

sensuous wisdom

Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars.

—Proverbs 9:1



NAN TULL IN HER BOSTON STUDIO 1986

Nan Tull remembers exactly when she first wanted to become an artist. Studying in Paris during her junior year at Wellesley, she observed many art students copying from original works in the Louvre. However, one day she was struck by the sight of a student not trying to replicate what she saw. Instead, the young woman was working to create an abstraction by enlarging the corner of a Titian painting—or what Tull thinks might have been a Titian. In her memory, the specific painting is not as important as the recognition of a process that would serve her well in later years, one that allowed for invention and made it possible for her to become a creative person.¹

This did not happen immediately. Tull followed a path shared by many women of her generation. She married, had children and moved house each time her husband relocated for work. But upon settling in Boston, determination replaced mere desire.

She enrolled at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, eventually earning a graduate degree at an institution known for its willingness to embrace new ideas. “I was beginning to wrestle with the desire to abandon realistic....renderings,” she observed. “I was back to the Titian-detail-enlargement in the Louvre, wanting to explore a new way of seeing.”²

Pushing beyond the small watercolors created before art school, Tull constructed ten foot canvases with thick surfaces of oil stick, sand and pastel. After climbing a greenhouse ladder to take pictures of seedlings framed within containers, she began to craft a visual language that was personal to her, one that used memory and observation to explore abstraction. “I’m visually attracted to structure,” she observed when considering her sources. “I love the paintings of Richard Diebenkorn, Brice Marden and Terry Winters. That kind of imposed order has a calming effect on me.”

Tull’s affinity for geometric abstraction made her studio a particularly attractive environment. She loved the expansive grid of windows that framed her view of the Boston skyline, and was energized by working with other artists to renovate an old warehouse. But just as she was preparing for two solo exhibitions, she became ill. Tull underwent emergency surgery in 1983, and her year long recovery was compromised by personal loss. The initially supportive environment of her studio

¹ Nan Tull, *Reminiscences of An Artist*, Boston Public Library, Boston, 1994.

² *ibid*

proved challenging. The heating unit refused to work and killed amaryllis plants given to her as get-well presents. Coal slag used to sandblast the beams as part of her building renovation, a construction material that carried the ironic name Black Beauty, "...rained down...in that cheerless winter."³ Fine black dust coated every surface.

Events wore down Tull's usually resilient nature. She found herself depressed, unable to work. Putting aside the geometric pieces planned for exhibition, she began filling sketchbooks with observational drawings. The black dust falling from the ceiling inspired her to begin working with charcoal, a medium she'd previously avoided. "Black became my favorite color," she says when speaking of these deeply nuanced works. As Tull's health returned, she made progressively larger drawings and then paintings of the dying amaryllis, creating some of the most important work of her career.

The *Black Beauty* work is undeniably sexual, recalling both the line drawings of Ellsworth Kelly and the oversized flower paintings of Georgia O'Keefe. It does not take great imagination to discern the phallic shape in the amaryllis head, or a vision of female sex between the petals. In the words of one critic, these works were "enough to make you blush."⁴ But what is remarkable is the powerful command Tull exhibits over the material. Charcoal encouraged a more gestural style of working. She used it to literally carve into space, creating expressive shapes that pulse with energy. An amaryllis lays its heavy head against a silver leaf. The tip of a smaller plant tickles the stalk of a taller one. Organic forms push against the top of the picture frame and refuse to be contained. Tull's world is a surprising, sometimes dangerous place—filled with events she finds impossible to control.

She manages to impose a much needed sense of order in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, monumental panels that reference pagan mythology, architecture, the male sex, and female wisdom all at the same time. Done in grisaille, these paintings of engorged flowers stand fully erect before the viewer. Instead of directing us to contemplate a delicate flower, Tull asks us to consider strength as part of growth—and eventual decay.

Asked about the title in relation to T.E. Lawrence's book about men and contemporary warfare, Tull discouraged literal comparison, but she's delighted to know that Lawrence looked to Proverbs. "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars:"⁵ Seven pillars serve as architectural support for pagan temples. The Bible informs us that there are seven days in the week and seven creative planets. Most significantly, myth and religion teach that wisdom is female and its various aspects can be named. Tull follows this convention in *Seven Pillars* by assigning titles to reflect virtues that are hard earned. Intuition played an important



NAN TULL IN HER BOSTON STUDIO 2009

³ ibid

⁴ Christine Temin, Perspectives, The Boston Globe, Wednesday, May 18, 1984.

