

# Plea to save the natural world

*Influxus* by Sarah Tomasetti.  
Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street,  
Deakin. Until May 22.

**Reviewer:** Sasha Grishin.

In 1995, the Melbourne-based artist Sarah Tomasetti gained a professional qualification in "Tecnica Pittura Murale" at the Laboratorio per Affresco di Vainella in Italy.

In other words, she was inducted into the traditions of fresco painting – that is, painting murals on walls, generally on wet gesso – a tradition that goes back to ancient Pompeii and one that attracted the greatest talents in Italian Renaissance painting, including Giotto, Michelangelo and Leonardo. Although fresco painting later declined in the West, it continued in the Byzantine East and survives through to the present, remaining a living tradition in the Orthodox diaspora in Australia.

Tomasetti has adapted this technique to make small, easel-size paintings, like neat fragments of wall on which she has painted spectacular mountain scenery. The layer of gesso, technically termed the "intonaco layer", is worked when it is dry in the "secco" manner, staining the surface with oil pigments, outlining forms with pencil and sometimes treating the surface with wax encaustic. It is a very beautiful technique with a subdued palette and a rich glowing inner luminosity.

For her subject matter, Tomasetti has travelled Mount Gongga (the



*Tian Shan II* by Sarah Tomasetti at Beaver Galleries.

highest peak in Sichuan province, known locally as Minya Konka) in China, with its glorious snow-capped summit at about 7000 metres. Located between the Dadu and Yalong rivers, it is a dangerous and beautiful mountain that has a rich tradition in mythology.

Tomasetti is a romantic in temperament and she notes: "My relationship to landscape is an emotional one. I seek out locations and subjects that have traditionally been the vector of romantic longings and re-examine them through a lens inevitably loaded with dread of the rapid melt". Central to her practice is the concept of global warming, and as the great snow caps melt and disintegrate, she draws a parallel

with the natural cracking found in the fresco surface. She continues: "Each work is an exploration of the complex interplay between the painted landscape and the fractal patterning that emerges randomly within the fresco skin."

The beauty of Tomasetti's little paintings is that they have a gem-like quality that draws you into a close examination of the work. The technique is the seductive eye candy and once you are hooked, then you are drawn into the philosophical subtleties of her thinking. What I find particularly attractive about her approach is the play between the very deliberate artist's intention in her compositions and her preparedness to embrace chance that lies inherent in the technique.

Her paintings, including *Minya Peak*, *Minya Konka Traverse*, *Gongga Shan*, *Gongga Shan from the air* and the superb *Cloud Knot*, have a wonderful transcendental quality, like meditations on the sublime tempered by the thought that what once was viewed as eternal and supremely powerful is now under threat.

Sarah Tomasetti is an artist who has devised her own unique artistic language and technique, which she is constantly refining and perfecting. They are not simply pretty pictures, but very personal and emotive paintings that make a plea for the preservation of our beautiful natural environment and for a concerted effort to combat global warming.