



MOVEMENTS
LIAT YOSSIFOR

DoppelHouse Press

FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY:
LIAT YOSSIFOR'S GREY PAINTINGS

by Ed Schad

Liat Yossifor's grey paintings were born in Germany, but did not grow up there. Yossifor needs the light of Southern California to paint them, yet the grey paintings were the result of a variety of pressures, the outcome of certain passions reaching crescendo and being reconciled. The location of that crescendo and reconciliation was far from the Hollywood corner where Yossifor currently works, actually in a light far less consistent and far more pummeled by weather.

Whether or not the city of Frankfurt, Germany is owned artistically by Max Beckmann in the same way as Nuremberg is owned by Albrecht Durer or Dublin is owned by James Joyce, it certainly seemed that way to Yossifor. For a residency there from March through July in 2010, Yossifor had the entire fourth floor of an abandoned building only a short walking distance from the Frankfurter Kunstverein, and Beckmann was everywhere. In short order, Yossifor gained the exact vantage point from which sprang Beckmann's *Frankfurt Central Station* (1942), with its deep grooves of black and yellow-

eyed cat sentinel. She sized up the bridges, still lifes, and squares that Beckmann painted as a master teacher at the Städelschule in the mid-1920s. Perhaps most pointedly to the discussion of her eventual grey paintings, Yossifor traveled, as though following the Beckmann thread to its logical conclusion, to Düsseldorf to see *Night* (1918-1919).

Night hit Yossifor close to home. It's a muscular and desperate painting. More specifically, *Night* is about as close as a painter can come to a complete vision. Painted at the end of World War I, *Night* lives in a broken present, a torture chamber of starvation and a society pushed to extremes. Yet, it would be hard to deny that *Night* also extends its terrible gaze into the future of the war-torn 20th century. Beckmann presents a basic and essential violence that even the most impressive of civilization builders can't repress. For Yossifor, *Night* felt familiar with its churning figures moving in and out of a relief almost chiseled into that tight space. The tortured become the torturers. Spectators reside a breath away from being involved. The thinnest of lines separates the healer from the horrible. *Night* is a painting of constant metamorphosis, where every human has both good and evil living in splintered and complicated shards inside them. This subject matter and how it made its way into painting had fascinated and compelled Yossifor for years.

Yossifor was not painting her grey paintings in Frankfurt. Instead, she was putting the finishing touches on a body of work that Beckmann spoke to intimately. Yossifor had an intense interest in building human forms out of landscapes of pure black paint. In short, the tectonics of love and violence

which make up the human experience, in her black paintings, are likened to the quakes, knifing glaciers, and hot faults of the earth itself. The touchstone in this body of work was the romanticism of looking to nature for the harder sides of human truth, but its daemons were the saints of Romanticism in ruin: Beckmann, Max Ernst, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Forms muscle for life in Yossifor's black paintings, they groan from underneath mountains. Humans fight, wrestle, and love with equal abandon, while receiving their forms in the gentlest of manners, painted less from the contrast of darker versus lighter colors, but more from opposing textures and brush work. The black paintings accumulate thousands of gestures in the hope that light will give the surface meaning. Though the black paintings want form and paint to be exchangeable, fully themselves in different moments, the overall impression is the landscape, the bodies, the union of the two.

This type of painting was tough going in the pale German light, an irony that was not lost on Yossifor. Though the black paintings were close in spirit to the Germans of the early 20th century, Yossifor began seeking a different approach. Yossifor produced more black paintings for an upcoming show, stimulated by her surroundings and enjoying the old square of Frankfurt (destroyed and rebuilt, albeit clumsily after World War II), but the terms between her and painting were changing.

"It was my stay in Germany that led me to think that I may have been too reverential towards the German painters," Yossifor said ultimately of her trip, "I came back and scraped [many of those] black paintings to start anew."

Yossifor's grey paintings need Los Angeles. They grow and come to life in Los Angeles, or, specifically, in L.A.'s light, alternatively smoggy and bright and able to hold tones and gradients of color that can change radically over the course of a single day, sometimes in a single hour. It is perhaps this feature of the works that makes them so difficult to understand. The finished paintings have a light touch and, whereas Yossifor's black paintings always come through with a tone of severity, the grey paintings are ethereal and seem to dance. The grey paintings, though pervasively the color worn by the series, almost contradict what the essence of grey has come to mean. If one were to take Wassily Kandinsky's famous definition of grey from *On the Spiritual in Art* (1914) as a foil, Yossifor's grey paintings hardly measure up to Kandinsky's "toneless and immobile" grey, his grey as "disconsolate lack of motion."

