

The Sensory Overload of Ken Tisa's 'The Color of Sound'

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Ken Tisa, *Kali's Dance*, 2017
Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY



Exhibition view, Ken Tisa, *The Color of Sound*, 2017
Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY

"The Color of Sound" is Ken Tisa's first paintings exhibition in more than twenty years. It's not that he wasn't making art all that time. On the contrary: For Tisa, art is a daily practice, and his involves not only painting, but also ceramics, collage, textile design, and scenic design. Some think of him as an artist's artist, one who believes in the essential pleasure of expression, who delights in the sensuality of material wisdom. It's no accident that the title of his current show at Kate Werble Gallery connotes synesthesia, an implosion of the senses, for his is art that's trippy, stirring, and charged in a most transcendent way.

Tisa holds a particular place in New York lore. He was close friends with the luminary performer and drag artist Ethyl Eichelberger (1945-1990), and a collaborator of the poet Max Blagg. After nabbing his MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1972, he landed in New York in time for the downtown art explosion and, later, the AIDS crisis. The artist's most recent show here in town last spring was of older work. A poignant three-part installation titled "Object/Time/Offerings" at Gordon Robichaux covered the wall of one room with a selection from Tisa's vast collection of puppets, masks, and dolls from all over the world, throughout which he hung postcard-sized paintings. (The artist claims to be a dedicated lifelong enthusiast of stuff.) In a second room, a floor-to-ceiling collage of his personal ephemera was installed next to another floor-to-ceiling installation of more small paintings, which Tisa made throughout the 1980s and 1990s as AIDS took the lives of his friends, his collaborators, and his partner. The artist painted more than a thousand of these canvases, figurative works possessed of a single striking image possessing something of the mystery and magic of a Tarot card: a nude bum, feet levitating above the ground, a smiling woman being pummeled by raindrops, a muscle man in bright red briefs. These paintings, intended to be shown together as a single work of art, register sex and death and grief and humor as equal, inseparable conditions.



Ken Tisa, *Night in Istanbul*, 2017
Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY



Ken Tisa, *Heartthrob*, 2017
Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY



Ken Tisa, *Night Out*, 2017
Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY

Love is never uncomplicated. Life is rife with dazzle pains. "The Color of Sound" deals in a similar mire, temperature (perhaps sensibility is the better word), but Tisa's new paintings, all made in the last three years, reveal his inner formalist: all abstractions in gouache and watercolor, typically muted media that he gives the scale and the self-assurance of oil paint. His titles are lucid, giving nudging narrative by summoning particular points here on earth as well as in less tangible realms: *Spirit Song*, *Night in Istanbul*, *Dreamtime Maze*, *Heartthrob*. His compositions – polyrhythmic, unruly – are multidimensional, magnetic chaos; their many elements advance and recede, come together, and fall apart, all at once.

The molten orange and red-rose trail that dominates *Heartthrob* screams for attention, smearing itself over a delicate web of multicolored orbs, calling for us to look closer while pushing a viewer away with its scorching palette. Squint at *Big Bang*, and its teeming center takes the shape of a psychedelic portrait in profile: a dark blue tadpole(y thingy) as its eye, streaming yellow masses becoming its nose, mouth, and neck. *Lost and Found* is a dizzying tangle of tightly drawn pathways – a candy-colored network to nowhere. *Night Out* is sensual, sexual, its freaky green lattice winding through a wiggling jungle of oddball stuff, some open and penetrated as orifices. Though his paintings appear to scramble or explode almost as though in a sudden flash, it takes time for Tisa to achieve such intricacy, density, and depth. It is this sense of duration, of return, that infuses his work with a meditative, spiritual frequency, as though Tisa made them, perhaps in part, as prayer.

Kali's Dance, titled for the Hindu goddess who liberates all and destroys all evil, is the largest work in the show. Free-handed forms – like innards or comet trails or maybe a goddess's choreographic notations – loop across the canvas. Beneath them are frenzied configurations of even more kooky, kinky figures, layers to be excavated or collapsed by the eye as it takes in the marvels of Tisa's cosmic elsewhere made for the here and now.

'Ken Tisa: The Color of Sound' Through December 22
Kate Werble Gallery 83 Vandam Street
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