



MOVEMENTS
LIAT YOSSIFOR

DoppelHouse Press

LIAT YOSSIFOR: A CHRONOLOGY

by Christopher Michno

Propped against the wall of her spacious second-story studio on Hollywood Boulevard, three of Liat Yossifor's grey paintings in various stages of development sit perched on low wood supports. Her austere work-space contains painting supplies, a table arranged with tools, an old paint-stained leather sofa, her paintings, and little else.

Yossifor's current paintings seem most easily identifiable in connection with the New York School and Art Informel. In discussing the work, she advances the idea that as she makes the large gestural sweeps with a palette knife, or small, incisive gashes that give the paintings their expressiveness, she imbues her work with emotive meaning. She shies away from suggestions that her work has references to Lucio Fontana, who often slashed or perforated his canvases to introduce spatial depth leading beyond the flat surface of the canvas. While Fontana rejected the idea that his slashes conveyed violence, there is more than a hint of trauma in Yossifor's works. This is just as true of past projects; her paintings have always been charged with a subtext of psychological and political difficulty.

In the studio's uncluttered volume Yossifor invests her painting with the concerns that filter into her work through her experience of the world, through her sense of herself, as well as through ephemera, her intimate relationships and even news of world events that press upon her consciousness every day. The grey paintings, while ostensibly abstract, function doubly as figuration, even as they make use of a formal language that reads within abstract painting's concerns, and build upon its rich history.

Yossifor's paintings, past and present, are visually and materially seductive, and the artist generates tension around their presence and hidden narratives. These qualities require the viewer to engage in the experience of physically standing before her paintings in order to appreciate the works as objects that introduce themes of struggle, difficulty and camouflage. In this, Yossifor creates interplay between the sensuality of the surfaces and the fleeting states of mind that underlie her gestural impulses.

Yossifor's earlier bodies of work, which up through 2010 contain elements of figuration, provide a framework for understanding how the grey

Large Figure
14 × 12 inches
Oil on linen
2011
Private collection



paintings codify both literal bodies and bodies of meaning that are referential, not solely abstract.

Yossifor's monochrome portraits of women, which she began while in graduate school at the University of California Irvine in 2001–2002 and continued making through 2006, are important precursors to her grey paintings. In these early portraits, figures are drawn into immersive fields of pigment and medium by various means as to appear almost etched. They resist identification within the monochrome field and read as expanses of saturated color in which features—aspects of the figure—alternately appear and recede as the viewer's vantage of the painting changes. The portraits defy photographic reproduction, as do most of her paintings, as the camera is unable to “see” or capture the complexity of figure dissolving into ground except in limited focal ranges. Yet, this fugitive quality that resists the camera insists on presence as well as plurality—the eye must engage from multiple points of view.

In making the early monochromatic portraits, Yossifor posed her models as though they were soldiers, in postures that effect a military bearing. It is important to note that as a teenager of fifteen years old, Yossifor left Israel with her family for the United States. Her emigration, just a few years before she would have begun her compulsory military service in the Israeli Defense Forces, produced in her a feeling of cultural and geographic dislocation. In a sense, she pursued the painting of life-sized doppelgängers as a conjectural gambit that would allow her to consider the “what if” questions that this

abrupt change in her life evoked. The portraits are culturally nuanced, yet politically sensitive: while a viewer might seek to delineate political positions in the work, Yossifor has deliberately made the paintings elusive.

The fugitive quality of Yossifor's painting continued with “The Tender Among Us,” exhibited in 2007 at the Pomona College Museum of Art. In this series, Yossifor reprised the theme of soldiers, but set them in a horrifically beautiful landscape. Painted during the 2006 Lebanon War, or Israel-Hezbollah War, “The Tender Among Us” reflects the ubiquity of images from the conflict. She felt profoundly ambivalent about developing this series. The paintings veer luridly close to Romanticism, offering idyllically rendered skies—Yossifor says that while she painted these, she thought of the sublime skies of Caspar David Friedrich—yet, the paintings are also somber.

Under the influence of Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2003), Yossifor began to think of herself as staging war paintings from the remote safety of her studio and revisiting war movies like Terrance Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), which wrest moments of sublime beauty from violence. In the lower half of *The Tender Among Us II*, a vulnerable and exposed nude dominates; in *Dusk*, soldiers merge in hand-to-hand combat to become one seething body of tar. Still, in her quest for achieving an ineffable catharsis, she experienced guilt over the attention she gave to the glut of conflict images offered up by news media. Reflecting Yossifor's inner turmoil, these paintings of dark and ruinous landscapes externalize her sense of conflict and confusion mirrored by these acts of war.