Extended study of Yossifor's grey paintings instead finds a scale of tones and sensations. At times, the grey is cool and distant as in her *Night Dance* (2012) and, subsequently, the slashing forms that arise from the surface of that grey gather a certain composure found in weathering Greek and Roman low relief panels, even sharing some dynamism of the militant triumphalism found in the cyclical ceremonies of the ancient world. Other times, the grey is warm as though spiced from a flavor of soft yellow, as in *Wide* (2013). The forms on these canvases seem caught in the widening of a hot day blowing across a plain, full of morphing clouds and turning shapes. This grey has gentleness and heat found in Marc Chagall and Paul

Klee, a sort of spiritual or animistic rhythm. Figures appear but only flirt with meaning. One also thinks of Brice Marden's monochromes, which had very little to do with the creeping rationalism of minimalism and everything to do with the atmosphere of olive groves in Greece.

Each of Yossifor's paintings become a fantasia for projection, and they completely change upon multiple viewings. The light of Los Angeles aids their creation. It is—in contrast to the Frankfurt light—quite unlikely to throw deep shadows; as Bob Irwin puts it, "the haze fractures the light, scattering it in such a way that on many days the world has almost no shadow."* One could become convinced that it is the flatness of light in Los Angeles that discourages any one of Yossifor's knife strokes, cutting through drying paint, to assert themselves in a too drastic fashion. It is this quality that allows the paintings to have a different point of emphasis each time one looks at them. For instance, *The Bathers II* (2012) is aptly titled as a child of Cezanne, for looking at the work is predicated on the subtlety of a thousand twitches of the eye as it pours over a scene rather than the fixity of a photograph. At times, it is the gentle curves of line in the right corner that compel the eyes, at other times, the sweep of flat passages of paint. One could be convinced that the emphatic slice of line in the lower middle left is the whole point of the painting, only to be distracted by a small squiggle that wants to become a face.

The grey paintings appear instantaneous, as though the product of a vision. They have a kind of glowing penumbra around their edges. Some-

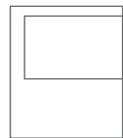
* Quoted in Weschler, Lawrence. "L.A. Glows." *The New Yorker*. February 23, 1998.

times this edge is striking, as though a particular color like blue or mustard. Other times, the penumbra is the sensation of a surface behind the work, an awareness of the panel or canvas on which the painting started. The central canvas (which is worked from the color into grey) is a sort of lifted or floating cloud of action. It helps to use a painter to whom Yossifor is often falsely compared, Robert Ryman, as a rubbing off point for understanding Yossifor's clouds of paint. In a Ryman the surface is just paint, and if one sees more than paint, Ryman has failed. The opposite is true with Yossifor: her paint begs for form, at times bursting into form while at other times staying itself. She seems to want forms to feel fleeting and mercurial. That floating block of paint that steps forward from Yossifor's canvas is always ready to live and die and intends the entire theater of paint to be present at all times.

Though one can use terms like mercurial, ethereal, and beautiful to describe Yossifor's grey paintings, as though mindlessly fixed on the running

Wide
82 × 70 inches
Oil on linen
2013
Private collection





Detail: *Wide*



teleprompter during the announcement for best actress at the Oscars, the grey paintings are not Hollywood paintings, at least not Hollywood as typically packaged. They are not products of leisure. These paintings are hard on Yossifor in the same way that Los Angeles can be hard on people. While the grey paintings' final forms may have abandoned the overt struggle and violence of Beckmann by succeeding in offering imaginative fields of genesis and change, it is only because Yossifor has internalized that same violence and struggle. For all their beauty, the grey paintings work hard to achieve their apparent casualness.

A central premise of Yossifor's work is the battle against inertia, a resistance against solidity, and her paintings express in their final form the process of action or rules that she has set for them. When Yossifor starts a grey painting, she lays down a mass of wet pigment in various colors, and then she is literally on the clock. She will only work on the painting until the paint dries, a matter of days. She moves paint with a palette knife, slashing and pushing the material around until her movements become patterns, until her patterns break into forms. Forms will then dissolve back into patterns and even back into the chaos or unformed state of pure pigment. It is an exhausting and emotional process, executed on a variety of scales. Big paintings require Yossifor's whole body, as though she is wrestling the painting in front of her. Small paintings are more akin to a conductor interpreting a three-day symphony with his baton, constantly correcting and adjusting the various players in the paint as the themes rise and fall, hoping

that the journey, in the end, not only has a coherent thread but also a unique flavor.

Figures emerge from the painting as though a surprise, and Yossifor will get to know the figure over the course of hours. A figure will arrive and then will slowly slip away; Yossifor will be drawn away from the figure into a line or an impulse of color. She will describe arriving back in the studio the day after a full day and finding elements of the picture (of which previously she had been fully convinced, even loved) and terminating those elements with a quick slash. Yossifor is constantly creating and destroying, for it is not so much the figures she wants but instead a sense of power, a sense that they answer to her touch, that they come and go with her knife.

