched canvas or linen? These were the first unstretched pieces I've done – partly in order to integrate the fabric borders more smoothly, and partly in order to be able to ship them home easily. Usually I work on linen that is stretched, and prime them with rabbit skin glue in order to preserve the natural color.

Much of your work is on raw linen—can you tell us more about this choice for a support? I enjoy the way the ground serves as a neutral field from which I can push space backwards or forwards, and the earthiness of the natural color contrasts with the intensity of color and ethereal washes. Years ago a friend gave me a book on Chinese painting describing the Taoist philosophy in which there is an unmanifest reality out of which the "10,000 things" of the universe arise. It seemed a perfect metaphor for what I am trying to do - the linen ground creates the sense of space that I want, an undifferentiated field of potential.

(Early on I had found that raw canvas seemed too tethered to an Ab Ex/Frankenthaler vibe, or the white space of a Photoshop layer...)

Is there a reference for the flowers and other icon-like shapes that appear in opaque paint on the surface? Do you use color or pattern references for the more recognizable moments in your paintings, and if so, what inspires them? The more ornamental areas of the paintings come from a lot different sources, and are usually combinations of hybrid things that are merged together for both aesthetic and conceptual reasons. I'm fairly promiscuous with my references. There could be geometric yantras, fragments of Ukiyo-e prints, fractals, digital photos, Chinese landscape motifs, patterns from around the world, etc. I'll print out everything I'm interested in, then start rearranging them together - sometimes I'll take iPhone photos of random "floor collages" when everything is scattered over the studio floor, and these might feed another "cluster". I'm interested in these heterotopic spaces, the in between, the collision of cultures and spaces and aesthetics. I grew up as a Third Culture Kid in 5 countries before I went to college here in the US, and I think that belonging everywhere/belong nowhere thing is probably my home base. The ways in which new things are generated by the intermix is important to me.

Does meditation still play an important role in your life and work? I have been doing yoga and meditation since 1998. I practice mysore style ashtanga yoga 5-6 days a week, and meditate daily. My meditation practice was first in the Kriya Yoga tradition, and now in the Sri Vidya lineage of Yoga from the Himalayan Institute. (This is the energetic/internal version of Tantra, not the misinformed and sensationalized western version!) For me, the practices allow me to continuously regroup and reframe my experiences in the world according to something saner and more ecstatic than I might otherwise have access to. I read a lot of yoga philosophy, and it definitely aligns with the ideas that are important to me in the studio - how things are made manifest through some sort of intelligent creative process, and then undergo dissolution in a continual process of change and evolution... Ongoing questions about the real and unreal, a commitment to some sort of celebration of what is here in our experience and also beyond, the totality and incomprehensibility and sheer weirdness of it all.

In a previous interview you stated, "I am interested in the ability to see and experience and know something without language being able to name the experience for us." Can you elaborate on this idea of nonverbal knowledge? I think that when we recognize images and can name things, it lights up specific/language oriented parts of the brain, and triggers what we know. Art, and abstraction specifically, has the ability to push us towards other kinds of knowing, other relationships with concept and meaning making....it allows for a kind of nomadic thinking, functions as an intermediary between states of consciousness and perception, creates space for us to inhabit some of those uncomfortable territories in between...There are so many different ways that art can function, so much work for it to do in the world. I'm interested in how art can open up alternative visual experiences that align with internal spaces, altered states of consciousness, euphoria, complexity, etc.

