

invocations of
consciousness

**TOMISLAV
NIKOLIC**

Justin Clemens
Juliana Engberg
Julie Ewington
Andrew Jensen
Marielle Soni

MER. B&L

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Tomislav Nikolic Discussion Transcripts

A conversation between
TOMISLAV NIKOLIC and
MARIELLE SONI

TRANSCRIPT ONE

Bill's Café, Crown Street, Sydney
19 December 2018

MS: ... but when do you get the opportunity to do that in the contemporary world? Just sit down and talk about the values of life, you know? In what context? It's really hard.

TN: It is really difficult. I don't think there are enough catalysts for that. I think that the lack of catalysts in our culture, maybe in Australian culture, maybe in contemporary western culture, is what our issue is. I suppose in some way I like to think or imagine that I'm creating some of those. I don't have any delusions that they'll be effective to everybody, but for some people.



MS: And it's a way in. It's almost like it's an excuse to have that opportunity to talk about spirituality, philosophy, values, ethics.

TN: Morals.

MS: Yes.

TN: Beliefs, faith. If you have faith.

MS: Yeah, it's interesting.

TN: Complex.

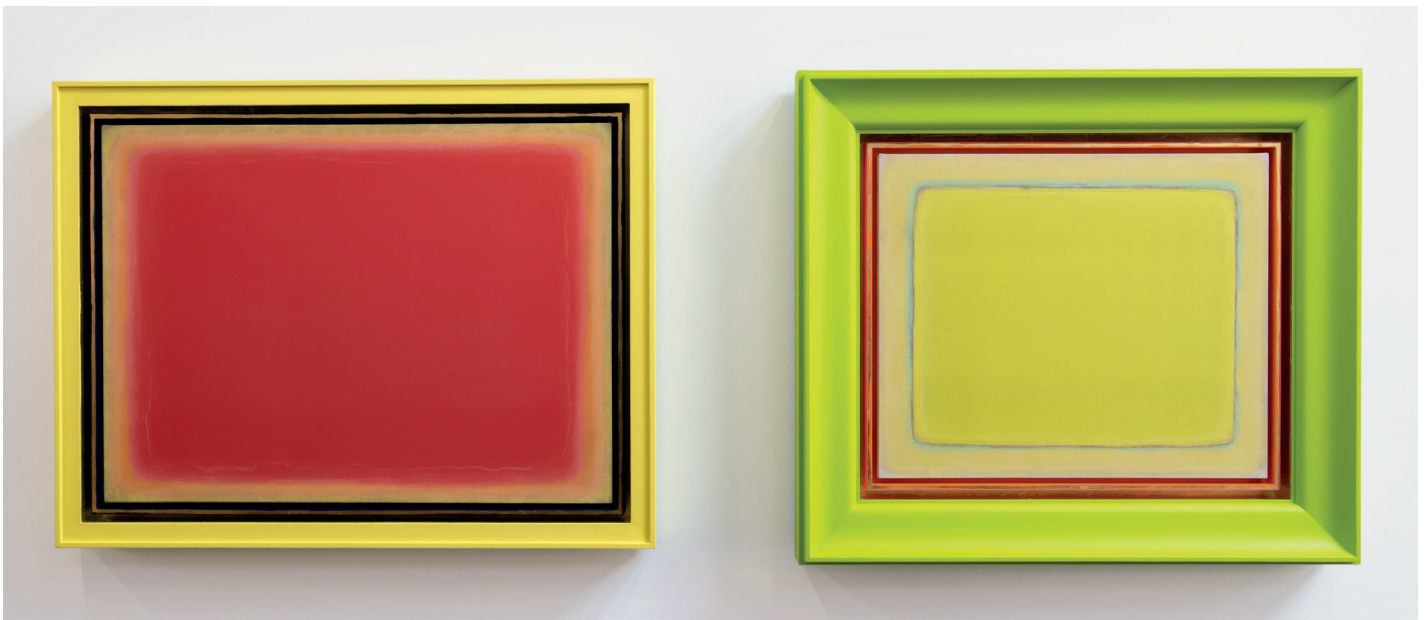


MS: And I think that's a really good point in terms of what you were saying about how your work can act as a catalyst because even now, the way we talk about contemporary art is almost like we have to read it in a direct way. So even contemporary art isn't naturally a catalyst for talking about those things.

