

Liat Yossifor, Below the Eye

KAREN LANG

Liat Yossifor's new paintings pulsate to the beat of examined life. *Below the Eye*, the title of the recent series, alludes to the physical eye, the mind's eye, and the way these paintings pull the viewer below the perceptual, the rational, or the given, into a creaturely realm where seeing and knowing uncouple. If this territory is alive, it is also melancholic. Pulling us below the eye, tearing open the wounds of possibility, these paintings lay bare "the expression of the expressionless, a crying from which the tears are missing."¹

It would be rather convenient to hang the feeling world of *Below the Eye* on the artist's experiences of life under siege on ancient land. Yossifor was born in Israel and emigrated to the United States just shy of her sixteenth birthday. In Israel, memorials to the unknown, the fallen, and the heroes stand while human victims and "heroes" fall. In *Below the Eye* swimmers are as frozen as statues and statues are as animated as human beings ready to die for a cause. Official culture perpetuates collective enchantments. These paintings pierce the political, social, and cultural skin of war, death, and commemoration. They depict creaturely life—life before political, social, and cultural expression, life beside these forms of expression. Crying without tears.

In the tradition of Giorgio Morandi and Philip Guston, Yossifor is a painter's painter. To look at the work of a painter's painter is "to recreate it, feeling in your wrist and fingers the sequence of strokes, each a stab of decision which discovers a new problem."² Yossifor begins by combining her source material—photographs of monuments, painted battle scenes, imagery that strikes a chord—into new compositions. With paintbrush she sketches outlines of these compositions onto prepared panel. Hand then leads the eye as she works in a wet on wet technique, transforming oil paint into figure, ground, form, and texture. This technique requires her to work swiftly, close to the panel. The predominately dark palette raises the challenge of creating form and content intuitively. Whether small or large in size, these paintings are monumental in scale. They are mutable in two senses: in them we see both the process of making and an appearance that shifts according to lighting conditions. Like the art of Morandi and Guston, *Below the Eye* repays extended looking.

Painting is the experience of the painting—for the artist, and for the viewer.

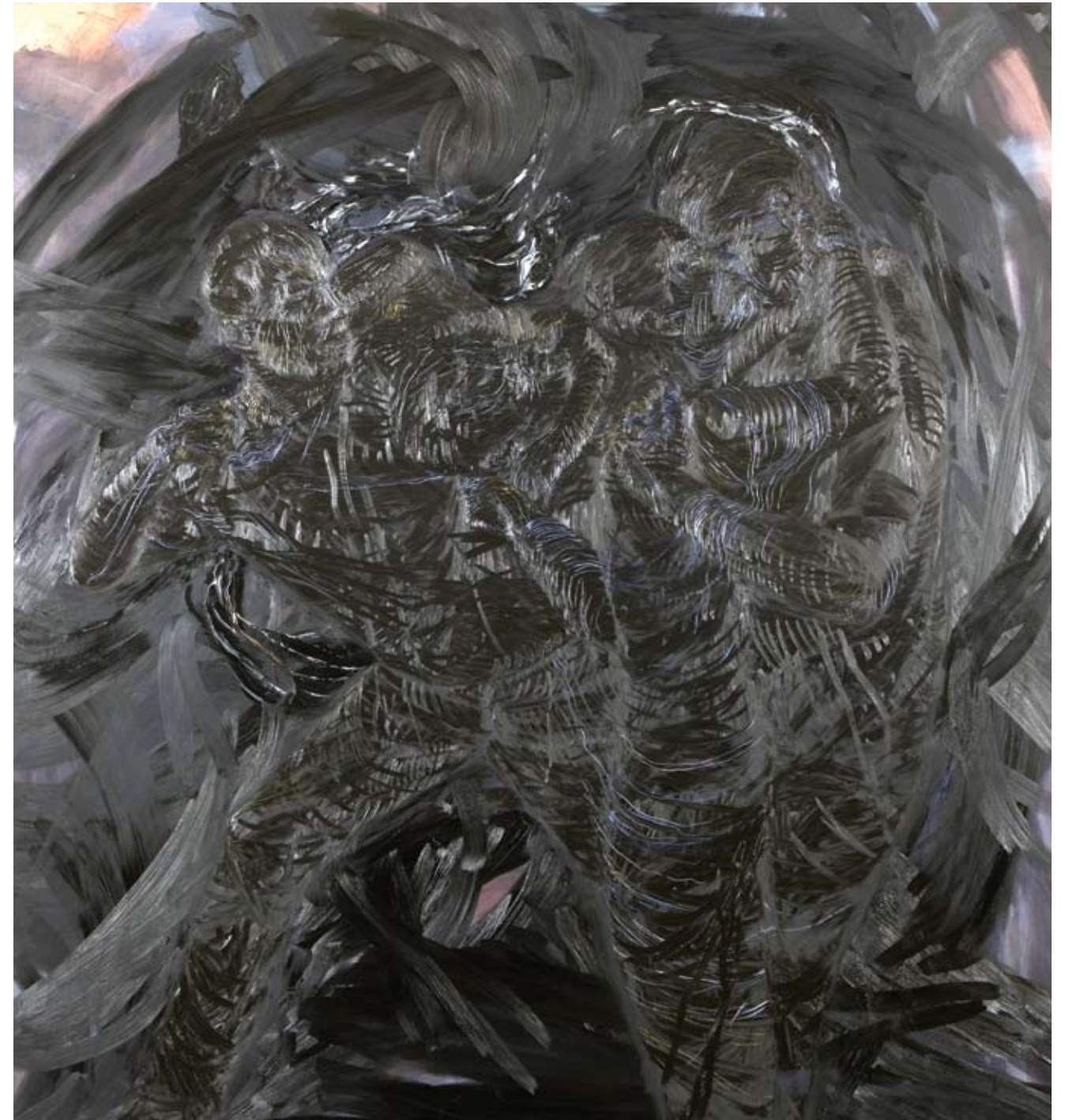
It's difficult at first to perceive the subject of these paintings. This difficulty arises from the close interplay between medium, technique, palette, and subject.