Are there any common themes in your most recent body of work? What are you thinking about the most these days? All of the above! I'm thinking about how to push this sort of hybrid complex contemplative space - how the ephemeral is pouring through and immanent within the material world in all kinds of magnificent, exuberant, grotesque, raucous forms. I'm curious about how all this can be present in a painting...and thinking also too about how this kind of experience can have political/social implications, and the challenges of that. I just finished a fantastic book called "Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism" by Ann Weinstone/Shambhavi Saraswati, and parts of it could be my manifesto!! *"Tantra holds difference and multiplicity, and oneness or nonduality in the same thought, in the same body. It rejects nothing, exempts nothing, and ultimately resolves nothing in favor of a general cosmology and ontology of pervasive and undecidable relation, one that delights in it's own paradoxes."*

"Within the Tantric tradition of which I am an initiate, both desire and pleasure are the engines of creation. Nothing is rejected. Nothing is renounced. A self-aware energy, pulsing with spontaneous desire, emanates the manifest universe and then experiences pleasure upon encountering itself in all its multiplicity. I desire. I anticipate. The other appears. We recognize each other. I taste her sweetness. We are distinct; we are one body. An identity inside a difference; a difference inside an identity. An expression, an emanation. Beyond resolution. Paradoxical. Trembling. The Tantras or written scriptures most often describe this trembling, this creation inside the edge of the multiplicity and oneness, as delight. "

That's a pretty good description of what I'm trying to do in the studio!

What is a typical day like for you? Most days start with getting on the yoga mat at home or at my local yoga shala, then home for tea and internet/mail time. I teach full time so three days a week I'm on campus until around 8pm....On a studio day I usually get into the studio - which is the ground floor of my house - after lunch and am there off and on until bedtime with meals, lots of tea, etc. thrown in. Studio time includes a combination of hard work, napping, sipping tea, reading, surfing the web, working again, shuffling bits of paper around, dancing, etc.

Who are some of the artists that you look at the most often or most recently? I've been looking at a lot of Tantric painting, textiles, etc. My heroes run the range from Rothko and Turner and late Monet as a young painter, to all the current painters who are trying to make meaning out of the process! As a graduate student I was lucky enough to see the "Spiritual in Abstract Art" exhibition in Chicago where I saw Hilma Af Klint's work for the first time. That whole show rocked my world. I'm really looking forward to seeing the retrospective (finally!!) when it comes to the Guggenheim next Fall.

What are a few of the stimuli or experiences that get you really excited to get back into the studio, particularly if you have been experiencing a spell of tepid inspiration? I'm usually stoked to get back in the studio after any length of time away – even after a good vacation – or by traveling and encountering new visual sources. If I'm stuck, it often helps to just BE in the studio, reading or writing, but just spending time in the studio creates a kind of space, permission, possibility. Music is also very important.

If epiphanies occur for you, where and how do they usually happen? Can you conjure them by planning for this catalyst? I'd love a magic spell for epiphanies, but don't have one...they usually come when I get out of my own way.

Is there anything that significantly supports or destroys your groove or energy in the studio? What do you listen to while you work? Is this an important part of being in the studio? How do you navigate distraction in the studio and in life? I almost always have music going – instrumental world music, kirtan/chanting, some jazz, and almost nothing with lyrics in English! (I just don't want to hear an external narrative, and definitely not if it's whining!) DJ Cheb is Sabbath, Nithin Sawhney, Prem Joshua, Tulku, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Shakti, are some of my favorites. I don't have a television in my studio, and try and keep just an iPad around if I want to look something up so that my distracted time on the computer/internet black hole is manageable. Yes, Facebook is a distraction, but I'm fortunate that almost everyone on my feed posts amazing articles on art and yoga and world events that I actually WANT to read.

Has there ever been a book/essay/poem/film/etc that totally changed or influenced you? What are you reading right now? There's a Japanese word – *Tsundoku*, "the condition of acquiring reading materials but letting them pile up in one's home without reading them." I'm one of those people that has 10 books started at all times, and this can be a problem. I surf between art books, yoga philosophy, fiction, etc. I teach a graduate seminar on Critical Issues every Fall, which consists of a month of classics like Plato, Kant, etc. and then moves quickly to 20th Cent. and very recent readings, so I always have something going for that course – currently the Paper Monument volume *Social Medium: Artist Writings 2000-2015*, and also waiting for Hito Steyerl's new book *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Civil War*.

