

Howard Tangye: The Pentimento Collection

by Robin Cantwell

From da Vinci to Degas, the *pentimento* - a visible alteration in a painting that shows the artist's change of mind during the composition of a work - has been a recurring motif through art history. The term (typically found in its plural, *pentimenti*) derives from the Italian 'to repent', evoking the cinematic image of an artist trying to make amends for a mistake made earlier in the creative process; for example, the change of a hand position as detected in an X-ray of an underdrawing, or the reshaping of a figure in a preparatory sketch. For some, these so-called 'mistakes' are nothing more than the ghosts of paintings past - fossils to help art historians piece together a work's timeline and formation - but for figurative artist Howard Tangye, whose new collection presents a major departure from the shy, romantic imagery of his earlier work, they are the window into the artist's mind's eye. They are, in fact, the study of creation itself.

Australian-born Tangye first encountered *pentimenti* in the book *Drawing: History of an Art*, gifted to him early in his practice. It was in these pages that Tangye saw how these visible workings could become something more than mere changes of mind: they could become choices for the eye of the viewer to follow and explore. Early renderings of this idea can be seen in the late Quattrocento drawings of the great Renaissance humanists and, in particular, da Vinci. Leonardo, his imagination forever roaming the page, made exploratory use of these changes of mind to obtain a transcendental, elusive quality to his form; in the words of Cambridge Professor Paul Joannides, 'his drawings become a maze of lines as one modification sets off another', infusing these 'repentant' strokes with a sense of invention and ethereal freedom.

This liberated, stylised use of *pentimenti* lay in stark contrast to their role in the drawings of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, whose figures and backdrops are often reshaped and reconstructed time and time again in an obsessive multiplicity of positions, as evidenced in the exacting *Three Drapery Studies For A Man Pointing Forward*. For Ingres, these intense, metronomically repetitive renderings - often drawing arms and legs three or four times on a single body - symbolised his relentless search for the neoclassical perfection that came to define him as a visionary of the Napoleonic Era.

However, with the expressionist movements that took shape during the late 19th Century came a different use for *pentimenti*, manifested most powerfully in the preparatory sketches by Edgar Degas for the dancers that famously feature throughout his oeuvre. Here, *pentimenti* serve as contours for the balletic kineticism of his subjects, his dancers often performing live in his own studio. One can imagine Degas caught in a hypnotic trance, the *pentimenti* pirouetting across the page as the artist sought to capture as faithfully as possible the rhythmic displacement of time and space that came and went in the briefest of moments before his very eyes - a phenomenon that was often sacrificed for a more impressionistic sensibility in his finished oil on canvas.

In a major departure from the shy, romantic imagery that had become a recognisable characteristic of his earlier practice, Tangye's new body of work pursues a more expressive receptivity that stems from the artist's association with childhood. In the same way Degas applied the technique to bring to life the physical motion of his dancers, Tangye uses it to represent the movements of his sitter's mind, turning it into a vibrant aspect of his artistic repertoire. When confronted with this series of choices, Tangye attests that it is 'the eye that decides which one works'. One cannot help but trace a symmetry between the meanderings of the artist's own mind and those at license within the figurative portraits of those he depicts, for the *pentimenti* that Tangye builds into his work also seem to conjure the restless imaginations of his introspective sitters, often pictured deep in thought. By taking us on this journey of artist and subject, Tangye is setting his repentance free.