



COMMUNICATING VESSELS

By Susan Power

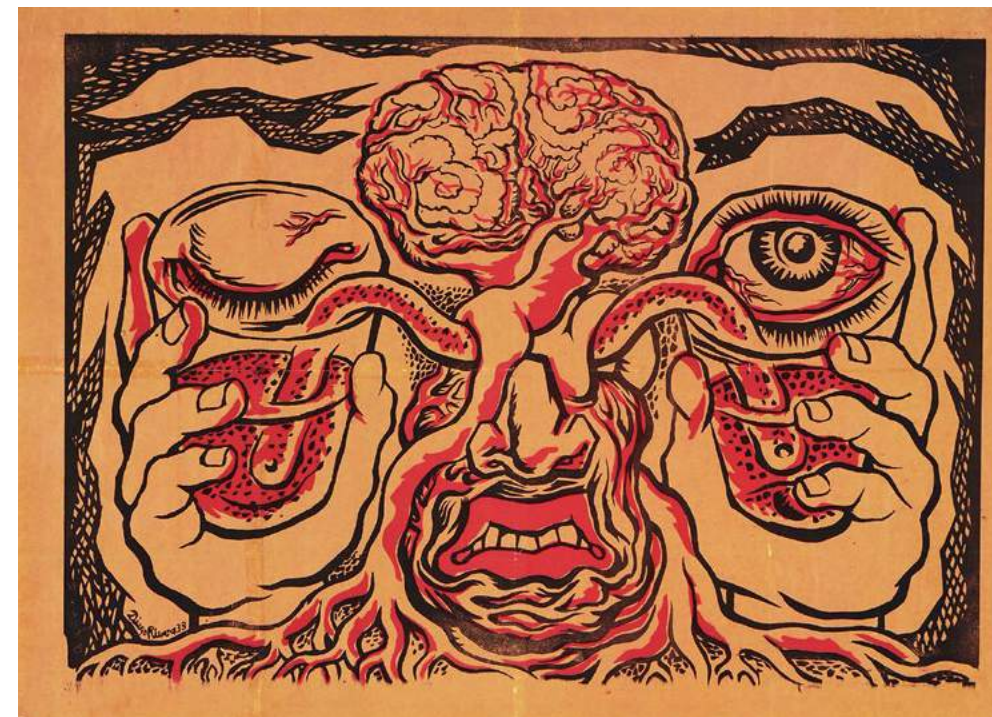
In lively, capacious paintings that envelop vast domains, Liat Yossifor embraces duality by embodying its nuanced, multifaceted, and often conflicting nature. Apparent antimonies manifest variously through the materials, forms, and language comprising her works. Reaching a crescendo with this latest body of work, *Communicating Vessels*, the artist demonstrates an assuredness and acute control concomitant to jubilant release. These exuberant expanses of paint reward sustained contemplation, inviting the viewer to experience the exchange and entanglement of complimentary pairings—accretion and removal, motion and stillness, action and reflection, radiance and shadow, vigor and languor, agitation and serenity, give and take, back and forth. The canvases, which both contain and emanate a dynamic tension, convey what the French poet and founder of the Surrealist movement André Breton termed “convulsive beauty.”¹ At mid-career, Yossifor has honed her faculties with a single-mindedness, which itself might appear to be at cross-purposes with the emancipatory essence of her oeuvre. Yet, from the start, she has forged a singular trajectory, skirting convention and eschewing trends.

