

FRESTONIAN GALLERY

TIM BRADEN LA COLORISTE



PRIVATE VIEW: 21st SEPTEMBER, 6-8PM
SHOW DATES: 22nd SEPTEMBER – 4th NOVEMBER 2023

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A JOURNEY INTO COLOUR - ESSAY BY THOMAS MARKS

You don't look at the city; you look out of it. - 'Worlds of Tangier', 1958, Paul Bowles

For the American writer Paul Bowles, who called the city home for five decades, Tangier was forever on the verge of disappearance. In part, that impression stemmed from a construction boom that had accelerated in the post-war period, arousing a nostalgia in Bowles as the casbah was overhauled, effacing its historical fabric, and as new districts sprang up in the old town's hinterland. 'There must be few places in the world,' he wrote in the late 1950s, 'which have altered visually to such an extent in the past quarter of a century.' Bowles's was also a sensibility, however, that reflected a broader, residual Romanticism: of Tangier as not only a place but an idea, as a promised haven – and as such, as a mirage that might slip from view no sooner than it materialised. During the period of the Tangier International Zone, from the mid 1920s onwards, and indeed after Morocco regained independence in 1956, European and American tourists, travellers and ex-pats disembarked in the city en masse. Some, such as William Burroughs or Joe Orton, were tempted by opportunities for transgression; all, from artists to heiresses, were drawn by the cheap cost of living. 'Over the years,' Bowles wrote in 1963, 'a great deal of disparate material about the place has been written – for, neutral and against – labelling it everything from a paradise to a hellhole. [...] Tangier has become a kind of legend.'

Before a brace of visits in the summer of 2023, the painter Tim Braden had long sensed that the historical tug of Tangier might make for an artistic opportunity. Braden has often travelled in search of subject matter, not in a bid to emulate the escapism or exoticisation of the past but to test the fault lines, the points of abrasion, where myth and experience meet one another. During extended periods abroad, in places such as Brazil, Russia and Mexico, he has made work alert to the artistic voyagers and visions that have preceded him, most recently reflecting on Josef and Anni Albers' travels in Mexico in the 1950s. North Africa has been a persistent focus. Since undertaking an artistic residency in Algiers in 2008, Braden has frequently returned to the city; his subjects there include the Jardin d'essai de Hamma, a botanical display garden which was depicted so often by French painters during the colonial era that it came to inform the European imaginary of the city. 'I'm fascinated by Orientalism but also very wary of it,' Braden says. Braden travelled to Tangier attentive to how the city was already mediated for him: by the novels of Bowles, including *Let it Come Down* (1952), for instance, and by the paintings that Henri Matisse made on a three-month visit in 1912 – and not least *Fenêtre à Tanger*, a detached, elevated view from the French painter's hotel window. But he also set out with a feeling for less-rehearsed Tangier lives, such as the experiences of Jane Bowles (who had complex relationships in and with the city), of the creators of Kettle's Yard, Jim and Helen Ede (who lived in Tangier from 1936–52), and of the Scottish painter and engraver James McBey and his American wife, Marguerite.

A photograph of Marguerite McBey in her garden in the Old Mountain district of the city had previously furnished Braden with imagery for a painting in 2018. After moving to Tangier in 1932, the McBey's bought and renovated two houses, El Foolk and Villa Jalobey (a portmanteau of James McBey and Loeb, Marguerite's maiden name). What Braden did not realise, and what eventually determined his Tangier paintings, is that Villa Jalobey is now the Tangier home of Yto Barrada, the Franco-Moroccan artist who has done so much to invigorate the cultural life of the city. Braden had been eager to visit the Cinémathèque de Tangier, founded by Barrada in 2006 as a centre for North African film in the art deco Cinéma Rif building. But at Villa Jalobey he encountered The Mothership, a more recent project that Barrada has instigated, and which encompasses a dye garden and residency – a *kaleidoscope*, as it were, of myriad plants incubating all manner of tints, hues and chromatic possibilities. This is the 'colouring garden' that is the focus of Braden's Tangier paintings. It is a place in which the wild madder whispers of reds, deep reds and purples, the mimosa and wood sorrel, and the black-eyed Susans, of yellow and orange dyes for paper or fabric.

For Braden it has become a site for meditation on how he apprehends place, and how he comes to occupy his version of it, through a painting process that is consciously transformative. It is fitting for Braden to have alighted on a garden for such reflections, and not only because the idea of a garden as a world apart coincides, to some degree, with certain western perceptions of Tangier. More personally, gardens have long been subjects for the artist, in works such as *Mr and Mrs Kandinsky and Paul Klee in the Garden* (2013) or *The Artist's Garden* (2016), sites that open up pathways for him to think about painting.

