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The Next Cy Twombly? First, Jan Frank Paints for Australia and Tim Olsen Gallery



Tim Olsen and Jan Frank

by Nicholas Forrest

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Amsterdam born, New York based artist **Jan Frank** isn't shy about the fact that he believes he is the next **Cy Twombly** and is continuing the tradition of his favourite artist **Mondrian**. Luckily for Frank, his confidence in himself is not at all misplaced. Both his personality and his work inspire the sort of admiration and respect that justify his self-belief.

Frank's minimalist explorations of negative space, currently on show at **Tim Olsen Gallery** in the Sydney suburb of Paddington, are bold and refreshingly honest just like the man himself. Titled *Minimalism to Modernism: Painting for Australia*, the exhibition draws from a recent body of work produced over the last six months at his studio in New York.

When an opportunity arose to interview Frank, who had just arrived in Australia for the exhibition opening, I knew it was an opportunity that was too good to refuse. His reputation as an artist living a fascinating "live fast, die young" life preceded him and made the prospect of interviewing him even

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more enticing.

When he wasn't speaking he nervously chain-smoked as though he couldn't bear to not be doing something with his hands; his focus on talking about his work was so intense that he didn't even pause to flick the ash from the end of each cigarette.

Discussing art with Frank was an incredibly enlightening and engaging experience which unveiled an obsession and passion that has seen him get up in the middle of the night and scrape the paint off a canvas using a razor blade. Divesting himself of the burden of the unfinished work was the only way he could get some rest.

At the heart of his artistic practice is a process of addition and subtraction. For Frank, "less is more"; his aim is to apply "as little to the surface as possible" and to relay "the least amount of information". "The more complex it becomes, the more I dislike it," he explains.

How does he know when a painting is finished?, I asked. His reply: "I know that a work is finished when I get the feeling that adding one more stroke would be one too many".

Just as important as the process itself is the female figure that he uses as a catalyst - just don't suggest that he uses the female figure as inspiration. For Frank, the female figure is first and foremost a tool; "I use the figure to get the paint on the canvas" he says. He made reference to one particular model, a swimmer, who apparently had particularly interesting back muscles.

It wasn't till after the death of his friend **Willem de Kooning** that Franks started using the figure – a nod, perhaps, to de Kooning's own interest in the female figure. "Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented," de Kooning famously once said. I think Frank would agree.

When asked about his artistic process he described it as a "game I play in my head" the purpose of which is to produce "real" paintings as opposed to the "fake" paintings that he sees everywhere these days. It would perhaps be more de rigueur to refer to his paintings as being "honest" – honest in the sense that they are pure expressions of colour and form driven by an insatiable and interminable desire to explore the limits of negative space.

Amazingly, each of his large-scale paintings are produced using six-foot-long brushes that seem to contradict the calculated, mechanical approach that he takes to his work. Never working closer than three to four feet from a painting, using the long brushes, however, allows him to see what he is doing from a distance and maintain greater control over the entire composition.

His smaller ink and commercial correction fluid drawings on handmade paper are perhaps the most interesting and compelling works in the show. Reverberations and echoes of their former selves, the



figures in the drawings make momentary appearances amongst the jungle of marks and flashes of colour. Consisting of several small sheets of paper joined by pieces of sticky tape, the physical composition of these drawings is yet another dimension of the process of addition and subtraction that seems to permeate every aspect of his artistic output.



Although a couple of the paintings in the show appear to be somewhat self indulgent and out of character with the majority of his exhibited work, the show is an incredible triumph that presents Frank as one of the most talented and intuitive painters of modern times.

Minimalism to Modernism: Jan Frank's Painting for Australia is on show at the Tim Olsen Gallery until the 14th of October. For more information visit <http://www.timolsengallery.com/>

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