Extended looking disentangles figure from ground, but as in optical illusion, figure and ground, shape and stroke, vie for primacy in perception. Effectively, I perceive subject but I do not see it apart from surface. As subject renders surface and surface renders subject, I am inside the painting's world of illusion, trapped in its snare. As my capacity to recognize through difference wavers, the paintings extend recognition. This complication and extension of recognition ushers in imagination and perception. I believe I see a body in that inky field in *The Swimmers* (2008). Why is it there? Is it in motion or are those strokes building up its form? Is there something else, something I can't make out? What does it mean? These paintings make me look. They afford ample imagination. They solicit and defy perception.

Expressiveness arises in the very nature of depiction. The wet on wet technique lends primacy to the hand and full weight to expression in the process of making. What is depicted is no less expressive. Yet depiction encompasses more than style and subject. It also refers to the way painting engages the imagination and recognition unfolds in the viewing experience.³ The very look of *Below the Eye* complicates and extends recognition. The vital energy of the brushwork, the nihilistic palette, the viscerally uncertain subject matter, all these address me, engaging my imagination and eliciting a sense of reflection on my part. In the aesthetic response feelings awaken but nothing adds up. The paintings reverberate.

The viewing experience of Yossifor's paintings extends beyond my time in front of her panels. If seeing draws me into a world of illusion, a feeling world lingers. Recognition includes what I decipher in the painting and what the painting understands in me.⁴ I might not yet recognize what the painting understands in me. Description includes what is in the picture and thoughts after seeing the picture.⁵ The picture might not yet recognize what I understand in it. That *Below the Eye* stays with me is its art. But it's a haunting. For if these paintings reverberate with the expression of the expressionless, a crying from which the tears are missing, they resound in me with a recognition from which the words are missing. Only in thought after seeing the paintings do I come to some recognition, some description, of what I see in the pictures and the pictures understand in me.

Below the Eye draws on the subject and style of the national monument. Gigantic tower, ruler, soldier, man on horseback—the national monument translates



LIAT YOSSIFOR, *Below the Eye (Romancing A Monument)*, 2008. OIL ON PANEL; 69 X 64 IN. COLLECTION OF ANITA BECKERS, FRANKFURT. PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITE.



LIAT YOSSIFOR, *Below the Eye (Where Statues Go To Die)*, 2008. OIL ON PANEL; 18 X 16 IN. COLLECTION OF ANITA BECKERS, FRANKFURT. PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITE.

abstract ideas of nation into tangible, easily recognized symbols. A visual analogue to Friedrich Nietzsche's depiction of "monumental history," the national monument commemorates selectively chosen, great, and vanished moments from the past in order to fix memory for the future.⁶ Death, when it appears, finds its apotheosis in some ideal or other. Yet, the history of the monument follows a path from the cemetery into the city and onto the open landscape. Poised conceptually between death and immortality, the monument has its historical roots in the grave marker: the mark of the death of an individual person.⁷