TN: Because it's so didactic you have to, you need to know the whole history of art, and Duchamp and Warhol, and everything that's come before and how we got there, and you know, it's sort of a duality or a fracture of reality. Whereas it never used to be like that, well maybe religious paintings. But people had a visual vocabulary back then. People understood what was going on, whereas we can't even read those things anymore.







TN: Yeah, I sort of think that's a lot of it.
I want it to be quite simple, really.

MS: Yeah, I guess you can overthink things,
can't you?

TN: Yeah, I'm prone to that.



MS: It's not really.

TN: It isn't but it sounds that way. It's, it's ... it easily goes into the territory of eyerolling.

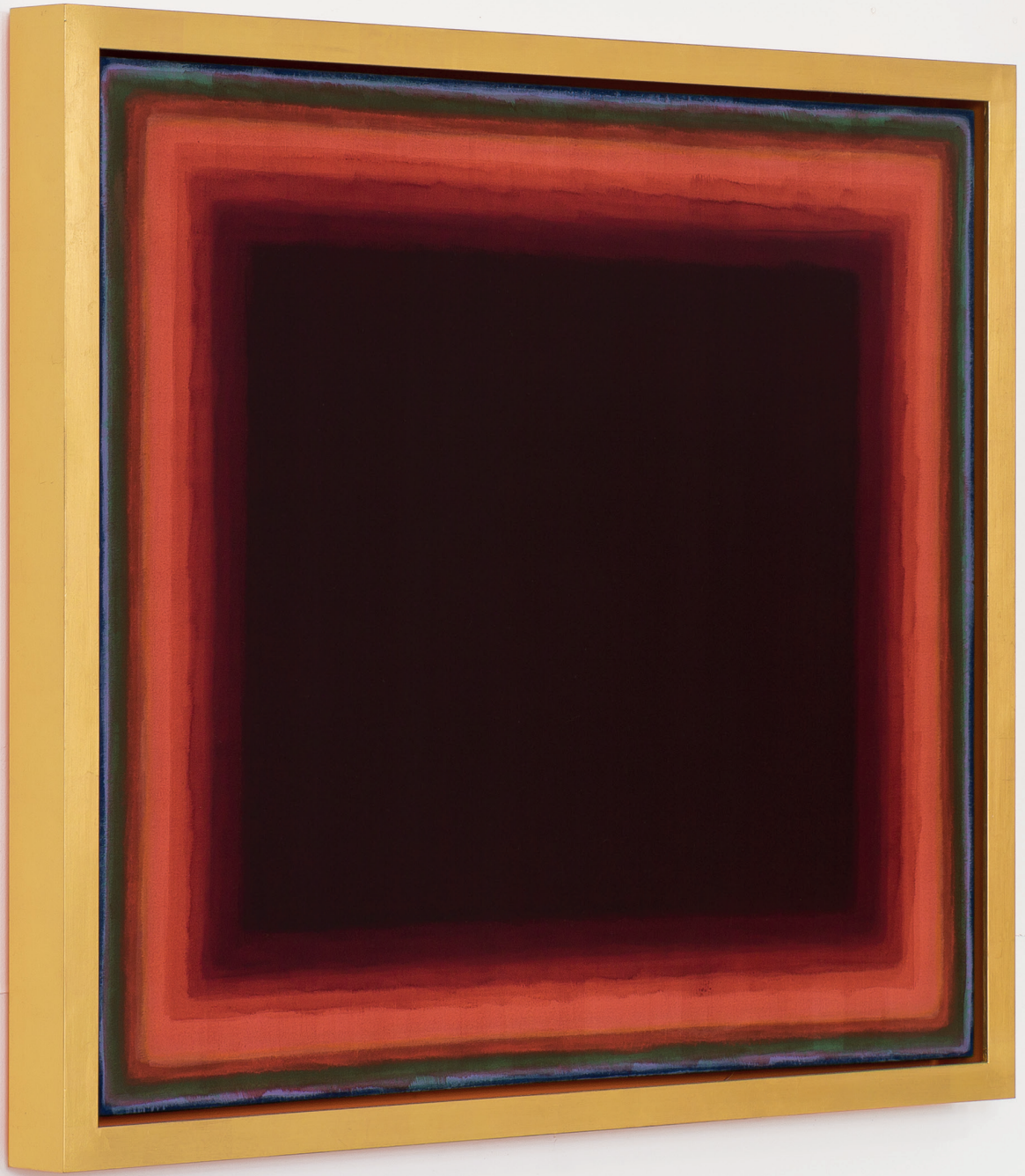
More laughter.