Yossifor can be so involved in the action of her paint, in the dance of form and destruction of form that she describes the hours melting, much in same way athletes describe losing a sense of space and time when they are within the perfection of rhythm of their exertions. It is a matter of letting go of consciousness and just leaning into the absorption of their task. This absorption matters to Yossifor—the fact that her paintings are a pursuit inside of set constraints. Evident in her work is the fragility of the difference between a painting that “works” and a painting that is meaningless, success resting on an accidental gesture or failing from a direction pursued too long or too far. The movement of the paint, over the course of several days, becomes impossible. The paint hardens from a paste into rubber and eventually into concrete. Yossifor destroys a quantity of paintings equal to

or greater than she keeps, she confesses, and much of her time is devoted not to the creation of new work but the scraping of the old.

Yossifor's grey paintings, then, embody a sort of paradox. On one hand, their surfaces are confident assertions of the hidden imagination, that soup of impressions and images that reside and morph in the mind until they are called into expression. The surfaces carry all sorts of material metaphors for the expression of this fugitive idea: the nature of liquid as it becomes a solid, the protean potential of pre-fired clay, even the transition from the archetypal to individual and back again. On the other hand, the grey paintings are pained by their own nature. While the surfaces call for limitless interpretation and an ever changing visual environment, the materials and artistic process, by the rules Yossifor sets for them, have to grind to a halt, and, importantly, have to await judgment. For all of the immortality of perpetual change, there is a mortality always lingering somewhere in the grey paintings. It is in this paradox that perhaps Yossifor comes into the contemporary moment of painting, a terrain often known for its lack of belief, its uncertain premises, and the difficulty of calling the immensity of painting's historical and ongoing activities all over the world into coherence. Yossifor is enthralled by the age of belief in painting yet is subject to its history that has come to question those commitments.

Consider for a moment, the works of two vastly different artists: Joan Miró and Alighiero e Boetti. In Miró's *Animated Forms* (1935), owned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, a striking feature of the work is that

the artist was not self-conscious, even slightly, of what he was painting. Every mark on the canvas was predicated on the idea of change, of being and becoming, and, amazingly, the marks continue to be open to change even after the painting was finished. It is unclear whether or not Miró's shapes, for instance, develop from the lines or unravel into the lines. There is no landscape or perspectival system to anchor the shapes: they exist as though they have flashed up from your mind, sprung from pure imagination across a blank field of white, as vivid and fleeting as a daydream. However, now consider Boetti's *Untitled* (1961) at the Pompidou in Paris subtitled, "To the south of the last inhabited country is Saudi." In quick-dry concrete, Boetti attempts to write a line from Book 3 of Herodotus' *Histories* speaking of the unknown, a place in his time beyond the last known region on Earth, the Arabian Peninsula. Boetti's writing becomes impossible and his gestures cease into stone, an ironic fate for the poetic reach of Herodotus's imagination. The work could not present a more stark face or present a less confident belief in the idea of a timeless human expression.

Yossifor loves both works. When she talks of Miró's forms and line work, she says, "It is as though Miró knows exactly what he wants, and, having practiced those lines thousands of times, he gets what he wants instantly." Miró was Catalán through and through, and his canvases quiver with the energy of his homeland. Partially rooted in folk traditions as well as the genuine animation of Miró's memory, Miró's canvases breathe out a sense of expansive imagination, a local series of forms open to limitless possibilities for change

and renewal. Miró had a longing for the soil and the experiences of his youth, and a playfulness grounded in a specific place permeates his work. He never lost that youthful spirit, even as his works groaned and contorted in resistance to Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War and even as the Nazi invasion of France displaced him and his family. One sees this bright belief in the imagination on Yossifor's canvases, a willingness to paint through hardship and troubles in her life, always chasing the fleeting genesis of forms constantly arising from her canvases.

One also finds, however, the hard romance of Boetti, a conceptual rigor that checks the body and the imagination in the face of historic truth and material fact. Though it is difficult to tie down the meaning of Boetti's *Untitled* (1961), one could make the case that it is the work of an artist in the wake of two world wars and a devastated Europe. *Untitled* (1961) is quintessential Arte Povera; its materials are expressive and humble and full of conceptual thinking. In the wake of the Somme and Mussolini and the Nazis and the Holocaust and starving masses of people living off of aid bags of millet and rice from the remote power of the United States, one can come to see Boetti's point as his transcription of Herodotus into wet concrete grinds to a halt. That imaginative world of painting that enabled Miró, that platform of dreaming, is now aware of itself; that limitless world is now aware of its borders. For Boetti, that awareness of borders and limitations (poignantly offered in a direct way in his "Mappa" works later in the seventies) was a function of a divided, conflicted, and murdered world, the same world that made Theodor Adorno

distrust poetry. Yossifor identifies with the limits of Boetti's world, feels constraints on her dreaming, both as a function of her heritage as Israeli and as a material condition of painting itself. Yossifor's paint dries. Boetti's concrete seizes up. Conceptually, Yossifor fights against her boundaries while fully knowing their existence. The boundaries make both artists who they are.

