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LIAT YOSSFIFOR: PAINTING AT THE CROSSROADS

Liat Yossifor is a master of erasure and burial, a painter whose practice is as much conceptual as it is painterly. Indeed, her recent not-quite monochromatic gray abstractions, with their thick impasto and bravura knife work can seem almost “beyond painterly,” struggling for realization as abstract low-relief sculpture.¹ The work is easily flagged as “expressive” (a word of dubious value, to which we will return); but the painter explicitly refuses even an ironic, post-modern connection to the style of (male-identified) abstract expressionism.² The works are seductively beautiful; their surface topography might be seen to map both a physical landscape (in the endlessly rich folds and valleys in which a viewer can easily become lost, wandering forever through an extraordinary world) and a landscape of desire (those same folds and valleys now defining a lover’s body, demanding the caress of the flesh as well as that of the eye). Yet they are also rigorously constructed, controlled, restrained, purely material objects empty of external meaning and resonance. In short, they embody a paradox. Perhaps they conceal a secret (or the promise of a secret never revealed).³ At the very least, they record a working process of enormously self-conscious sophistication. And it is to an elucidation of that process that we first turn.

THE PAINTING AND THE PAINTER’S BODY

Needless to say, every painter on canvas has a relationship to that canvas: its size, its proportions, its orientation, whether it is approached stretched or unstretched, primed or unprimed, etc. And these relationships can be either arbitrary (as with pre-stretched canvas that is sold in standardized sizes) or quite significant: as, for example, in the case of Jackson Pollock, who often tacked unstretched swaths of canvas to the floor of his studio in order to facilitate a process by means of which he might work while (literally) *within* the unfinished painting.⁴ For Liat Yossifor, the general similarity here is with Pollock, since her relationship with her canvas is anything but arbitrary. However, the particularities of that relationship are utterly dissimilar, since in her case they are determined by the artist’s body in a way that makes the canvas an indexical field of action for that body in all its physical specificity: they “belong” to Yossifor’s body in a way that is true for her alone, whereas Pollock is essentially cut loose from his canvas, which becomes a field for action more-or-less untrammelled even by gravity.

The paintings in this series come in two sizes ([80 x 70 in.] and [16 x 14 in.]). These sizes provide the artist with working surfaces that constitute modules mirroring her own size and convenient reach. They

¹ Liat Yossifor, conversation with author: February, 24, 2016.

² On the other hand, she has expressed solidarity with women working in that male-dominated abstract world, singling out especially Lee Krasner’s monumental *The Seasons* (1957), in the collection of the Whitney Museum. Ibid.

³ Such a secret might have been “buried,” hidden deep within the painting, waiting to be uncovered. Or it might have been “erased,” scraped down so that only a few fragmentary bits remain for a reconstruction.

⁴ From Pollock’s famous statement “My Painting” (1947) in *Possibilities I*, as excerpted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 546-547. He also points out that this approach leaves him free to move around the pictorial field in a way that radically de-prioritizes the up – down/left – right orientation that had been as definitive as rectangular shape for non-architectural easel painting since the Renaissance.

are, in effect, examples of an “organic geometry” that both binds the painted surface to the size of the artist’s body and establishes a boundary within which the painting unfolds as a direct index of the movement of that specific body. The paintings are thus carefully circumscribed traces of a “self” (more on this, below) which is importantly conceived not simply as a thing that thinks, conceives, or intends; but rather as a thing whose thoughts, intentions, and conceptions are fully embodied.⁵

This may seem to be a profoundly obvious strategy; yet it should be clear from even a superficial survey of abstract art that it has not been a common one. Indeed, monumental size regularly seems to be invoked by abstract painters as a way of consciously lifting their work out of the immediate bodily realm. On a rather ungenerous, although (I think) not entirely unjustified reading, this penchant for monumentality may be seen simply as a way of impressing upon the viewer, by dint of sheer presence, the “tragic and timeless” nature of the subject matter allegedly appropriated by the painters, to quote the seminal 1943 statement on Abstraction’s aims composed by Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko.⁶

But Gottlieb and Rothko are not merely being self-serving. Both their own work and that (for example) of the iconic “action painter,” Jackson Pollock, are intended to be “timeless” in a much more profoundly philosophical sense. Take Pollock as our example once again, since his work expresses that timelessness in a way that is especially trenchant as it seems manifestly paradoxical. On the one hand, a careful (even a cursory) visual examination of any of Pollock’s classic drip paintings makes plain the fact of their physical unfolding over time.⁷ We can trace the slow build-up of the intricate formal skein of color traces passing back and forth over the canvas like the work of a demented spider weaving a crazy web. Indeed, it is *almost* possible to project oneself into the physical coming-and-going of that flow, to re-enact in some sense Pollock’s own pattern of working movement; but it remains easier by far to follow that flow with the eye alone, as though looking down on some vast woven pattern from a great height.

