

Studio Visit with Liat Yossifor

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Liliana Rodrigues May 11 · 8 min read

This studio visit took place over Zoom, just before the work was about to ship to New York, for [Liat Yossifor](#)'s upcoming exhibition at [Miles McEnery Gallery](#).

LR- I noticed a shift in the work since your review “*Contemplating Disembodiment in the Work of Liat Yossifor*” for your exhibition at Fox Jensen gallery in Australia in 2020. Can you describe in which ways the work changed?

LY — *Since the show at Fox Jensen, motifs and images that were previously buried underneath thick paint, are now showing up at the surface level. Before, there was a play between action and monochrome. I used to think of the action as heat and the monochrome as a cold body of paint that was holding it back. Now, image-making and impasto paint move together, side by side, to mold a pictorial mass. I would say that image is now being prioritized over material. It sounds simple, but intention is reversed when image is prioritized. It's a different mindset, especially that, before, I had tried at times to resist imagery*

altogether.



Three Women, 2020, oil on linen, 81 by 78 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York.

LR- A long time ago, you did portraits that were buried in monochromatic fields. Recently, you continue to paint in a seemingly monochromatic way that is activated by opposite hues in action with each other. This has been described as ‘*cancellation*’ or ‘*annihilation of action and mark*’. What is your specific interest in the

monochrome? What purpose does it serve?

LY- *The monochrome is already loaded with its own set of politics and history. Early on, I was interested in its contentious relationship to representation as described by Malevich and Reinhardt. Later, I was interested in the criticism of those claims, or the complications of its history (as written about by Jaleh Mansoor). But over time, I learned this is much more to do with my personal psychology. I give information hesitantly as a painter, so while my work is grounded in expressive mark-making, it is also reserved. It holds onto information and lets it out in bits and pieces. Information escapes the black-on-black surface of the monochrome slowly, and at times not at all. But holding back is not without reasons. Since we are both fans of Theresa Diehl, I was thinking of the meticulous net that she stretched in front of her film ‘The Return of Pleasure.’ The footage was of women holding their babies tightly to their chests, to the point of almost suffocating their young. The disturbingly intimate footage was obstructed by the aforementioned net, like a veil that was hiding the bodies. I remember thinking she did this to give her subjects some distance from us. Similarly, in my paintings, the monochrome is like a shield that’s meant to protect what’s in the painting.*

LR — It feels like you are imposing a ‘visual hardship’ on the work, yourself, and the viewer. Despite all that ‘can only be seen under

***certain conditions'* (in the sociopolitical portraits), and all that is 'canceled' (in the grey paintings), there is still so much to look at and get lost in. How would you describe this seductiveness between all that is concealed and revealed? And, the pleasure of looking (for) at it?**

LY- It may be that the evidence of struggle produces pleasure in the viewer. Or, it may be the case that hardship that's being translated into paint as flesh is seductive for its materiality. I also think there is pleasure in the painting process that comes through. Even conceptual painting that attempts to reduce all that may be pleasurable or romantic, is still painting, and we still see things in it. Sometimes we see even more when we are starved for images. I notice that when I dim the lights on one aspect of the work, the viewer works harder at another. If I deny a sense of light in a painting, and only a little escapes the surface, the focus becomes on those minute areas of color or light no matter how sparse they are.

LR — In all your painting work, the investigation into the practice of drawing in all its aesthetic and philosophical dimensions comes forth. Can you expand on the different ways you've tackled the practice of drawing so far?

LY- Drawing is interchangeable with painting, which is to say that while in process, I am unaware when I switch between these modes. When I draw, I employ a technique reminiscent of psychic automatism, and it is through this automatic drawing process that I navigate between conscious and subconscious thoughts.

Writer Susan Power recommended to me to read “Contemplating Vessels” (Breton’s seminal text from the 1930s), and I ended up borrowing the title for my upcoming show in NY. Breton writes dream descriptions, political arguments, and daily occurrences, that are all mixed in without hierarchy or order. The thought interruptions seem to be just as important as the political arguments: everything flows in and out of these spaces at the same speed. The subject, if any, is the line of communication between all these opposites and ideas. This relates to what I try to do because automatic drawing — drawn or etched into thick paint — is like a navigation tool between inner and outer worlds.

LR — There is a performative dimension to your work that has been written about. It involves a set of self-imposed restrictions, such as your fierce work ethic and studio routine, the dimension of time, your physical energy and body movement, the three-day limit until the oil dries, how long daylight is available, as well as a specific set of

colours. Do you care to discuss this performativity aspect and self-imposed restrictions? Looking at the amount of work produced under this principle, do you feel closer to having exhausted all variations?