Striving to “stumble upon an alternative to the picture space that is framed...by its history,”² Yossifor mines the disparities and discrepancies that are part and parcel of contradiction and paradox. This complexity, which is at the core of the artist’s concerns, was crystallized during her first stay in Germany. At that juncture, she began to articulate her sense of a “two-headed brain,” the condition of being of two minds, torn between a split identity and a dual identity. In a painting titled *Double-Headed I*, which is evocative of Cubist multiple perspective, two views of a uniformed young man’s head, one facing forward and the other in profile, merge in a sinuous gray line tracing the contour of an eyebrow, the slope of a nose above a tight-lipped mouth that curves into a chin and extends into a jaw, against the striated black impasto of skin. Painted during an artist residency at the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 2010, the double portrait harks back to an earlier body of work while signaling a shift in another direction, one that can be glimpsed in a small-format picture that was executed the same year; that picture is a forerunner to her gray paintings. There, the

concise, thin lines thicken, dissolving the distinction between figure and ground, the painterly gestures muddying the differentiation between image and paint. A grappling with tension and ambiguity occurs again in *Doubled* (2012), in which two human figures commingle.

The artist formulates similar contrasts in subsequent bodies of work, such as *Nothing is black, nothing is white* (2017–2019), two series of large-format, seemingly monochrome canvases—of near black *Walls* and the much lighter-hued *Eyes*—and the related diptych *Nothing is black, nothing is grey*, in which the dissolution of the figure operates by way of the artist’s predetermined process. On canvases with dimensions close to her own physical measurements, Yossifor wields palette knives and assorted implements, embedding gestural traces in a thick layer of impasto. The layer’s short-lived malleability dictates the extent of her corporal engagement with the oil paint. Gouging and incising lines into the pictorial flesh or lightly grazing the painting’s skin and smoothly skimming its surface, the artist conjugates delineation and effacement, exerting her entire body in a mark-making ritual that registers the time-based movements of a mysterious performative act.

Often associated, perhaps misleadingly, with American Abstract Expressionism, Yossifor’s visceral paintings share affinities with postwar European variants of gestural abstraction that are grouped together under the umbrella term “un art autre,” (another kind of art), a lineage she avows.³ Theorized by the French critic Michel Tapié, “un art autre,” also known as “informal art,” is a broad category encompassing an array of spontaneous, improvisational techniques derived from Surrealist automatism. Staking out novel terrain in an intermediary zone where common divisions overlap and collapse, Yossifor deploys a vocabulary across media, conjoining the materials of painting with drawing techniques and the textural qualities of sculptural relief in defiance of strict definitions or categories. This porosity points to a certain communicability or interplay between oppositional forces and circumscribed ideas, the key principle of Surrealist thought and practice as articulated by André Breton in his seminal 1932 text *Communicating Vessels*.⁴ He adopted that scientific principle as a metaphor for the permeability of the dream world and reality, by way of “capillary tissue” or “conductive wire,” whose role is to “assure the constant interchange...



Diego Rivera, *The Communicating Vessels*, 1938, Linoleum cut, 26 9/16 x 36 13/16 inches, 67.5 x 93.5 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

between exterior and inner worlds...”⁵ In his lifelong defense of Surrealism’s transformative potential, Breton envisioned the exploration of the subconscious as an antidote to the fetters of rational thought and the key to the liberation of humankind, thereby allying the creative act with political action.

The Mexican Muralist Diego Rivera rendered that concept in a graphic print depicting a monstrous face with two hands holding connected beakers at eye level. Represented respectively by one eye closed and the other wide open, vision and sight, and by extension their corresponding states of sleep and wakefulness, imagination and outer reality are interconnected and intrinsically linked through the mind—a hybrid tree brain whose trunk/nose entwines with a female nude.⁶ The image, a sort of “Archimboldeque” portrait, conjures other binaries—animal and vegetal, feminine and masculine, interior and exterior, self and other, poetics and politics, the individual and the collective, darkness and light, clarity and confusion, rational thought and subconscious feeling, and more. These dichotomies, which are

the bedrock of Western thought, structure the visual arts as well—figuration and abstraction, painterly and sculptural, material and concept, form and content, text and image, ocular and haptic, seeing and feeling, creation and destruction, body and mind, absence and presence, and so forth.