Nor is this an accidental effect. In fact, when finished, a work like this is explicitly intended to deny its own mode of coming-into-being. It is not meant to be seen close up, like a map whose endlessly complicated routes we can only follow from that in-tight vantage. Rather, the painting addresses itself to an imaginary and dis-embodied “high modernist eye” hanging in the space of the middle distance and

⁵ This model stands in obvious opposition to the idea of a radical separation between mind and body formalized by Descartes in the seventeenth century. In practice, Renaissance painting has tended to be theorized (for example, already in the sixteenth century by Giorgio Vasari) in terms of a similar split between intention and execution. For a powerful poetic argument that this Cartesian dualism has been disrupted by modernity, see T.S. Eliot’s 1925 “The Hollow Men,” especially the section that begins “Between the idea/And the Reality . . . Falls the Shadow[.]”

⁶ See Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko’s 1959 “Statement,” quoted in Chipp 544-545. Gottlieb and Rothko also opine that “[they] are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal.” We might term this [almost inevitable] linking of the tragic and the huge a kind of “Moby Dick effect.” In contemporary popular culture, the complex tragedy adumbrated by the vast abstract expanse of the white whale has been replaced by the mindless, almost [in fact, literally] mechanical terror associated with the Great White Shark; thus Capt. Ahab becomes the relentless shark-killer Quint in Steven Spielberg’s 1975 *Jaws*, the classic Hollywood recasting of Melville’s iconic 1851 novel.

⁷ Likewise, the equally classic photographs of Hans Namuth and the documentary film *Jackson Pollock* by Namuth and Paul Falkenberg.

capable of perceiving and processing the painting's "meaning" in an instantaneous moment of visual registration and mental integration.⁸

Yossifor's strategy, however, is almost precisely the reverse. The painting is intended to draw one in, to suggest a vantage point that corresponds to the point at which the artist herself stood during the painting's actual construction. This vantage point is "privileged," or, perhaps better, has been privileged by the presence of the artist's own body in action; and, although a viewer will almost certainly not realize this consciously, this privilege can give a viewer physical access to the sense of embodiedness that the picture itself encodes. Still, since our viewers' bodies (which necessarily differ in height and weight; in ability to move in space, reaching up or crouching down at need, etc.) can never duplicate the artist's body, particular and specific to herself, our experience (again, unconscious) of the painting will always be a bit "out of registration," a bit unfamiliar; but embodied in its own (viewer's) way. In short, the experience of viewing the painting will itself be an embodied experience, similar to, but not identical with, that of the artist: a concrete or phenomenological, rather than a purely conceptual experience; a physical, rather than a simply optical exercise; an instance of being in relation to a thing (the painting) rather than a simple seeing of it.

GRAY

There is one fundamental difficulty with most paintings that have been or can be characterized as "monochromatic:" they aren't.⁹ This is certainly true of Liat Yossifor's monochromatic gray abstractions. And it is so for two different and equally significant reasons. First of all, the pictures are built up from a colored ground (lately most often a rich lemony yellow) that is often apparent as a narrow frame along or around the edge of the canvas. Thus the gray impasto stands out against a flat but vibrantly colored ground, which it seems to enshroud, but can never quite conceal. In addition, in working up the impasto, the artist occasionally exposes small traces of color (either that of the ground itself or another entirely, which is indicative of further non-gray marks made after the ground has been laid down, but before the enshrouding impasto has been built up). This description may be a bit cumbersome; but the visual impression that this strategy provokes is anything but. Despite the mass and weight of the impasto, these small flashes of color (or deep velvety black) can mark the topographical surface with the appearance of flickering light or random, almost slashing penetration. Clearly, these flashes of color or slashes of black played off against the encircling yet enshrouded ground go a long way toward establishing the sense of entombment or erasure that the paintings convey. A viewer can easily get the feeling that the gray impasto represents either (or both) the significant substance of the picture and/or a neutral yet substantial impediment to the recognition and interpretation of precisely that significance.

⁸ The colossal late series of Water Lilies by Monet (quintessentially "optical" works, to invoke a coinage of Marcel Duchamp) work in rather the same way. Their subject matter may indeed be of this world, but they have achieved their own apotheosis by abstraction (whether or not they carry a meaning either "timeless" or "tragic") precisely by the artist's monumentalization of them.

