

THE IMPETUS OF DOUBT

Oscillating between the physiological and the psychological, **Tonee Messiah** proposes new terrain for navigating uncertainty.

WORDS: JO HIGGINS



If the marriage of unequivocal shapes and ambiguous hues in **Tonee Messiah**'s recent body of abstract works isn't suggestive enough, titles such as *Careen to the Parameters* or *Simmering Heat*, *Oppressive*

Fog must surely give away her psychological wonderings. "The way I paint replicates the way I think," says Messiah, and in this latest series, "each painting presents a script between desire and its moderator, doubt."

OPPOSITE: Tonee Messiah, *Gradient presence*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 41 × 35cm. PHOTO: STANDISH & CO.

ABOVE: Tonee Messiah, *Augment and Halt*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 137 × 152cm. PHOTO: STANDISH & CO.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GALLERY9, SYDNEY.





LEFT: Tonee Messiah, *Left Side Living*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 91 x 107cm. PHOTO: DOCUMENT. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GALLERY9, SYDNEY.

OPPOSITE: Tonee Messiah, *Mould*, 2020. Oil on wood panel, 61 x 46cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NICHOLAS THOMPSON GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

A thread of deliberately unresolved enquiries can be traced throughout Messiah's work over the last several years – from the physiological experiences of moving through physical spaces to the navigation of more psychological terrains. “I have been looking at bodies in spaces,” she says, “and how certain spaces affect sensation. This [latest series] started through looking at how opposites coexist.”

It was motivated, initially, by the experience of an electric sunset in a grey, foggy sky. “My brain couldn't make sense of these two completely opposing visions. And that's what started me thinking about, well, how does that work? It really matches how painting works for me; where I am putting in tensions of oppositions, trying to find space to allow

both of them to exist.” For Messiah, it's been the productive oppositions between doubt and desire that has been fascinating her.

“In my painting, desire is what pushes me to take risks, and to do things that are not familiar or that are not known yet. And doubt is the thing that questions whether that's the right move or not. So [doubt] is imperative. But it can sometimes also be quite restrictive... But [doubt] is really important because it stops you from being unconnected and not analytical about what you're doing... So it's all about the tension of opposition and seeing how it manifests in different kinds of psychological scenarios.”

Unsurprisingly, it's the versatility of abstract painting that appeals to Messiah, lending as it does a mirror-like quality to the

psychological dialogues within her themes, and while colour is often the first point of fact in decision-making about a work; it is the physical experience of painting that directs its formal qualities. “The surprises are probably in understanding how my own psychological mechanism works and how potent doubt is to my process... I am teaching myself about myself through the work.”

Messiah received her Masters of Fine Art from UNSW Art & Design in 2017. She has been a finalist in the Waverley Art Prize and the Hazelhurst Works on Paper Art Award, among others. Her work is held in collections including Artbank, Sydney and Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne. Messiah is represented by Gallery9, Sydney and Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Melbourne.

TONEE MESSIAH'S *DUBIOUS DESIRE* SHOWS AT GALLERY9, SYDNEY FROM 14 JULY TO 7 AUGUST 2021.