Yossifor’s works materialize and articulate the intermediary zone where such oppositional poles coalesce. Her paintings harness chance, “the form making manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human consciousness.”⁷ The artist probes the medium of painting to this end, quite literally digging into the layers of paint, scarring it with reiterated yet improvisational marks reminiscent of Surrealist automatic drawing techniques. Some titles of her exhibitions—*Thought Patterns* (Ameringer McEnergy Yohe Gallery, now Miles McEnergy Gallery, 2012), and *Pre-Verbal Painting* (Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2015)—point serendipitously in the direction of Bretonian “psychic automatism [...] the actual functioning of thought....”⁸ Yossifor’s process suggests not only Surrealist procedures for delving into the psyche, but also the psyche’s layered and imbricated nature. The artist frequently scrapes a canvas once the paint naturally thickens around the third day, then reuses the support for another painting. This tactic may be repeated numerous times before she deems the painting finished. Often hidden by subsequent applications of paint, the accumulation of layers can sometimes be discerned. In her first series of gray canvases, for instance, a discreet trace of the material residue from the previous body of work, *Below the Eye*, remains exposed around the edges, framing the impasto motif.⁹ Another kind of layering is used in a more recent set of 2019 works, titled *Two Fold (Figure in Black)* and *Two Fold (Figure in Grey)*. In them, both technique and genre are superimposed—watercolor landscapes lie buried beneath figures etched in oil. The smaller-format works punctuate her production of large canvases, establishing a dialogue between more intimate (or emotive) and performative (or physical) modes.

The myriad of marks Yossifor scores into the thickness of paint—whether it is her meticulous cross-hatching or her ample looping lines—converge in a sustained “performance of the self.”¹⁰ Wrestling with the contingency of contemporary subjectivity, “grounded not in appearance but in the evocation of a presence,” her practice

perpetually reenacts an internal quandary, performing a pas de deux between “Here I am” and “Who am I?”¹¹ Brandishing abstraction as a weapon against facile categorization, the artist engages in combat with the depths of the inner self and the material world of the paint-laden canvas, and in so doing, mediates the duality of human nature. ■

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Endnotes

1. Breton defined the concept of “convulsive beauty” as “veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial,” all double-barreled descriptors that fuse the tension and dynamism of contradictory principles. See André Breton, *Mad Love (L’Amour Fou)* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1937) trans. Mary Ann Caws, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 19.
2. Liliana Rodrigues, “Navigating Space and History in Paint with Liat Yossifor,” *Nomadic Journal*, Jan 9, 2014. An interview with Liat Yossifor in conjunction with her exhibition of new paintings at Galerie Anita Beckers in Frankfurt, Germany, November 2013.
3. *Ibid.*
4. André Breton, *Communicating Vessels (Les Vases communicants)*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1932) trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
5. *Ibid.*, 139.
6. Diego Rivera, *Los Vasos Comunicantes*, 1938, woodcut print, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
7. Breton, *Mad Love*, *op.cit.*, 21.
8. In the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), Breton offered his dictionary-format definition of Surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of

- thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26. Breton reiterated the crucial nature of automatic techniques for Surrealist visuality in “Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism,” his preface for the inaugural exhibition catalog (1941) of Peggy Guggenheim’s New York gallery, *Art of This Century*, a text he would then include in his treatise on the visual arts, *Surrealism and Painting*.
9. The paintings comprising *Below the Eye*, which focus inward to explore issues of interiority, demonstrate the artist’s struggle to negotiate and articulate the explosiveness of conflict.
 10. Glenn Harcourt, “Liat Yossifor: Painting at the Crossroads,” in *Time Turning Paint*, exhibition catalogue (Pomona: Pitzer College Art Galleries, 2015) 13.
 11. I am indebted to Anne Collins Goodyear’s astute analysis of strategies in contemporary American portraiture. See Anne Goodyear, “On the Birth of the Subject and the Defacement of Portraiture,” in *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today*, exhibition catalogue, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 92.