



Tiziana La Melia, *Je ne sais quoi*, 2016–17, oil and aluminum powder on canvas, ink on wooden artist frame, 24 3/8 × 20 7/8".

Tiziana La Melia

GALERIE ANNE BARRAULT

Spanning adjacent walls and gently grazing the gallery floor, Tiziana La Melia’s panoramic canvas *Broom Emotion*, 2017, hung unstretched, like a backdrop to the rest of her eponymous solo exhibition, her first in France. Black arabesques and graffiti-like script emerged from this abstract work, saturated with pools of purple, yellow, pink, and brown—that is, watercolor, red wine, and instant coffee. A thin layer of sand covered the gallery’s terrazzo floor, while ostrich-size chalk eggs and purple sachets of white *dragées* were arranged atop fragrant bales of hay. A garden arch, covered with black toile and craft butterflies, framed the view toward La Melia’s painting, *Yellow Mistral*, 2016–17. The artist has talked about playing “the painter” as a theatrical part, and here she set the stage.

La Melia has alluded to her poetic approach and to the chains of associations she employs to

realize her works. Curator Franck Balland explains that “poetry does not precede the artist’s material activities but occurs in tandem—it acts, in the heart of her work, as a lever which upsets rationality, triggering possible stories.” While the arresting juxtapositions La Melia proposes in her works do have a poetic effect, here the vivid, immersive installation almost palpably conjured, for me, the power of fiction—in particular, the turbulent intimacy captured in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels.

Born in Palermo, Italy, La Melia now works in Vancouver but prepared much of this exhibition as a resident at Triangle France in Marseille. The heat and intensity of the ancient Mediterranean port exude from La Melia’s installation as well as from her recent paintings in oil on canvas. The playful evocativeness in the titles of works like *Feeling the dying sunflowers*, 2017, or *Cow Heat Femme Spin*, 2016–17, seems an echo of her painterly surfaces. La Melia’s touch is quick and whimsical, and each painting appears in a finely crafted, colorful frame. Some of her compositions elicit a smile. In *Je ne sais quoi*, 2016–17, a purple-and-yellow pansy blooms ebulliently and holds a glass of red wine in one folded leaf, while jauntily pointing another leaf toward the sky. A cry of “*Santé!*” is nearly audible. La Melia, like a poet, is not only testing the potential of her imagination but teasing her viewer with collisions of references and tastes. Most impressive is her sense of humor, a quality that implies intimacy, freedom, and the warm softness of a beaming face.

While several of La Melia’s paintings, such as *Yellow Mistral*, incorporate aluminum powder or glitter, her works are not like John Armleder’s glitter canvases, which stage deadpan investigations of the relationship between art and decoration. Hers is a girlish playfulness that forces the proximity of disparate media as well as divergent forms, and generates encounters between representation and abstraction. Balland suggests that kitsch or “bad taste” is at issue in her work, but she seems more concerned with the juxtapositions that arise between the various elements of her selected vocabulary and media. Two images, like two friends growing up to lead two very different lives, or two unexpectedly connected words in a poem, may find new and more ample meaning in the very presence of each other.

—Lillian Davies