

# The Nomadic Journal

Exploring art, architecture, and itinerant ideas

## Navigating Space and History in Paint

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### A Conversation with Liat Yossifor

By Liliana Rodrigues



Liat Yossifor, Detail of “Night Dancer”, 82 by 60 inches, oil on linen, 2013

**Liliana Rodrigues – I understand that your new work is done in three-days per painting. I am curious about this time constraint you impose on yourself. In the past, fresco painters had to deal with the properties of freshly laid wet plaster and pigments; thus, they were forced to paint quickly. What does it mean for you, as a contemporary painter, to set a time constraint on yourself?**

Liat Yossifor – I have worked before with one layer of paint while it is still wet and moveable, and the duration of the piece was until the paint starts to dry, which for oil paint is on the fourth day. But in the past two years, I have switched over to large scale, which is when these short sessions began to matter. Now, regardless of the drying properties, I set the clock as a way to structure the process. I work fast, and in continuum—one three-day session to the next—and I feel like I am in a constant state of flux, in liquid, until the layer starts to oxidize and then I step out

and go for the next run with the next painting. If the painting begins to make sense at the end of the first day, it is a bit upsetting, because while the thick layer of paint is open, I cannot resist pushing it around for the rest of the days. My drive to paint while the layer is wet overrides the pictorial decisions. Sometimes the better version of a piece is buried under all the action that happened at the end of the third day, and the irony is that I feel like I can still see it, but of course it has been totally destroyed. Because of all this, this limitation is now a critical part of the work; it has become the structure and frame for the work.

**LR – It seems to me that you are consciously avoiding an essential question to the medium of painting, which is, when is a painting finished.**

At first I thought that my speedy process is a matter of emphasizing process over the end result, but I think that I am after something else that has persisted in my work for a while now, which is an alternative to pictorial logic. I love pictures but I am often fighting the urge to make one. While a bigger, better, more colorful picture is something I am envious of, I don't ultimately agree with how it qualifies a painting. I don't think the resolved painting is as interesting anymore as it has been in the past. As a viewer, I also don't think that a push against the old formula works either; while the picture maker is still the court entertainer; the bad painter is easily consumed and loved by the audience because the anti-gesture is easily read. I am not exactly resisting the questions of painting, such as, when a painting is finished. I may be prioritizing other questions just as important to painting.

When I "perform" these works (performing is painting and vice versa, it just seems more accurate to say "perform" because of the repetitive sets of the three-three day sessions) I am also carefully navigating through space in order to find some kind of logic, but it is not pictorial or flat. I naively hope to stumble upon an alternative to the picture space that is framed in front of me by its history, and I keep in mind its more recent history too. If I end up at a dead end, I will paint that dead end. Maybe the hardest thing is that I try to work this out in the context of the tradition of oil painting, so the newness (if possible) has to come internally and not through a game-like variation on the questions of painting. I am not going to find what I am looking for by outsmarting painting. I actually think this subtler attempt to break away is more difficult. The monochrome aspect of the work is another way to resist picture making, which is actually the more historical reference part of my work, and I feel like there are already enough words about its contribution to this kind of painting.

**LR – We will soon get into the theme of the monochrome in your painting. But before we go there, it is very interesting that many artists in contemporary art restrain themselves (either technically, physically, or conceptually) and achieve greater openness between mediums. Matthew Barney's "Drawing Restraint" is but one example of such strategy. In this series he benefited from his training as an athlete by using harnesses and other gym equipment to limit his body while performing the drawings. Does the three-day discipline represent a kind of liberation for you? Does it open up painting to incorporate some ideas borrowed from the medium of performance? Why has it become important for you to apply the element of time on a two-dimensional, flat, still, silent medium?**

I think through paint and while making work. While making work, almost by accident, I ended up with a system of conditions and restraints, thinking they came from the material itself, but later realizing I created a set of strict psychological and theoretical conditions. To me, Barney's work is hyper aware of constraints; the constraints are the subject of the work. He is serious about these constraints, but he also winks at them. I am unfortunately without humor about my rules. I need to push against time, and I need to be anxious in front of the work. And, theoretically, I need to fight against the expectations we have from painting (representational, abstract, experiential, as a hybrid of representation and abstraction, etc.).