⁹ Malevich's 1918 *White on White* comes immediately to mind, although Yves Klein's IKB works provide an obvious counter-example. For a brilliant analysis of the ontological problems presented by a series of "identical" monochromatic pictures, see the opening gambit in the section "Works of Art and Mere Real Things," in Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) 1-6.

Unfortunately, or perhaps not, the “clues” that escape from behind the impasto carapace are never sufficient to facilitate an actual “reading” of the hidden work. They suggest the possibility of a hermeneutics of almost scriptural obscurity or the archaeology of some other arcane and forgotten knowledge. Might the kabbalah be a potentially useful metaphor here? Or the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* within which the self is lost in its search for God? In any case, what remains visible yet remains inscrutable, the possibility of a hermeneutics virtually unrealizable in practice.¹⁰ And in that sense, the pictures are essentially images of the difficulty of meaning, of its almost impossibly fragmentary nature, and of the extraordinary effort necessary for even its potential excavation.¹¹

Second, even simply to call the pictures “gray” as a group to a certain extent shortchanges them. The artist, far from falling back on a commercially available pigment, mixes her own gray for each canvas directly on the palette. Thus each particular picture instantiates its own particular shade of gray, which can function almost as an identifying mark, an indication of the specificity of the artist’s practice (taking that term in the sense of personal engagement rather than that of a sequence of actions repeated with minor variations) in every case. Taken all together, then, the pictures provide a wonderful little “taxonomy” of the infinite shades of gray, providing a sense that something even as ostensibly banal as that vaguely innocuous “non-color” half-way between black and white (or sunlight and shadow) is in actuality infinitely mutable and infinitely expressive.

TIME PRESSURE

How does a painter know when a canvas is finished? For naturalistic work, the answer would seem to be obvious: when the picture’s illusion of the natural world, its existence at the intersection of self-conscious art and the appearance of simple nature¹² has been embodied to the best of the painter’s ability as an artist.¹³ For a non-objective or abstract work, the answer is perhaps not so clear-cut; although, in theory, a painter working in the high modernist mode described above should become aware of the completion of a work in a moment of instantaneous visual and mental registration as if a circuit has closed between disembodied eye and abstractly perceptive brain. In practice, however, I suspect that the ending of a work, whatever its mode of production or the style of its visual vocabulary, comes about most often through a procedure that we can refer to as “tweaking” or “fiddling,” a gradual

¹⁰ Compare the discussion of a rather different kind of quasi-scriptural inscrutability in Glenn Harcourt, “Wallace Berman: Desolation Angel,” *XTRA: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 15.1 (Fall 2012) 56-60.

¹¹ For the background to this argument, see the discussion of Miles Coolidge’s photo inkjet print “Backstop” (2011) in Glenn Harcourt, “Some Notes on the Archive,” *X-TRA: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 14.3 (Spring 2012) 15-16.

¹² This argument is developed with succinct brilliance by the late eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant in ¶45 of the “Analytic of the Sublime” in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. Whether or not this is literally the case, Kant’s argument might well have been cribbed from the “Introduction” to Part 3 of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives* (1 ed. 1550).

¹³ Onto the frame of an anonymous 1433 portrait (often taken as a likeness of the artist, the Netherlandish master Jan van Eyck “inscribed” in paint a curious signature: “Joh. De Eyck me fecit” (“Jan van Eyck made me”) as well as the presumptive motto “Als ich kan” (literally “As I can”). Although the motto’s phrasing is rather elliptical, and hence its meaning somewhat ambiguous, at the very least it implies the claim: This is the best that I can do.

approach to completion through a series of ever more specific and focused changes that eventually resolve themselves in a feeling for the work as (finally) “being done.”¹⁴

This is not, however, the only way to proceed. Yossifor’s process, for example, is worked out only within a specified and rigorously enforced time frame: three days for the larger canvases, one day for the smaller. At the end of the allotted time, each canvas is evaluated and then either retained or scraped down and re-used. This kind of procedure seems rather more conceptual than painterly. In addition to which, the process of “evaluation” can hardly involve the instantaneous registration of meaning associated with the operation of the “high modernist eye,” since that registration stands in a reciprocal relationship to the artist’s own previous perception of the painting as “finished:” both the painter and the viewer must experience that instantaneous “snapping into focus” that signifies that the work is both “finished” and “meaningful.” In Yossifor’s case, each canvas is arbitrarily “finished” and must then be scrutinized both by the painter and (later) any other observer in an attempt to excavate meaning from its embodied form. Clearly, this scrutiny must be carried out over time; the painting unfolds its meaning even as that meaning has previously been enfolded by the building up of pigment on the surface of the canvas, but with this difference: that the operation of interpretive scrutiny is open-ended, unbounded, without any set temporal limit, an on-going dialogic relationship to which one can return, and return again.