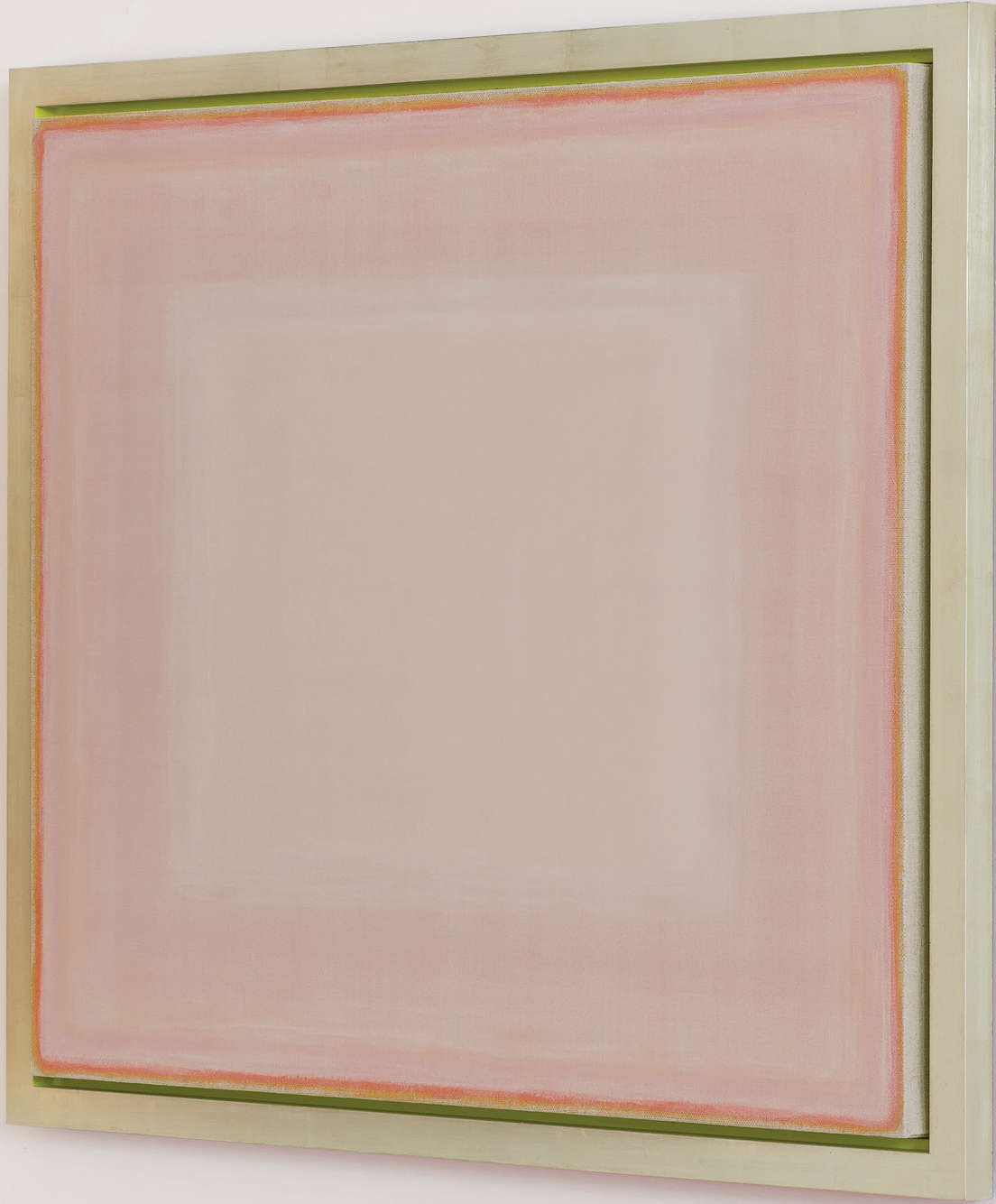
MS: I know, and I guess perhaps that's why we have come up with such simplistic terms ... it's almost like playground, childish, understandings of what that is. Like the mindfulness, populist ideas and things like that where some people have a very superficial understanding of what it is, or they use it very superficially.