Beginning with the subject and style of the national monument, *Below the Eye* coughs up the concept of death—death *qua* death—that marks the monument at its heart and that it is the monument's brief to ameliorate. These paintings are not simply negative monuments. They do not depict a heroism in reverse, one that would commemorate those left out of "monumental history" or that would celebrate virtues and vices absent from official monuments. Here, no apotheosis, no consolation or consoling, is found. Like the "tiny, fragile human body" at the center of "a force field of destructive torrents and explosions" that Walter Benjamin made the emblem of modernity in the wake of World War I, in *Below the Eye* there exists no ready ideology, no convenient casting of blame, only the fragility of the human unheard above the din of state clamor.⁸ This is the expression of the expressionless.

The national monument is a site where the human being meets culture, and culture molds the human being into its own image. In *Below the Eye* the artist takes on the role of culture, fashioning her statue-like swimmers and her animated, human-like statues into her own image. Yet these are intuitive forms, shapes and strokes that have arisen from and beside the artist. Her knowing and unknowing of these forms, so tellingly and effectively depicted in the visible process of painting, lends these panels a life and power of their own—as if the artist birthed paintings that spewed out death and she, upon seeing them, was surprised at what she found there. These are outcasts in human form, like the "human trash, husks of men that fate has spewed out," that people Rainer Maria Rilke's novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. "Wet with the spittle of fate," Rilke writes, "they stick to a wall, a lamp-post, leaving a dark, filthy trail behind them."⁹

Something is torn open—in the artist, and in the viewer.

These paintings solicit perception but they do not resonate at the point where seeing and thought come together. Their emotive force accumulates in their complication and extension of recognition, and it gathers in a creaturely expressivity. I go *Where Statues Go*

To Die (2008), into that gruesomely beautiful, intestinal maw—in the painting, and in myself. Crying from which the tears are missing evokes an immediacy of mourning, a howl before language and culture. Painting technique registers an immediacy of making, a dawning of form before form, and form itself. *Below the Eye's* manifold doubleness of form—death at the heart of the immortal monument; forms that have arisen from and beside the artist; the dawning of form, and form itself—reverberates. It doesn't add up. The burn is irremediable.

Rilke's recently-impoorished aristocrat, Malte Laurids Brigge, was disturbed by the "human trash" he encountered in the streets of modern Paris. Designating these individuals "outcasts," he sought to distinguish himself from them. Nonetheless, these "husks of men" seemed "more and more to recognize in Malte one of their own."¹⁰ Gradually recognizing himself in them, Malte questions whether "the whole history of the world has been misunderstood? Is it possible that the past is false," he asks, echoing Nietzsche, "because we have always spoken about its masses, just as if we were telling about a gathering of many people, instead of talking about the one person they were standing around because he was a stranger and was dying."¹¹ What I see in *Below the Eye* is the creaturely expressivity of the outcast, the stranger, and the dying. What *Below the Eye* understands in me is that I am one of their own. Like these pictures, creaturely expressivity is the grimace I bear when I am beside myself in the immediacy of mourning, and that if I were to see would make me strange to myself, and to you.

Below the Eye's eloquent doubleness includes a creaturely expressivity inside and outside the symbolic order of language and culture. These paintings evoke symbolization, for I must recognize the outcast before I can encounter the outcast in myself. They pierce and resist symbolization so that I might peer at the pictures' creaturely expressivity, and at my own. The generous, unsettling inclusiveness of Yossifor's paintings topples the distinctions erected by nations, cultures, and ourselves. Like two sides of a conflict facing off, painting and viewer see the broken forms, the darkness, in each other. Depiction is complicated and extended in these paintings so that recognition—of the other and the other in ourselves—may call a truce to what divides and remains hidden.

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6. If monumental history "is to be effective, how many differences must be overlooked, with what violence the individuality of what is past must be forced into a general form, its sharp edges and its lines broken in favor of this conformity." Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life" (1874), in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 133.
7. On the historical connection of cemeteries and monuments, see Hans-Kurt Boehlke, et. al. eds., *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet: Wandlungen der Sepulkralkultur 1750-1850* (Mainz: Hase und Koehler, 1979); and Richard A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).
8. Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty" (1933), trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings/ Walter Benjamin*, vol. 2, 1927-1934, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 732.
9. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1990), 39. On the human costs of human degradation, see Simone Weil's profound essay *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* [1949], trans. A. F. Wills (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1953).
10. Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), xvi.
11. Rilke, 23.