The imposition of arbitrary rules on artistic production is a strategy arguably as old as artistic production itself; and, until relatively recently, might even have been seen as constitutive or definitive of those productions that we identify as “art.” There is no reason for a sonnet to BE a sonnet in order to convey the content that it carries (a meditation on the fragility and transience of love, for example); but in order to be meaningful in its own precise way, its meditation on fragility and transience must be submitted to expression under certain rules related to rhyme and meter: the rules that define its being as a sonnet.

There is, however, an enormous difference between a sonnet’s arbitrariness and the arbitrariness of Yossifor’s process. A sonnet does not have to be written in one sitting, or in precisely three hours. It is, rather, arbitrary in a strictly formal way.¹⁵ The arbitrariness of Yossifor’s time frame, on the other hand, seems to me more intimately related to the arbitrariness at work, for example, in Marcel Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-1914). This is a kind of arbitrariness that is external to the particular form of the work, even as it works to define that form. It provides a particular example of an arbitrariness that is simply a condition of being in the world. It has almost the force of a physical law: it just is what it is, although we can easily imagine some other situation (some parallel universe) in which a different set of (equally arbitrary) laws apply.¹⁶

¹⁴ This is certainly the way that I approach the composition of a manuscript.

¹⁵ In that sense, the sonnet’s rules are more comparable to Yossifor’s choice of working in gray. While she might in theory employ any color while still working under the same constraints of shape and time, and still attempt to embody a similar meaning, I might write a sestina rather than a sonnet while sticking to my theme of love’s transient fragility.

¹⁶ The *stoppages* are essentially alternative units of measure comprising three replacement meter sticks cut along contours obtained by dropping a one-meter length of string onto the ground from a height of one meter. Although “meaningless” within the physical parameters of our own world, they might well be used to define “real” distances

This may seem a complicated explanation; but the basic point, I think, is quite simple. The decision to impose an arbitrary time frame on the painting process is not the same as the decision to execute a series of works in (more-or-less) monochromatic gray. The latter exemplifies the kind of decision that artists have had to make since time immemorial. The former is something radically new, a reconceptualization of what it means to make a painting, even (perhaps) of what it means to be a painting.¹⁷

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SELF

A bit earlier on in this essay, I suggested that a work that seems to proffer to the viewer an open-ended dialogic relationship with an essentially inscrutable Other might be viewed as in some way equivalent to a scriptural text requiring the mobilization of a mystical hermeneutic, even as an occasion to invoke the self-abnegation required of a desire to be absorbed into the absolute Otherness of divinity. It might also be seen in a quite different, much more mundane, but equally profound way.

It is not, after all, necessary to approach divinity or scripture in order to encounter an inscrutable Other; it is only necessary to confront a fellow human being. Indeed, this inscrutability is made the more urgent precisely because we have a tendency to see such human encounters as inherently transparent, regardless of the (obvious) “signs” of otherness they might display. In this particular instance, gender difference is an obvious example. My attempt to understand Yossifor’s work is already constrained by the fact that I am “incorrectly” gendered.¹⁸ But the issue is more fundamental than that. Even were I gendered differently (that is, in some sense or another “correctly”), the fact remains that Yossifor and I are radically different individuals, inhabiting different bodies, reacting in different ways to the fact of that embodiment; our experiences are likewise radically different: personally, intellectually, sexually, politically, spiritually. In short, we are different people absolutely and irrevocably: an irreducible I-and-Thou (to borrow a formulation from the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber) whose essential separateness will always be keyed to that oh-so-simple disjunction of adverbs.

In addition, post-structuralist philosophy, linguistics, and literary criticism have firmly established the *leitmotif* of the recalcitrant opacity of language in general: its rejection of any anchoring presence, its constitution in a free play of difference, its tendency to self-deconstruct – inverting hierarchies and disrupting logic. So, even if all those other impediments could be surmounted, interpretive language itself would be waiting to play us false.

or topographical relations in some fictive world of the artist’s imagination, as is exactly the case for the “routes” mapped out across the fictive “terrain” that underlies the 1914 *Network of Stoppages*.

¹⁷ Ironically, it also recalls a beginner’s exercise. How well I can remember one-minute sketches and contour drawings with eyes closed from high school art class.