TN: I think there's, it's ... it's ... hmmm. It's that thin veil between knowledge and understanding.



if vision is the only validation then most of my life isn't real 2015-2017





Tomislav Nikolic: Edging Ecstasy

1.

See Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973; *Paul Klee Notebooks* (vol. 1 and vol. 2), edited by Jürg Spiller, London: Lund Humphries, 1961–73; Josef Albers *Interaction of Color*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, first published in 1963.

1.

I am standing in front of a large luminous painting. I stand here for some time, for only then will it give up its secrets. Well, some of them. *The Intention of Chance* (2019–2020) [p.153] is a radiant pale green pool bordered by paler pinks, golds, and varieties of creamy tints. It is pulsing. It is expanding. It seems both dense and translucent, and a steady energy expands outwards from the centre of the canvas to the unusually active frame, which is successively gilded in yellow, lemon and white gold — increasingly euphoric — in dialogue with an emphatic dark border and a protective acrylic sheet. More than two metres in height, wider than my outstretched arms, *The Intention of Chance* embraces me in its implacable pictorial logic. I float in it. I am in ecstasy.

What brought me here, to the paradoxical place proposed by the painting's title?

2.

Tomislav Nikolic takes colour seriously. For its beauty, of course, but more importantly because of its mysterious insubstantiality and radical instability. Its power. Modern science says that colour is an effect of light produced by circumstances, yet this colour/light conundrum continues to exercise the finest minds, even with twenty-first century developments in physics and neuroscience, and notwithstanding the great colour studies by modernist artists like Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Josef Albers.¹ Encounters in colour are the painter's territory: between emotion and experience, between painter and viewers, between what we see and the un-graspable world beyond human senses. All that. But first, in the material world, there are crucial exchanges between pigments and paint pots, brushes and stirrers, hand, eye, surface: all the exacting studio stuff that fills the painter's day and is at the heart of its mystery. As colour is the most obvious of Nikolic's preoccupations, I start here: colour as his special focus, the ground on which he tests himself and the world. This colour includes brilliant, dreamy, edgy, unexpected, challenging, lunatic tones, combinations that set your teeth on edge. As with *The Intention of Chance*, there is deliberation in every aspect of this working with colour, yet paradoxically its notorious unpredictability is central to its allure: 'Colour is somewhat roguish in behaviour', says Nikolic



fig.1 Francis Bacon, *Two studies from the human body*, 1974–1975.

© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage/Copyright Agency 2022. Photo: Hugo Maertens. Private Collection.

in a 2013 interview, and he speaks of being ‘ambushed’ by unexpected possibilities.²