Psychologically, I might be manufacturing a level of stress that used to be a part of my painting method when I was younger and more anxious, and now I have to trick myself into this state of mind. I don't know if my process is self-serving or that it will lead to something bigger, and maybe the two can happen at the same time. The constraints are certainly both self-serving and meant to interrupt the comfort level in the studio, with the hope of interrupting the result too.

**LR – I would love to explore this new improvisational aspect in your work more deeply. Well known for his experiments with chance and improvisation in the field of dance, Merce Cunningham always took liberty with the structure of the dance production. He called it poetic license. At the same time, he seemed to preserve some control over certain elements. I recognize the same controlled action in your work. How would you describe the relationship between preparedness and improvisation in your work?**

LY –The three-day sessions are actually rigorous in terms of structure and control. It is a set-up for chance to occur. The tighter the perimeters are, the wilder I can be inside of them. Cunningham is a very interesting example of organized chaos; structure and freedom are locked together, and this is exactly what my painting feels like to me. I have practiced my gestures and scribbles daily, and I tend to scrape a ton of work while developing a body of work. Like a dancer, once I have practiced my moves, I am then able to “improvise.” This is why letting go reads differently from one painting to another; it depends on the prep work, and the build up before the moment of abandonment.

**LR- When you talk about the practice of going into the studio every day, about the energy released during those three days, do you see the painting as a residue of that intimate performance. Or, do you consider the painting as a valuable and desired object in itself?**

I consider the painting to be performative, not the residue of a performance. I am busy thinking about painting questions but I use the performative aspect of action painting and the relationship to movement in space and time to hopefully help me get to a great painting one day in the future...not to a great performance. Meaning: I always intend to make a good painting, as an object, on the wall, with all of its market traps and issues. Some of those issues I attempt to question, as I explained before, but of course my resistance is from the inside. A full resistance to painting would be to simply stop making them. I love the way a still surface on stretchers can have so much power.



Liat Yossifor, *The Americans*, 22 by 20 inches, oil on linen, 2013

**LR – Besides the fact that you have always been interested in monochromatic painting, you seem to arrive at the monochromatic gray paintings in a completely different way as in your early work. These are no longer the result of the extensive work of one single color and its shades but in fact, the addition of many different colors onto the canvas and their neutralization during the process of painting. Do you care to talk about this evolution?**

Strangely, the gray now is not an aesthetic choice, but maybe it is an aesthetic position, which is to prioritize continuous action over the appeal of color. I start with white, and the more I move around with opposing colors in it, the more I approach gray. My gray at the end of the three-day session is a result of continuous action. It is the result of colors being consumed by the ground and by movement. To be specific, I grab burnt sienna, sap green, ultra

marine blue and mars yellow, and together they cancel each other out. I tried to shortcut this process and introduce the black from day one, but there is no tricking. The painting fell flat next to the rich grays the colors make when they meet up in equal amounts.

**LR – Unlike other painters who stick to a lifelong formula, your style has changed several times. You started out with a series of monochromatic portraits of soldiers, either in red or in black, followed by a series of predominantly black paintings concerned with public war monuments and symbols of power, followed by a series of abstract white paintings and finally the gray abstract paintings. Can you talk a little about this need to change?**

I feel that when artists are asked about changing their work, the question on its own is a compliment. I just saw the Guston show at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt. His change of style is one of the more beloved heroic moments in painting for painters. But, change is also fear of going further, and sometimes it is a greedy urge in the sense that it can be about catching up with the new (which can also be argued for Guston). It is hard for me to locate each time and each change. Early on, I thought of changing my work as a sign of integrity, and now I wonder if at times it was self-sabotage. I can say for sure that when I try to manufacture change I get into trouble, I do need to let things happen on their own, even self-sabotage is best when it is happening organically. Then, there is something almost charming about an artist working against his self-interest!

**LR- After your first visit and artist residency in Germany in 2010 your work saw a crisis with representation. It seems to have been the decisive moment when you abandoned figuration altogether. Can you talk about your stay and the experience of seeing post-war German painting in person?**

The change and crisis after my stay in Germany represent a transition I can talk about. There was quite a build up for me towards my stay in Germany. I was invested in German painters, and post-war (both wars) as a period of especially potent work in painting from Germany, one of the strongest reactions to violence in painting's history. I did not just want to see the works in person but feel the place and time from which they were made. I was also a Jewish Israeli American woman, more identified with post war German painting than any other period. American abstraction was born from these paintings, and I wanted to understand the teachers, not the students. Before the residency, I was painting in LA, on Hollywood Blvd. (where my studio is located) but was (and still am) attracted to Art Informel, the Cobra, and a European interpretation of what is raw and primitive.

