

Liat Yossifor at the Pomona College Museum of Art

January 23 - April 7, 2007

Opening Reception: Saturday, January 27, 5-7 PM

Catalog Essay

Agonisms

By Kristina Newhouse

In order to view the monochromatic paintings of Liat Yossifor, significant adjustments in perception must be made. The viewer is drawn into the seductive darkness by the artist and then asked to make out the subtle contours of numerous human bodies. At first, the action of each painting is difficult to discern—and then, incrementally, understanding begins to emerge. The tightly-framed compositions depict the waning moments of a melee. Like the initial images of any fresh conflict, the violence she portrays is nearly incomprehensible but then, as everything comes into focus, sadly and sickeningly familiar.

To work in this visually discrete manner, Yossifor makes many sketches from figurative tableaux she has arranged and photographed. She then creates a background from thin washes of oil paint and dry brushwork on panel. In the foreground, she uses a wet-on-wet technique to excavate each life-scale figure from thick layers of oil paint. It takes confidence and a little faith to manipulate the medium in this manner. Given the almost undifferentiated dark tones and opacity of her materials, she labors in near blindness. There is a window of only a few days within which to complete the composition before it dries. An intuitive “body memory” of human shape must override critical judgment to guide Yossifor’s hand in the task of defining forearm, cheek, and torso. She cannot know with certainty whether a composition truly succeeds or fails until much later when she is able to glaze its surface and thereby coax out the subtleties of her brushstrokes.

For her presentation at the Pomona College Museum of Art, Yossifor sought inspiration from past masters of figuration. She is fascinated by the attenuation and organic abstraction of the human figure in El Greco's *Laocoön* (c. 1610-1614). Another source is the almost theatrical emotional charge and curious distortion of three-point perspective in paintings by Romantic artists Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix. From the late Black period (1819-1823) of Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, Yossifor gained insight into rendering the nuances of dark and shadow. From Goya's horrific series, *The Disasters of War* (c. 1810-1820, published in 1863), she learned the grim economy with which an artist can convey the ruination of human beings at the hands of one another.

In many early nineteenth-century portrayals of violence by Géricault and Delacroix, a tumultuous mass of humanity crowds the chaotic foreground. Such works teem with flailing limbs, contorted bodies, and faces set in expressions of triumph, bloodlust, supplication, fear, or pain. Géricault and Delacroix oftentimes provided broad clues so viewers could determine with whom their sympathies should lay. Heroes and tragic victims were commonly supplied with a pale complexion, noble brow, and straight Grecian nose—artistic conventions that readily distinguished them from more “barbaric” foes.

By contrast, Yossifor's combatants cannot be differentiated; each are rendered in likeness. Within this mode of representation, Yossifor proposes a non-polemic meditation on violence. This is not to say she approaches her subject with detachment. In fact, the opposite is true; her paintings are highly emotionally charged. Simply, Yossifor has chosen not to take sides. Hers is a fantastical, aesthetic chronicle of war's activities, an abstract exercise in being present in the space of conflict. She provides viewers with no foreknowledge of the adversaries, their causes, or the outcome of their conflicts.

Without protagonist to cheer on or antagonist to condemn, the viewer is left to consider the plight of all participants solely as agonists. To agonize is to strive for victory in a contest of will and might. Agony is characterized by great anguish, as suffering is undoubtedly tethered to any prospect for conquest. The agonies of battle are convulsive; there is

pause for neither compassion nor introspection until the last spasms of violence have subsided.

The bleak scenes in Yossifor's *Dusk and Blue* (both 2006) are governed by dark pathos. The adversaries who grapple with one another appear at the brink of exhaustion. Though their energy is flagging and the ground around them littered with the bodies of fallen comrades, they persevere. None seem capable of quelling the overwhelming desire to crush opponents into submission. The burden of such actions feels unbearably heavy. In these paintings, Yossifor conveys how, with every successive blow, the combatants become increasingly debased, to the point where they risk sacrificing some vital part of their humanity.

Without question, the vanquished have the most to lose in conflict. Yet, the victors never come away completely unscathed. Subjugation is ultimately reductive and dehumanizing for the agonists of both sides. No cruelty perpetrated by one man against another can compare with the dehumanization of violent death. Death is indiscriminate, as likely to snatch away the righteous, as the wicked (these categories being entirely dependent upon who is asked to ascribe them). As life is stripped away, so too is identity. To the dead, it no longer matters whether the side they defended has won or lost.

The land upon which wars are fought does not conceive of itself as territory. Like death, it cares little about victory and defeat. The soil embraces the dead equally, without prejudice or animosity. In *The Tender Among Us I and II* (both 2006), the anonymous contours of the dead and dying mimic gentle hillocks and valleys as if yielding to the land. In these compositions, Yossifor obliquely acknowledges the possibility for rejuvenation at war's end. Inevitably, the spoiled landscape of battle heals. Within a generation or two, the names and deeds of those who had fallen on its fields are forgotten.

In a symbolic sense, the sparring factions of Liat Yossifor's new painting series might be seen as embodying the opposing poles of vengeance and forgiveness. The impulse to remember and retaliate is pitted against the need to let go. In vengeance, forgiveness is resisted. In forgiveness, the cycles of offense and retribution are put to an end. In myriad scenarios of social justice, there can be a time and place for both (although today, the balance seems unfortunately weighted towards vengeance and

protracted violence). Without at least pause to consider forgiveness, the unnamed combatants of *The Tender Among Us* may never find their way out of the dark landscape of mutual destruction. One can only hope each will soon have the wisdom to declare “Enough!” so that the ameliorative processes of justice can begin.

Kristina Newhouse is curator of the Torrance Art Museum.