This long exploration has taken many turns — some systematic, many more intuitive, even compulsive — but the format of Nikolic’s paintings has been surprisingly consistent. These are dense fields of paint, often apparently a single colour, whatever the sizes and shapes of the canvases, and seemingly abstract, or, more properly, non-objective; taken as a whole, they appear to be random sports of late Modernism, reminiscent of painters from Josef Albers to the Australian Robert Hunter, with the same impeccable surfaces, and *noli me tangere* emotional reserve. Nikolic’s work looks like a highly idiosyncratic development from modernist monochromes. Appearances are deceiving, however. That’s exactly the point. For while Nikolic’s wide-ranging interests in colour mark him as the inheritor of modernist lineages, this is not through the artists of the Bauhaus and their American followers so much as through a long-standing meditation practice, and through consulting many theosophist thinkers associated with Modernism, especially the influential American Alice Bailey (1880–1949), and her writings on the Seven Rays, an important quasi-mystical colour scheme found in Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian mysticism and Chinese spiritual belief.³

Crucially, the original impetus for the Nikolic works derives not from investigating colour relations systematically, but from his determination to harness specific emotional responses to paintings encountered in art museums, or emotional tones or moods experienced in life. These epiphanies depart from modernist colour theory precisely because of their serendipitous origins and are revealed through an astonishing range of colour choices and combinations that departs radically from Modernism’s utopian bent. That was often based on reduced colour schemes and characteristically explored harmony; indeed, scientific investigation of colour, from Isaac Newton to Goethe and beyond, was based on the notion of harmonising complementary colours. Nikolic, however, often sets up colours for clash and conflict — look at the outrageous pink and red in the diminutive *Let the bridges you burn light the way* (2015) [p. 63], a provocation in name as well as deed, or the startling combinations of *Oh no, I’ve said too much, I haven’t said enough* (2019–2020) [p. 159]. (Gallerist Andrew Jensen put it plainly in 2017: ‘Nikolic’s colours are bolshie at the very least.’)⁴

If Nikolic’s work is an account of emotion experienced, it is never straightforwardly expressionist: there is little evidence of the painter’s hand, and the paintings are so perfect that they seem to have arrived fully formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus, with only occasional drips and dribbles to pointedly, if paradoxically, remind us of human deliberation. However, Nikolic’s work is often in explicit dialogue with the history of painting: the works in the 2011 solo exhibition *EIDOS*, for instance, responded to

2.

See curator Jane Devery’s interview with Nikolic on 9 October 2013 at <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/melbourne-now-countdown-day-44>, last accessed 20 October 2020.

3.

Telephone interviews with the artist, 15 May and 21 May 2020; see also Alice Bailey, *Glamour: A World Problem*, first published 1950, at https://www.lucistrust.org/online_books/glamour_world_problem; see also Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev et al, *Colori: Emotions of Color in Art*, Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2017, for a neat summary of theosophy in connection with modernist art, pp. 20ff.

4.

See Andrew Jensen, ‘BORDER-LINE the unruly paintings of Tomislav Nikolic’, uploaded 2017, at <https://www.jensen-gallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/TOMISLAV-NIKOLIC-PDF.pdf>, last accessed 20 October 2020.



fig.2 Sassetta, *The burning of a heretic*, c. 1423–1426
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. Purchased with the assistance of the Government of Victoria, 1976.



fig.3 Tomislav Nikolic, *pay the prophets to justify your reasons*, 2018-19



fig. 4 Caravaggio, *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1599

Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, MIBACT - Bibliotheca Hertziana, Istituto Max Planck for the History of Art/Enrico Fontolan.

5.

See Tomislav Nikolic: *EIDOS*, Melbourne: Tomislav Nikolic, 2011, in connection with an exhibition of the same name at Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney.

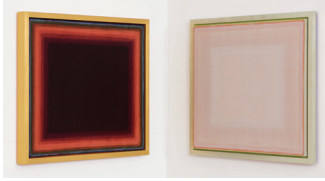
6.

There is a voluminous literature on the importance of red. See George Didi-Huberman on its changing importance from the Middle Ages, quoted in Vittorio Gallese and Martina Ardizzi, 'The Sense of Color, Midway Between World, Body and Brain', together with connections between the words color and calor (heat) and summaries of scientific studies of emotion connected to colour, in *Colori*, pp. 23–35. See also Spike Bucklow, *Red: The Art and Science of a Colour*, London: Reaktion Books, 2016.

familiar paintings in the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne;⁵ *The Intention of Chance* found its green field in Francis Bacon's *Two studies from the human body* (1974–1975) [fig. 1]; and a recent suite, *pay the prophets to justify your reasons* (2018–19) [fig. 3], took off from *The burning of a heretic* (c. 1423–1426) [fig. 2], the NGV's small panel by the Sieneese painter Sassetta — the glowing oranges and cobalt sky, and Sassetta's original size, have been transliterated into Nikolic's paintings.