In a later series, “Below the Eye” (2008–2009), Yossifor began an investigation of failed nation states, exploring references to commemorative monuments that aim to formalize national identity, war and heroism. Adopting source imagery from graveyards of Soviet-era monuments strewn with outsized Lenin heads, this series contains competing currents of disillusionment and idealism. Even as the painting of a toppled monumental head *Where Statues Go to Die* (2008) probes exhausted ideas about nationalism, larger than life leaders and imperial ambitions, another, *Romancing a Monument* (2008), depicts the seductive embrace of three figures, one a young woman and another, a male figure that the work’s title suggests is a sculpture. In Yossifor’s painting, both sexes may be soldiers; either may be returning from war. It is tempting to identify the female figure as a stand in for Yossifor; in this body of work, one senses her difficult and ambivalent orientation to her former homeland.

In “Below the Eye” as in her other bodies of work, Yossifor intentionally obfuscates subject matter, eliding figurative elements of the work into chromatic and textural complexity. However, the paintings in this series are not simply monochrome; their painterly surfaces reveal subtle underpainting and complex brushwork as well as the drawn lines and hatch marks Yossifor used in her earlier work. One witnesses in *Still Life* (2008) and *The Gathering* (2008) a dominant grey palette accompanied by slender streaks of color, resulting from Yossifor’s mixing of wet pigment on the canvas that is also characteristic of her current series. The paintings’ layered appearances

advance a sense of interiority and suggest that visual information offers an incomplete view of the world. Yossifor suggests the perception that comes from feeling—below the eye—is more reliable, more real.

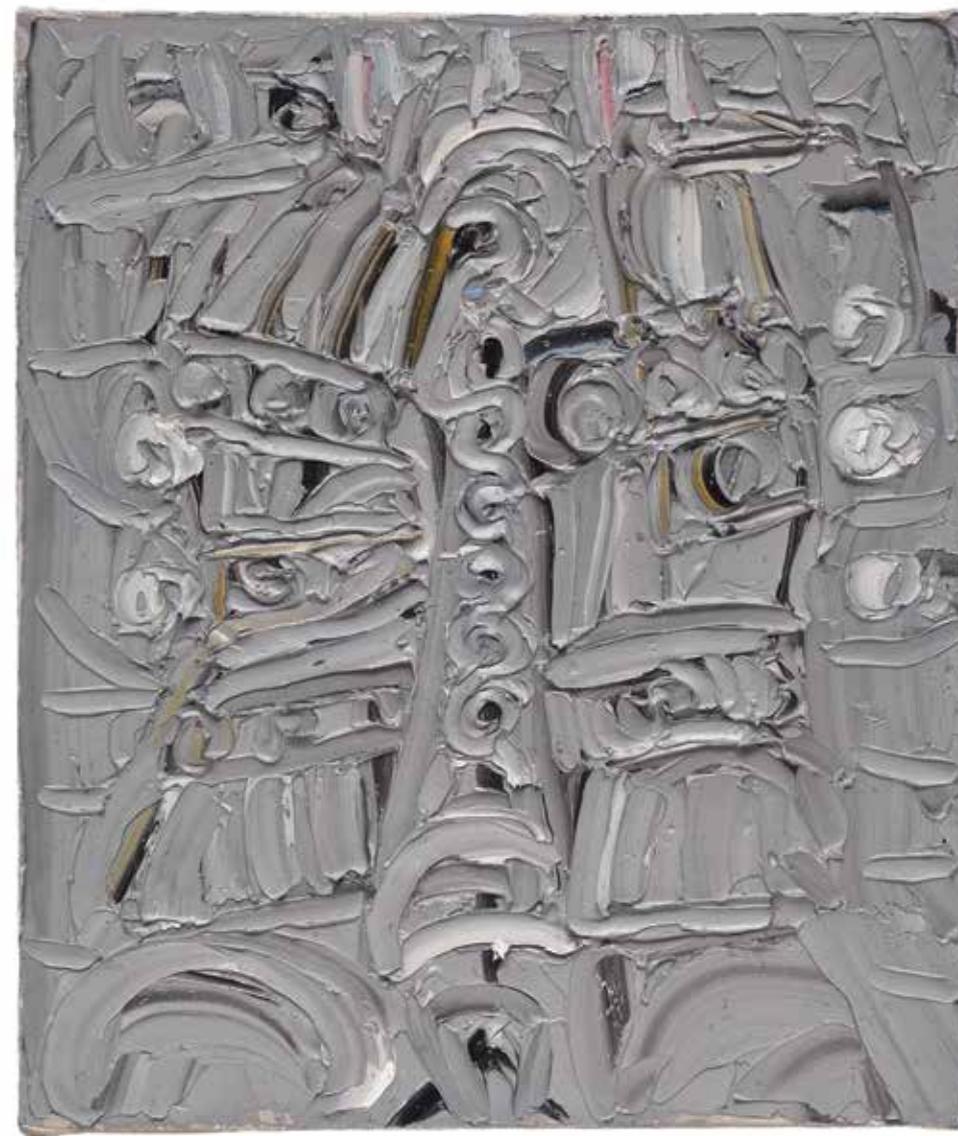
In her last explicitly figurative body of work, shown at Galerie Anita Beckers in Frankfurt, Germany in 2010, Yossifor made a series of predominantly black on black canvases, accented with slivers of blue and red. The dimensions, shapes and depictions in the Frankfurt paintings emerge from marks incised into their surfaces, similar in process to the way Yossifor developed pictorial volume in her early portraits. In these works, she continues to address monuments and idealized visions of war, as well as themes of the individual versus collective. In *The Monument* (2010), individual soldiers merge into a wall of bodies; in *The Lovers (Soldier and Mask)* (2010), a pair of soldiers painted in blacks and greys against a background of blue—one wearing a mirror-like mask—embrace; *The Soldier with Two Flags* (2010) reintroduces the quest for identity, with the subject being caught between two worlds. The Frankfurt paintings oscillate between representation and abstraction, even more so than her earlier work, with geometrically shaped figures receding into rich fields of color. Though these paintings were inspired by her interest in Kirchner and Beckmann, they also draw on the subtle color modulations of Ad Reinhardt.