On the beach this summer I read a couple of art novels, *This Blazing World* by Siri Hustvedt and *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus, and in the yoga category I recently finished *Avatar Bodies: a Tantra for Posthumanism*, by Anne Weinstone/Shambhavi Saraswati and just started *The Recognition Sutras* by Christopher Wallis. And *Yogavatanam: the Translation of Yoga* – I'm trying to learn Sanskrit. Hah!

In terms of early influences, as an undergrad I saw the film *Philip Guston: A Life Lived*, and it was the first time I think I understood what it might be like to make a life as an artist. That he changed radically, risked everything, squeezed the tubes really hard! My favorite parts include that moment when he lovingly pets some old paintings, when he completely painted something out after days of frenzied work, and when he talks about all the nattering voices of old teachers, critics, friends jabbering away in your head, and how in order to work they all have to leave, and then, "if you're lucky, YOU leave". It took me decades to understand that. At the time I was transitioning from being a "highlights-on-the-eyeballs" kind of figurative painter to working abstractly, and the other book that helped me over to the other side was Fritjof Capra's *Tao of Physics*, which for many of us was a first peek into the wackiness of quantum physics and consciousness as mutually overlapping areas. I realized I didn't want to describe the world I could see around me, but wanted something else.

I'm almost embarrassed to admit that reading the *Seth Speaks* books in the early 90's really blew my mind and challenged me to at least question how what I was thinking/vibrating might be influencing my experience of the world. Maybe as an artist it just made sense that thoughts and vibrations are made manifest....Physics has proven that everything is vibrating, after all. But paying attention to how my mind was operating allowed me to transform from someone who was fairly dark and depressed (I like to say I was appropriately melancholy for an artist) to someone who is mostly pretty functional.

Empty and Full: the Language of Chinese Painting by Francois Cheng really opened up some possibilities for me about how to think through what I was trying to do in the studio. My mother and grandmother were both born in Shanghai (my German great grandparents had moved there from Constantinople in the late 1800's), and I grew up around mostly Chinese art. Since as adolescents we tend to rebel against or discount our parents' aesthetic, I hadn't really paid much attention to it, and that book turned me towards a realization that much of what I wanted in my own work matched the intention around Chinese Landscape/Taoism.

Any advice from your past that has stuck with you or helped you? I am grateful that as a college student my oh-so-wise father said he fully supported my decision to be an art major – on the condition that I had NO "back-up plan". I couldn't imagine a tolerable or productive life doing anything else, and my back up plan at the time would have been playing acoustic bass – not exactly a more practical option. In the challenging, delirious, unpredictable, and complex

process of remaining an artist since then, I've learned that it's worth being stubborn about protecting my freedom, curiosity, and joy.

What has been one of the most challenging aspects of your career as an artist so far? Trying to get the work seen! As an artist living in Philadelphia we're close but not close enough for frequent studio visits, etc. For all the talk about a decentralized art world, the emphasis is still very much on New York.

How has teaching influenced you or your work? The graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania is highly interdisciplinary, and I have fantastic colleagues, so I think that has kept me open and responsive – I can't go down the painting rabbit hole exclusively! I am lucky that my day job involves talking to people who love what I love. The range of conversation and experience that I have with the students is stimulating for me - it's not a one-way street. If somebody is thinking about a topic in an intimate way, in order to have the right conversation with them, I might have to do some research on something that I haven't thought a lot about and so that enhances my own experience. Going back into my own studio, now I've thought about new things. Neural pathways are being activated and so the process of teaching to me is not in any way something that I have to shut out in order to work in the studio. It's a little bit more fluid.

Do you have any other news, shows, residencies or projects coming up? I have a show opening November 3rd at Zg Gallery in Chicago, and I'm strategizing for a sabbatical next spring, so hopefully will be doing a few residencies and traveling. There are so many places I want to go – Morocco, India, Barcelona, and Japan are on the current wish list!

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us!

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