They are at once his dwelling places and his points of departure. Design and contingency; engagement or withdrawal; parts and whole; figuration or abstraction: suchlike are the duels or duets that Braden happens on in gardens.

It is the latent palette of the planting at Villa Jalobey, as a living swatch book of dyes that is legible only by the trained eye, which has moved Braden to translate the garden into his own colour arrangements and visual language. He has not sought to map specific plants to the colours they produce, although samples of dyed fabric that Barrada has shown him have informed the deep reds which are otherwise uncommon in his paintings. (The relationship between textiles and painting is another of Braden's longstanding subjects.) Instead, the garden's imaginative model, its sense of possibility, has granted him a type of licence in making successive versions of particular views of the place. With its cool, heightened blues, *Villa Jalobey greens and blues*, for instance, seems to recast a cropped detail of the earlier *Jalobey* as a Nordic scene. In *Colouring garden (large reds)*, an arrangement of (mostly) green brushstrokes from a much smaller painting, *Colouring garden (greens)*, is blown up into an audacious abstraction of tomato red, Parma violet and fuchsia.

In Tangier, Marguerite McBey became a prolific watercolourist, often painting her gardens at Villa Jalobey and El Fook. 'You have to get [the inspiration] on to the paper before it disappears or is forgotten,' she said. 'For years I had watercolours at the ready in every room, like a writer with a pen and paper.' McBey's words capture the essential conditions of watercolour as a swift and irreversible medium, properties entirely apposite to *plein air* painting: their directness corresponds with the fleeting nature of light and weather.

It is intriguing, in this context, that Braden compares his large-scale oil and acrylic paintings of Villa Jalobey, executed in his studio in London, to works that evoke the immediacy of paintings made *in situ*. In fact many of the larger works 'began' as smaller paintings and sketches, from which, through strategies of cropping and editing, their compositions were derived. In this process of 'enlargement', however, Braden has purposely retained the freedom of his original brushstrokes, as well as the blank spaces between them, as they appear in smaller versions. Take the voids that define the trunks of trees in *Colouring Garden, Reds (large)*, for instance, or the caesuras amid their periwinkle foliage. To achieve such designs requires painting in a single take; there can be no turning back. 'These paintings are like sketches,' Braden says. 'You can't reveal a new gap.' Although these are mediated images, internalised by the artist through repetition and revision, they nevertheless conjure a mode of immediacy: they are *plein air* paintings of the mind.

'There's so much content in there,' Braden says, 'but I love the pure paintings that the preparation opens on to.' If such calculated freshness, and indeed the process of achieving it, is the dominant note of Braden's Tangier series, then he interleaves it with works that allow for circumspection as he stakes his claim to represent Villa Jalobey. The oil sketch titled *Le Jardinier*, for instance, depicting a faceless gardener at work, acknowledges that Braden's presence in the garden might be a type of trespass. Further 'prop paintings' – as Braden refers to them – wilfully engage with exoticised representations of the city, admitting the ethical obstacles that have perhaps provided a creative provocation for this body of work (he cites 'Everything is Nice', a short story by Jane Bowles in which an ex-pat crudely misjudges an encounter with a Moroccan woman, as an important reference point here). Two sketches based on postcards of Tangier, one depicting three women in traditional dress, emphasise the perpetuation of the orientalisising gaze. *The Orientalist (McBey)* shows a postcard of James McBey's *El Marrakeshia* (1936), a portrait of a young Moroccan woman, taped to a shelf in Braden's studio.

'Imagination,' Paul Bowles wrote, 'is essential for the enjoyment of a place like Tangier, where the details that meet the eye are not what they seem'. That feels a fitting way to conceive of Tim Braden's approach to the garden at Villa Jalobey. In these paintings, imagination supersedes perception – arriving at a vision that is true to both the painter and the place.

Thomas Marks is a writer and critic, and co-founder of a cultural consultancy, Marks|Calil. He is an associate fellow of the Warburg Institute and a trustee of Art UK, and was the editor of *Apollo* magazine from 2013–21.

Tim Braden was born in 1975 in Perth, Scotland. He received his MA from Ruskin School of Fine Art at Oxford University and attended Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. He has exhibited widely, including at Baibakov Art Projects, Moscow; Gemeente Museum, The Hague; Hamburger Bahnhof at Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Kunstneres Hus, Oslo; Museum Van Loon, Amsterdam; and Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. His work is included in many public collections, including the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Nederlandse Bank, Amsterdam; Pembroke College, Oxford; Walsall Museum and Art Gallery, UK; and the Zabłudowicz Collection, London.

For further information on the exhibition please contact: gallery@frestoniangallery.com