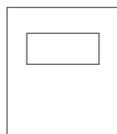
Upon Yossifor’s return to Los Angeles, she expected to resume where she left off in Germany, and began preparing for a solo exhibition at Angles Gallery. But in 2011, with only three months to go until her show, she

abruptly scraped the paint from each canvas and started over. By necessity, her painting took on renewed urgency. During this period of self-imposed, compressed production, Yossifor intuitively arrived at the process she now uses, working in three-day sessions while the paint remains “open.”

An important reference for the grey series can be found in Gerhard Richter’s squeegee paintings, in which he obliterates his initial lively color fields using custom tools. Richter also proves an important counterpoint for Yossifor’s interest in German Expressionism, the movement with which Kirchner and Beckmann are associated. While Yossifor follows the example of expressionist painting, which sought to visually manifest the inner feelings of its practitioners, by developing her canvases as states of being, which are concealed or embedded within layers of pigment, motion and time, she has also created an algorithmic system or set of process rules, which, combined with a collection of loosely structured practices, provide her a working methodology. Robert Storr suggests that Richter decoupled the hand from the gesture through his process, allowing references to pass through

Uniform
14 × 12 inches
Oil on linen
2011
Private collection





Detail, *Uniform*

his paintings rather than becoming the primary subject. So too, states of mind driven by Yossifor's awareness of external events, international politics, the history of painting and her own tumultuous internal musing flow through her works.

Yossifor often refers to her painting in terms of a personal struggle combined with an aesthetic one. Her painting process is firmly anchored in her sense of self and in her body. While the grey paintings are abstract, they retain figurative elements. It is as if she puts her shape into the painting. This is borne out in the thickness of her surfaces, the multiple folds of paint tucking under or lapping over, like flesh. Some of her early inspirations come from Gutai artists grappling with mud and Ana Mendieta covering herself with earth and plant matter and leaving impressions of her body in the ground. In the performance-based rules Yossifor has set out for herself in making her grey paintings, she has eliminated visual criteria as the basis for her work in favor of something less easily identifiable. Those criteria rest on Yossifor's subjective considerations and have to do with intuition and empathy, but also the artist's desire to move beyond tidy compositional resolutions.

Yossifor starts with a selective palette, then works and reworks the surface of her paintings. In doing so, she occludes multiple layers of possible visual outcomes, entombing successful abstract pictorial solutions or compositions in a cycle of writing and rewriting a painting's surface. In the process of repeatedly creating and encasing abstractions that cast her movement, Yossifor has returned to an early idea from her monochrome portraits of the

canvas as a mirror. In the grey paintings, multiple viable works exist but are buried in layers as if she seeks to embed herself in her paintings within a reverse archeology of pigment.