The problems of the West were my problems, but they were further complicated by my position, which was overly romantic since I was a visitor. I am not a European painter, and was historically an occupied subject there, so the attraction is also due to the power structure Europe has over me as a Jew. Considering the reality between Israel and Palestine, I rarely allow myself to be rendered as a victim. But, in Europe, I got in touch with old buried issues about my Jewishness that were covered up by the normalcy of my position in Los Angeles and Israel.

This mess must have been what propelled such an over identification with paintings from Germany. A quick example would be an early Baselitz; in which an upside down painting stands for an upside down nation. The victim/victimizer position as an Israeli and a Jew while in Europe switches so fast in my mind. I could contradict myself inside of a five-minute conversation. And, sometimes I perform an identity that I feel is expected of me, but it feels almost real since I can pull equally from what feels like a two-headed brain on this matter. I did not talk about all this when I was over there, but the work I did for my first show there is awkward and derivative because my love affair with German painting became unraveled by my experience of living there. It was a process that happened both inside and outside the studio. When I got home I had nowhere to go with all of my research and work, and I had to break away and start over. The arguments for my paintings were exhausted by the reality of a place.



Liat Yossifor, Double Headed, 10 by 8 inches, oil on linen, 2010

**LR – After you returned to LA, starting with your 2011 show at Angels Gallery and up until now, it looks to me that you are limiting several aspects which have been central to painting. You removed color prior to your**

**stay in Germany, but then you removed the figure, the subject, and lately you removed the decision of when to end a painting. Would you agree that you have a persistent interest in narrowing your choices in painting?**

I track this path all the way back to my days as a student. I first worked with a full and expressive palette, and then became interested in the monochrome while in graduate school. After my studies, I then spent several years making white-on-white and black-on-black paintings, in which I collapsed the figure/ground space but still worked with a figure and a ground. Later, I eliminated both figure and color. Maybe technically this is incorrect to say, black is like white and gray, but in my work, black is a color in the sense of its presence and dominance, where gray is mud, an accidental result. These choices left me with a naked layer of paint. It can't be dressed up too much; it's just gray paint that was moved around a lot. And yet, while moving, I had intended to create space with all of the grandiose illusions that any painter has when they are composing space with full palettes and all the tropes and tricks of the medium. So, the result can be confusing because of these urges to do so much with so little.

I think my intention is to open up the space of painting without the distractions and the expectations that we bring to its viewing. This actually reminds me of your question about Cunningham, because I relate to him on this point too. In his world of dance he removed the narrative, the climax, and the musical forms that were the expectations built into a dance production. He did not send his dancers on kayaks or to climb buildings like Trisha Brown; instead he messed around with the idea of dance on the stage of dance. This is also an argument for modernism, but I care less about the categorical definition and more about what keeps me excited in the studio.



Liat Yossifor, Wide, 82 by 70 inches, oil on linen, 2013



Installation view, Liat Yossifor at Galerie Anita Beckers, 2013

*This interview was conducted in front of Yossifor's new paintings at Galerie Anita Beckers in Frankfurt, Germany in November 2013.*

**Liliana Rodrigues** earned her MA in 2002 from the University of Nova in Lisbon. She has worked in management and communications in art scenes as diverse as New York (Mike Weiss Gallery), Lisbon (Galeria Filomena Soares), Santiago de Compostela (CGAC), Leipzig (Galerie SPINNEREI archive massiv), Frankfurt (Galerie Anita Beckers) and Dublin (art quinquennial Dublin Contemporary 2011). Rodrigues has written for various publications, such as Transcript Verlag 2003; Catalogue Friedrich Vordemberge Gildewart Stipendium Museum Wesbaden 2012; Catalogue 25. Kasseler Dokumentar Film und Video Fest 2008; and Res Art World/ World Art 2009.

**Liat Yossifor** earned her MFA from the University of California, Irvine, 2002. She has been in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including the Pomona College Museum of Art, Claremont, CA (solo), Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe Gallery, New York, NY (solo); Anita Beckers Gallery, Frankfurt, GE (solo); the Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, CA; the Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT; and KunsthhausNuremberg, GE. Yossifor completed her residencies at The Ucross Foundation, Claremont, WY in 2008 and at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany in 2010.