¹⁸ The notion of gender (and its inevitable relation to sexuality) is almost impossibly vexed, and beyond my competence to deal with adequately here. The classic theoretical introduction remains Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990/2006). Although this assertion is immediately disputed within Butler’s analysis, my own purposes here can hardly be better served than by her quotation (177) from Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”: “Nothing in man [sic] – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men [sic].”

In light of what I have said previously, I can hardly argue that one of Yossifor's paintings can replace this opacity and complexity with a perfectly transparent window. Yet it can provide a different (and at least initially non-verbal perhaps better: "pre-verbal" or "proto-verbal") avenue of approach. That this is true depends on my earlier analysis of the painter's relationship to her canvas, which was described in such a way that the artist's process appeared constructed so as to make each painting a rigorously (but not rigidly) circumscribed set of traces of the artist's embodied self.

In that sense, at least, any one of these works can be described not just as a painting on canvas, but as a kind of "performance of the self."¹⁹ The operation of building up the impasto, the working and re-working of the surface with brush and knife, comprises simultaneously the laying down of those traces, something the artist has described as "my struggle with [my own] identity."²⁰ Hence, we can read the paintings as a kind of "coming-into-being" of the artist herself, keeping in mind that that being is itself mutable, and that its mutability is played out in struggle. Both struggle and mutability are embedded at once in every stroke, the result of an artistic "choice," whether conscious or unconscious, and in the sum total of all the strokes: the finished painting.

My job as a viewer might thus be framed as an entering into dialogue with the work through an attempt to "re-experience" the artist's coming-into-being. Of course, this attempt is doomed by a double impossibility. I cannot describe my attempt linguistically; at least I cannot provide an appropriate description, one that will not sooner or later be betrayed by the opacity and slipperiness of language. Nor can I claim any special authority or authenticity for my own experience. The inscription of the artist's traces is irreversible. The canvas can function neither as a window, through which to see the artist (even "as if through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12) and not face-to-face), still less as a mirror in which to see myself reflected.

But perhaps the situation is not as hopeless as it seems. Even an out-of-registration image can still be quite usefully, even if not perfectly legible. The notion of a 1:1 mapping, like that of congruence in geometry, belongs to the abstract worlds of logic and mathematics. It simply cannot describe the superimposition of experience, or the re-inscription of the artist's coming-into-being on my own. However, this very being out-of-registration, not quite legible, slightly incongruent; this inability to sustain exact superimposition or re-inscription: all these are necessary pre-conditions for the operation of interpretation. They are points of entry into the work. They both allow and sustain the open-ended dialogic relationships between artist and work, viewer and work, artist and viewer that comprise the nexus within which the work may reveal the parameters and the (partial) substance of its meaning.

¹⁹ I have previously made this argument with respect to a quite different work: Carolee Schneemann's *Up To And Including Her Limits* (1973-1976). See "Some Notes on the Archive" 23-24. Also helpful in regard to the argument here is Kristine Stiles, *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and her Circle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) liv-lix; 219 (the dialogic nature of the *Up To And Including* . . . performance); 228 (the coming into visibility of the invisible); 260 (the "enemy-man," the "individual man," the "old wall of man," and the difficulty of experiencing the work across a gender divide).

²⁰ See Ciara Ennis, interview with Liat Yossifor in this volume.

Ideally, that revelation of meaning will never, indeed can never, be complete. Unlike the work of making, the work of interpretation is by definition never-ending. It moves past (worst-case scenario) like the (potentially) endless crawl across the bottom of a TV screen.

Liat Yossifor's paintings, on the other hand, remain, not just as passive objects of interpretation, embedded in swirls and eddies of explanatory text or glossed by an ongoing stream of interpretive "updates," but rather as active invitations to dialogue. They not only prompt the work of interpretation; they take an active part in that work. They don't so much belong "up there" on the wall as they do down here, at the crossroads.²¹ They sit entangled in the midst of a landscape traversed by overlapping, convergent, divergent, and opposing texts. They are sites for the making of meanings, and anchors for those complex operations of construction, inscription, destruction, re-inscription, de-construction, invention, citation, quotation, birth, and re-birth that we identify with the coming-into-being of culture.

²¹ I am speaking here of the spiritual crossroads in Haitian Vodou, the place of intersection presided over by Papa Legba, the facilitator of speech and communication. This is the site of interpretation; but it is also a site of danger, where Papa Legba can grant the duplicitous power of art, as (in the guise of the devil) he did to Robert Johnson.