LY — *There is an infinite amount of lines and directions and gestures, so in theory it's never exhausted. Like any language, the more I know it the more I know there is more to it. So my answer is no, but also yes. In fact, that you ask this tells me it might be exhausted. I am recently questioning the self-imposing rules. Maybe it's time to take them apart. The rigidity was initially set up to inspire more freedom, to work chaos against the structure. In my new works on paper, I think there is a beginning of something else to come, another way to access freedom in painting. I am curious now what freedom is in painting when it's not set against order and structure. My friend [Iva Gueorguieva](#) is experimenting right now with structureless forms, which is hard to do because almost all painting can be understood as form and freedom. It's a hard road because it has been explored before mainly in the West under the category of "bad painting" (which I associate with male European childlike painting) but there has to be more to come, as freedom is experienced by other kinds of bodies.*

LR — **Your work seems to be a testimony to a balance between cognition and action, between knowledge and automatism. How**

much of it is conscious and how much of it is, as it's been called, 'a *trance-like interaction with the paint*'?

LY — The trance-like interaction with paint happens after hours of being too aware and too much in my rational head. I have to work towards this trance state, which is pure joy by the way. It does not present itself every day, and it's not easy to access. But, when present, it's intense; it's full and sufficient. Then, it breaks, reality sets in, and there is a stretch of time before it occurs again.

LR — In a wonderful way, the language describing your paintings keeps expanding. From portraits to investigating figure-ground relationships, imprinting, abstractionism, expressionism, performativity and self-imposed restrictions, action-painting, embodying landscapes, and topographic strata. Your seemingly disciplined and repetitive practice seems to hold the world in it. Looking back on your career, how you would describe the cycles, the shifts in the work? Are there particular conditions or certain intervals of time when the shift in the work happens? How does the work and the language around the work evolve?

LY — Some changes happen on their own, and other changes are slow and hard. Every change brings about insecurities and periods of transitional work,

so some exhibitions are those odd moments in-between bodies of work, which is very frustrating. Each cycle brings about a new way of talking about the work, but the core stays the same, like a life theme. I am hard on myself when I am stagnant, my personal and emotional life is greatly impacted when I am stuck at work. When I review the last decade, I see that I abandoned some bodies of work too fast, and stayed on others too long. I think I am often eager to do the next thing, but sometimes my hands and tools are slow to catch up with the new vision that's already painting itself in my imagination.

LR- Your work is bold in many ways. Its scale is bold. Its gestures, theatrics, and language are bold. Its technique of strokes, stabs, and smudges is bold. These paintings are medium, technique, palette, and subject all at once. They are paintings and objects at once. They are both sculpted paintings and oil drawings. It has been suggested that your work is ‘a personal struggle combined with an aesthetic one’... How do you experience this boldness?

LY — I paint and paint and yet I still have a hard time accepting painting, and I do question the medium and its efficacy. I know some painters are lighter in spirit; they paint, they show, then paint again. And this is a personal choice of course — to be in a certain state with oneself and the world that is always unsatisfied. This also speaks to my identity, which encompasses many things,

not just a place of birth and gender, but a way of thinking. So, writing that my work is ‘a personal struggle combined with an aesthetic one’, is accurate. A more developed kind of writing about the dualities in my work paralleling the dualities of my identity was recently written about by Susan Power for the [exhibition catalog “Communicating Vessels” 2021](#). While short, this writing I find is also a review of my work from the past until now. It hints at connections and attitudes over the years.



Water, 2021, oil on linen, 80 by 78 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York.

LR — Thank you for your time Liat, and success with your upcoming exhibition!

LY — Thank you so much for taking the time to interview me and for your thoughtful questions.

About Liat Yossifor

[Liat Yossifor](#) is an American artist (b. 1974, Israel), living and working in Los Angeles, CA. Her work is part of public and private art collections, including the Isabel and Agustin Coppel Collection (CIAC), Mexico City, Mexico; The Margulies Collection, Miami, FL; Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul, MN; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); and The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

About Liliana Rodrigues

[Liliana Rodrigues](#) graduated in Art History from Universidade Nova of Lisbon. Having lived and worked in six different countries, Liliana has worked for a range of private and public organizations, including studio Marcel Wanders in Amsterdam, contemporary art gallery Anita Beckers in Frankfurt, the Dublin Contemporary 2011, the industrial arts center and artists' community SPINNEREI in Leipzig, and the National Tile Museum in Lisbon.