For the most part these transcriptions of colour are intuitive and general, rarely specific; the emotional impact of the original is transubstantiated, rather than the incidental details of a painting. One notable example is the magisterial *Just before the most significant events, people are particularly prone to deny the possibilities of the future. (cause all we're doing is learning how to die)* (2014–17) [p. 85], in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was inspired by Caravaggio's great *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1599) [fig. 4], depicting the murder by a courageous Jewish woman of an Assyrian general before his planned destruction of her city, recounted in the Bible's Book of Judith (verses 10:11–13:10a). Caravaggio's colour scheme is tightly controlled — red for the general's spurting arterial blood, scarlet curtains framing the scene, golden yellow for Judith's robe, white for her blouse and the bed-sheet — but with Nikolic, Caravaggio's strict palette becomes a concentrated assault. As it happens, Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* is notable for the unemotional efficiency of the two women going about their deadly business; this, working with the rich colour, is the particular source of the painting's horror.

One may not know exactly what provokes Nikolic to focus on a particular painting or mood, or to adopt a specific colour, but here Caravaggio's sumptuous violence does haunt his painting. I say haunts precisely because this encounter is not embodied in sign systems, facial expressions or bodily gestures, but in something more elusive that is nevertheless felt by viewers: the traces of intensity are embedded in the substance of the painting. The appalling emotional force is transmitted by the electric intensity of the colours — shrieking yellows, the reds associated by ancient and medieval artists with trauma — and the great size of the painting, that at 1.86 metres high, and a span of 2.36 metres, encompasses the viewer's body.⁶ One does not merely look at this painting, one enters into it. And then there is the frame, insisting on our complicity in this drama. Sharp, provocative, edging past the bounds of good taste, the pompous frame hints at indecency witnessed. Here is an evident tussle — the vibrant colour of the canvas is contained within an elaborate protocol of containment. Yellow, the most visible of all colours to the human eye, signals warning, and orange follows closely behind. And there is much to see here: the elaborate frame surrounding and presenting this bubbling energy demands our attention, as part of the whole. Instead of marking a break between canvas and the world, here the frame



If vision is the only validation then most of my life isn't real, 2015–2017

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold leaf, 13.25ct white gold leaf, copper leaf on linen, canvas and wood

corner diptych:
90 × 80 × 7.5 cm &
90 × 80 × 5.5 cm

Collection of Winston Roeth,
Beacon, New York, USA

→ pp. 98–99



cultivating grace, 2017–2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf, 13.25ct white gold leaf, 6ct white gold leaf, 24ct gold leaf, museum glass on hand-carved wood
89 × 78 × 8 cm

Private Collection, Melbourne,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ pp. 100 (detail) & 101



Pleasure in the languorous, non-linear moment, reviving reality, 2017–2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold leaf, 22ct gold leaf and 13.25ct white gold leaf, on linen and wood
124 × 330 × 15.7 cm

Private Collection, Sydney,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ pp. 102–103



It's from yourself that you have to hide, 2017–2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, museum glass, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf on linen, composition and wood
159.5 × 128 × 11.5 cm

Private Collection Melbourne,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen, Sydney,
Australia

→ p. 105



To give us feelings that could never be fulfilled, 2017–2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold leaf, copper leaf on linen and wood
161 × 125 × 4.5 cm

Private Collection, Hong Kong
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ p. 107

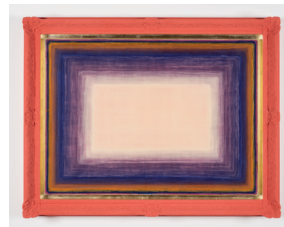


the semantics of experience, 2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, museum glass, copper leaf, 24ct gold leaf on linen and wood
162 × 130.8 × 10 cm