Yossifor's paintings must be read as complex arrangements of thought, influences and desires. Perhaps a way to account for the heaviness and struggle inherent in her work is the fact of her emigration from Israel with her family, not so much as biographical narrative but as a piece of history as influential as anything else she has lived, witnessed, or to which she has been exposed. She subjects the entirety of herself, including the fluidity of her sense of identity and an unspoken existentialism, to the process of painting daily in her studio. Encrusted under layers is an unending battle with both the medium and herself, through which her painting becomes esoteric and deeply personal.

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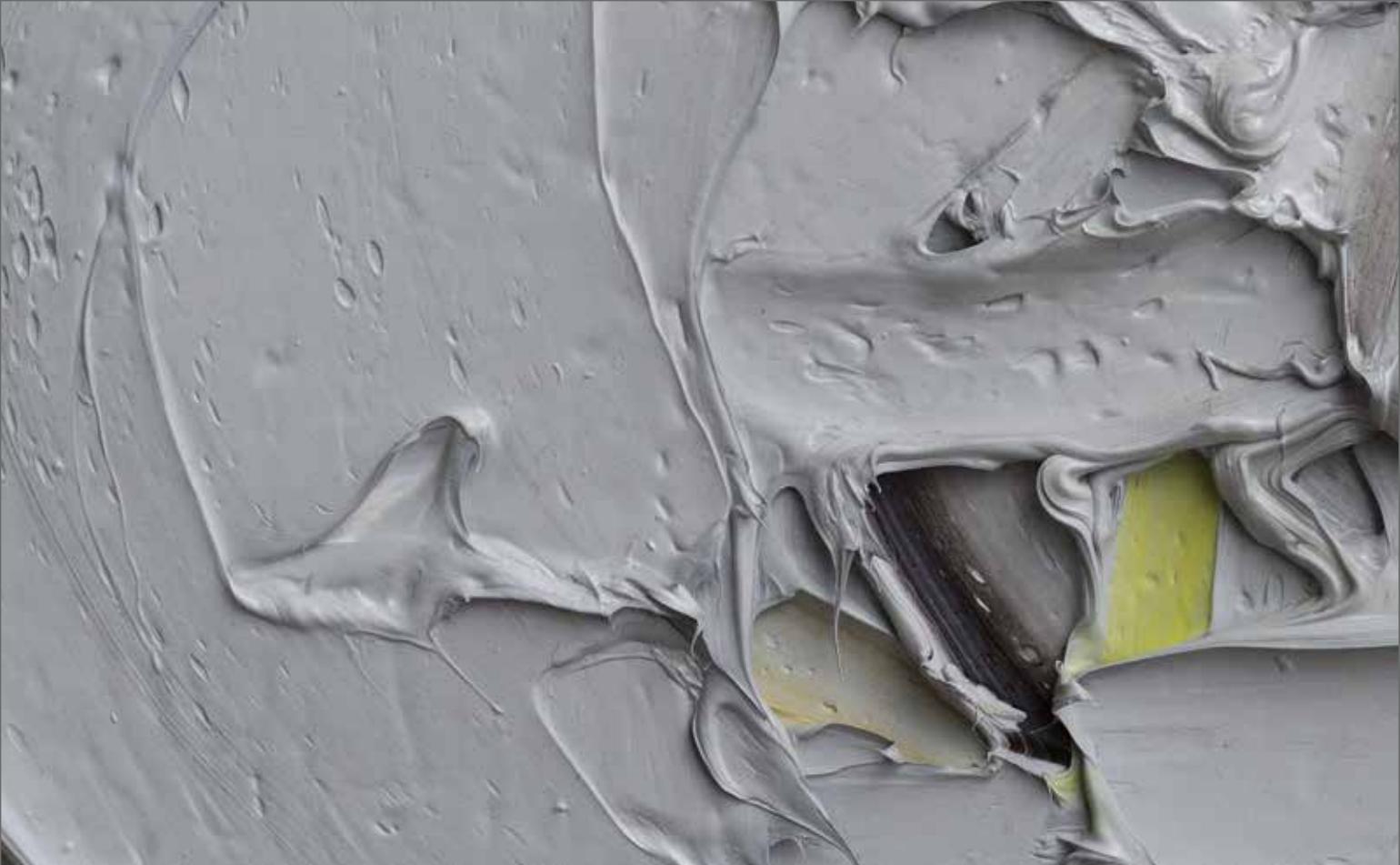
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