However, valiantly, Yossifor seeks the confidence of Miró. She believes in skill, that repeating the same stroke or line a thousand times can liberate the mind and liberate the forms and figures in a painting. She believes that a viewer of her work can be absorbed, can take in the vistas of dynamic change, yet come away refreshed and dazzled. However, she also believes in the limits of painting, in the truth that lava becomes granite and that also by studying the limits of something, we can come to a deeper and most lasting empathy. The grey paintings were born in Germany and yet grow up in Los Angeles. They equally wear the world and that otherworldly light with no shadows.

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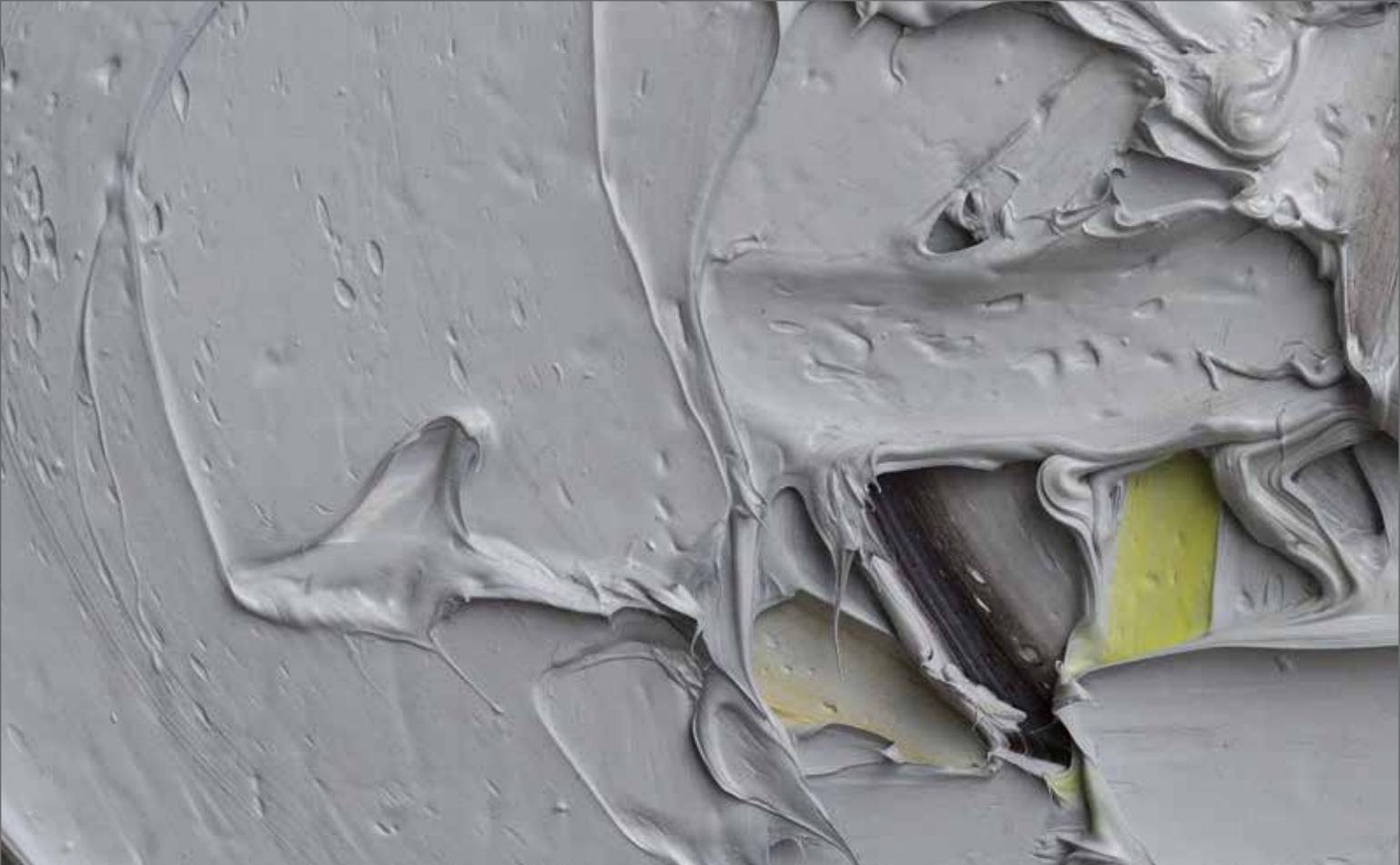
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