Private Collection, Sydney,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ p. 109

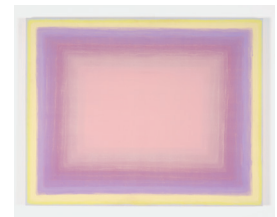


want to be the best that I can be, 2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold leaf, 13.25ct white gold leaf, acrylic on linen, composition and wood
93 × 119.6 × 11 cm

Private Collection, Auckland,
New Zealand
Courtesy of Fox Jensen McCrory,
Auckland, New Zealand

→ p. 111

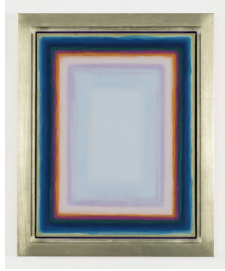


they need love to help them heal, 2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, copper leaf on plywood
72 × 91 × 3 cm

Tamsin and Patrick Johnson,
Sydney, Australia
Courtesy of STATION, Australia

→ p. 113



freedom from the hearts desires, 2017–2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 13.25ct white gold leaf, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf on linen and wood
58.5 × 48.5 × 4.5 cm

Private Collection,
New York, USA

→ p. 115

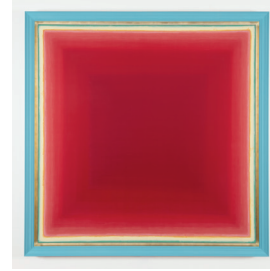


Pendant Painting, (companions), 2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 12ct white gold leaf, 24ct gold leaf, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf on linen and wood
197.5 × 351 × 10.3 cm

Private Collection Sydney,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ pp. 116–117

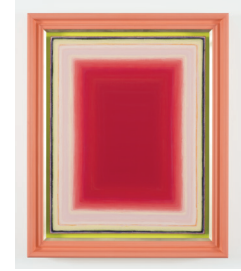


the recovery of intention, 2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 13.25ct white gold leaf, 24ct gold leaf on linen and wood
205 × 205 × 10.5 cm

Private Collection, Sydney,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ p. 119



I've been playing myself, 2018

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf, 12ct white gold leaf, museum glass on linen and wood
113.3 × 92.7 × 13.5 cm

Private Collection, Sydney,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ p. 121

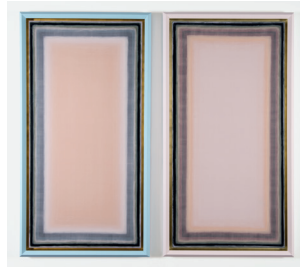


in the mirror of your eyes, 2018–2019

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 16.9ct lemon gold leaf, 12ct white gold leaf, acrylic, on linen, and wood
159.5 × 132 × 13 cm

Collection of Pawel and Joanna
Grochowicz, Auckland,
New Zealand
Courtesy of Fox Jensen McCrory,
Auckland, New Zealand

→ pp. 122–123

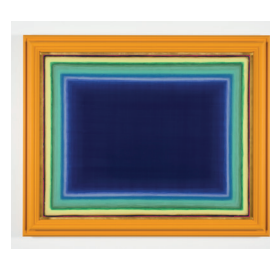


Like reflections of your mind, 2018–2019

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 22ct and 16.9ct lemon gold leaf on linen and wood
215 × 242 × 9 cm

Private Collection, Hong Kong
Courtesy of Fox Jensen,
Sydney, Australia

→ p. 125



the words you try to find, 2018–2019

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 22ct gold leaf, 13.25ct white gold leaf on canvas and wood
122.5 × 150 × 11 cm

Private Collection, Auckland,
New Zealand
Courtesy of Fox Jensen McCrory,
Auckland, New Zealand

→ p. 127



I can't light no more of your darkness, 2018–2019

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold leaf on linen and wood
185 × 185 × 9 cm

Private Collection, Melbourne,
Australia
Courtesy of Fox Jensen McCrory,
Auckland, New Zealand

→ p. 129