

Embodiment and Abstraction

By Christopher Michno

Since 2011, when Liat Yossifor definitively turned her painting practice toward abstraction, she has been making paintings that adhere to a specific formal approach. The process of making her gray paintings, as she calls them, is delimited to a three-day interval that corresponds to the length of time she can work the paint until it begins to dry. Arriving at this parameter out of necessity, she found the experience of generating a new body of work in a compressed time frame compelling and adopted the practice of working in a kind of *alla prima* manner—that is, in the first attempt (or from start to finish, all in one shot).

Working in this way, particularly as Yossifor has structured it, places certain demands on the painter as she performs or enacts a painting. Not insignificantly, she works from sunrise to sunset to take advantage of the available natural light that filters into her studio. This affects how she perceives the work as she makes it. Accepting the time limitation dictated by her medium, and choosing not to allow herself to work beyond that time, requires a certain kind of presence on her part as she engages the painting. Her work isn't just visual; it becomes a self-conscious performance. The visual presence of the painting is itself a critical aspect of her work. With her gray paintings, she developed a practice of evaluating each canvas at the end of the three-day period. If she was not satisfied, she scraped the paint from the canvas and started over.

The evidence of her hand is clearly seen. These are thick, textured, scored paintings. Knife marks drift and slash through pigment; the butt of a brush digs a trough. The surface, far from pristine, bears these marks as a kind of relief painting. The process is physically grueling. As she trowels, scrapes, drags, and slashes, each attack adds to a cumulative depletion of her energy.

The time pressure of three days turns into a kind of psychological pressure. Yossifor is chasing an elusive composition around the canvas—though she is not seeking to achieve a composition that is thoroughly “resolved.” She is struggling to locate something with contradictory forces that simultaneously push and pull the viewer, something that can confound and aggravate. And though she technically gives herself three days to finish one of her gray paintings, she could just as well pull short and stop in two days, or even one. In this process of pushing against the paint as she figuratively pushes against her own eye and her judgments of the painting, Yossifor orchestrates the configuration and subsequent entombment of innumerable compositions on the canvas. It is a cycle of excavation and burial. And when one considers the embodied aspect of her performance, one of the questions to ask is whether Yossifor is concealing something in those layers of paint.

The possibility of entering a trance-like state during these cycles of painting is a compelling aspect of her process. The hunt itself, for an evasive pictorial apotheosis, puts her in a physically and mentally heightened state, which she is acutely aware of pursuing.

It is possible to think of these paintings as creating an abstract figure embedded within the paint. This can be related to the Gutai movement in Japan, in which artists used their bodies to activate a variety of materials. Kazuo Shiraga’s 1955 performance, *Challenging Mud*, offers an analog. Ana Mendieta’s works in which she is photographed on the ground camouflaged with mud or plant material, or the ones in which an imprint of her body has been left in the ground as a trace, also provide a referent.

And yet, stepping back from that heightened state of awareness and focus, Yossifor began to consider shortening her performances at the canvas. A period of three days began to seem too long—giving her too much time to reconsider. If the gray paintings, in addition to being a bodily performance in relation to a medium, are also about setting up multiple possibilities of painting outcomes—most of

them ephemeral—then her new series of black paintings are the result of choosing even more stringent restrictions on her process in a gambit to raise the stakes of the game.

The choice of black pigment is one aspect of upping the ante. The idea of making a profound commitment is coupled with her admiration for Ad Reinhardt's subtle black paintings, which exert a perceptual tension between indeterminate spaces. Yossifor spent more than a year formulating the black paint she now uses, refining the medium to a state of hyper-saturation. In response to the paint's capacity to absorb light, Yossifor has described her sensation of working with it as akin to "painting blind." Whatever else this might do to her painting process, it must certainly have the effect of centering her movement more deeply in her body and requiring from her a greater responsiveness to the sensations within her body as she acts in relation to the canvas.

Yossifor's black canvases heighten the sense of her painting as a performance. The shortened time frame—one day—forces immediate choices; the performance in the studio—the part that none of us sees—is even more intensely draining, more deeply trance-like. And as with her gray paintings, when she deems a black canvas unsatisfactory, she scrapes the paint off and begins again.

In contradistinction to Reinhardt's black paintings, which are all five-by-five feet and within the arm span of a man—in his own words, "*not large, not small, sizeless,*" Yossifor's canvases are scaled to her own body. (She is a woman of modest height.) Reinhardt's assertion of absolute abstraction, witnessed by his *dimensionless man*, rejects the idea that abstract painting can refer to anything beyond itself. Yossifor's paintings are open. They are an effort in which mind and body act in concert to impart an idea, encoded in the formal structures of paint. The resultant object elicits a response in the viewer in which visual, emotive, and cognitive modes, each activated simultaneously and in concert, are subsumed. It is within this awareness of painting's embodied and sublime possibilities that Yossifor's painting practice exists as performance within the specificity of her own person. Her work becomes an

index of embodied thought as much as it is an imprint of the artist's body. While the thought itself cannot be ascertained, much less recalled by Yossifor at a later date, the record of its pulse is present in the object itself. This quality infuses her black paintings with ambiguity, setting them in a space that defies easy classification as a consumable object.

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