⁵ King James Bible, Proverbs 9:1

part in her creativity, as well as Astuteness and Integrity. After completing six paintings, Tull struggled to complete the final in the series which she then entitled *Patience*.

Following *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, she began making observational drawings of milk weed pods collected on walks. Once inside the studio the pods became dried and cracked; they split open to release their seed onto her work table. Obvious interpretation misses the point. What Tull saw in the dead husk of one plant was the promise of new life for the next. *Scattered Seed* has less to do with male and female sexuality than her belief in artistic regeneration. “When you are sick for the first time, you begin to think—well, there is an end. Everyone leans heavily on the sexual part of these drawings, but that is not what I was thinking.” Instead, Tull worked to portray “the promise of life that continues...the idea of rebirth, and the chance to begin again.”



IRONS 9

For the next few years she produced charcoal drawings at a prodigious rate. Working less from observation, Tull’s work grew formally abstract. Layers of black charcoal make *Movements* and *Extensions* seem weighted down by emotion. They quiver with human gesture made just beyond our ability to see it. *Irons* allow for a transparency of solid form, and create a deliberate distance from domestic responsibility. Eventually Tull found a way to combine observations of nature with geometric abstraction. In studies for her first encaustic painting, male and female shapes stand together without touching. Delicate pencil lines and strips of tape direct the eye up and down in a meditative consideration of the page; a thin layer of beeswax creates a shimmering effect. But these studies

show only the bare bones of Tull’s final encaustic. In *Standing Engagement*, pencil lines and tape disappear entirely. Wax rises proud of the surface, obscuring all that lies below.

Encaustic can be a challenging medium. Like charcoal, it’s messy, elegant, and sensually attractive. Tull continued experimenting with beeswax, applying tape over drawings to introduce ordered regularity. “I can be messy when I’m working,” she observed. “But I love the tranquility of structured form.” A previous fascination with geometry begins to assert itself. In *Tropos*, the grid is always present. Up and down lines dominate works like *Irrigate*, alluding to the life force in nature, while insisting that we have the ability to channel this force. Since beginning to work in charcoal in the early 1980’s, most of Tull’s work had been black and white, or various shades of gray. A decade later, color reappears with an initial affinity for dangerous red, followed by cautionary yellow. Encaustic helps to release a wide range of complex shades and tones.

Color within her *Suspension* encaustics is satisfyingly rich. While their strict linearity indicates pure abstraction, these lush paintings build on her observations of the natural world. Tull's conscious of what first inspired her to become an artist. By not trying to replicate nature, she's able to articulate a private vision. *Suspension: Midnight Morning* and *Suspension: Celadon Night* record her experience of color at a particular time of day. Light is contained within layers of wax, mysterious and translucent. *Genera: Coral Fan* describes an understanding of sea life living beneath turbulent water. *Suspension: Pearl* recalls a private consideration of iridescent light. Tull's return to abstraction does not remove her from the world. Instead, it helps distill its essence.



GENERA: CORAL FAN

She loves encaustic, taking pleasure from the smell of molten beeswax, and the changing process inherent to this ancient material. Bringing in kitchen implements from home, she enjoys feeling she's "stirred up some great mystery." Depending upon how she layers the wax, strips of tape rest on the wooden panel at the bottom of the painting or rise to become suspended—information that she's imbedded within a secret world. *Suspension* not only describes a method of working; it also asks the viewer "to suspend ideas about what it takes to make a painting." Like other artists, Tull wants her audience "to be more open to seeing what they wouldn't have noticed before."

Tull is a compassionate person, filled "with great empathy for every stage of life we go through." As a young woman walking through the Louvre, she was able to identify the person she might become by observing the creative process of another. A dying amaryllis helped her know "that there could be something we leave, some record of a time that propels us into the future." *The Seven Pillars* became a sentimental education based on the making of art. She gained critical self knowledge upon completion of each panel. Although her work might cause some critics to blush, Tull's sensuous wisdom has less to do with sex than honest emotion. "I would never paint anything I don't care about," she says emphatically. As an artist, Tull envisions moments of true feeling based on experience. As viewers, we are wiser for that.



INHERITENCE: MIST

Katherine French, Director
Danforth Museum of Art

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from conversations between the artist and author, which occurred from January 2007 through June 2009.