

theartsection

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Editor's Introduction
with Pooh Bear

Kraus/Auslander

Exploring a Classic



Liat Yossifor, *The Americans*, 2013, 22 by 20 inches, oil on linen, courtesy of Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt, Germany

Alla Prima: Painters in Dialogue

Interview with Liat Yossifor by Erin Lawlor

I was introduced to Los Angeles-based artist Liat Yossifor and her work at the same time, by a mutual artist friend at an exhibition on abstract painting in 2016, and couldn't help but wonder how I had remained unaware of her work for so long prior to that. The dense physicality of the work is immediately striking, and yet there is a sense of surface, a lightness of touch, a playfulness almost, that is equally engaging. The surface marks can be read as a form of graffiti or sensate hieroglyphics – a reading that seems to be confirmed by Yossifor herself naming some of the works “walls.” Yet on further examination it becomes clear that these marks are not just surface, but are also an integral part of both the content and the structure of the paintings; that the almost-monochromatic slabs she creates are in fact made up of these marks and their effacing, in one obsessive and highly physical session of working in oil paint, wet on wet.

I have myself been working, in oil, *alla prima*, for many years; there is a particular engagement that comes with working this way, a sense of un-forgiveness, of risk, more usually associated with watercolor, and at the same time a sculptural quality that goes hand in hand with the physicality and malleability of the medium. There is perhaps, above all, an ambiguity in setting oneself up to necessarily work fast in what is a notoriously slow medium. There is much in Yossifor's work, in short, that felt familiar to me in terms of process, concern, and intention.

Yossifor's recent exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery in New York provided an ideal opportunity to sit down with her and talk paint, walls, and the particular exercise that is working *alla prima*.

-- Erin Lawlor



Erin Lawlor, 'what lies between (big bad wolf)' 2017, oil on canvas, diptych, each panel 71x51 inches Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Pauline Pavec

Erin Lawlor: We both work alla prima. For me it was something that came about both instinctively, and gradually; I am curious as to how and when you started working in this manner?

Liat Yossifor: In your essay in the catalog for your show at the Daugavpils Mark Rothko Art Centre, I read that someone described your work as "sudden death" painting. That really gets to heart of alla prima. I think this kind of painting has sudden deaths throughout (when one moves a gesture around and has to know when to stop in order to turn or interact). But, also, the pressure is on for the painting to come together so quickly that, in a way, the whole project becomes essentially one big gesture. For me, I worked alla prima years ago when I was making portraits and wanted the figure and the ground to appear at once. The portraits were socio-political and it was a way of trapping the subjects in their surroundings in order to tell their stories. I

returned to alla prima in 2011 out of necessity; I had worked on a show that was not coming together, and at the last minute decided to scrape all of the works in the show to give a chance for something bolder and faster to emerge. I liked that everything is in flux and that all the decisions matter in real time. When I returned to the technique, it was in order to free the figure, not trap it. As one painter to another, I'm curious as to how you think the viewer experiences this method?



Liat Yossifor, Wall I, 2017, 80 by 78 inches, Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

EL: Actually it was a viewer who originally used the term “sudden death” -I think viewers do seem to try to “read” the works in a different way: the eye tries to follow the brush-marks. You speak of making figure and ground as one - working this way means that we do both create a sort of initial mass of paint, that we then work with, and within. There is a sense in which the work is almost a sculptural block, and the grappling feels sculptural - I certainly sense in your work a sheer pleasure in the materiality, not to say sensuality, of oil paint.

Working on the ground, I’ve found the painting becomes a field rather than a window – but I wonder if that impression isn’t also to do with working alla prima - working with an all-over. Which is interesting because that puts us in dialogue with an American tradition of painting, despite our origins; the field versus the figure, Resnick vs. Leroy. [1] In the recent works you seem to approach the painting more than ever as an overall mass - what does the appellation “wall” signify to you specifically?

LY: "Wall" was a reference to what you noticed - the sense that the work is made from a sculptural block. After I spread the first thick layer of paint and before I go at it, the work is a wall, not a window. I liked the idea of Four Walls that are large-scale black paintings as one statement. They are meant to be seen from afar as objects, or second walls, and their marks remind me of marks on walls over time.

Regarding the American tradition in our work, for me, it is a trajectory I didn’t expect. I have always been more drawn to the European structuring of the painting space. When I was a student, I used to sit in the SFMOMA with the Americans and struggle a bit (while a Beckmann experience was no effort); in the end, the European works were my education. But what I personally like or want for my work is not always what happens in the studio.

As for Resnick, in spite of scale, his all-over paintings are humble and the colors are "homeless" (a term David Pagel used to describe my friend Iva Gueorguieva's palette). It seems he is seeing something we cannot see. At first, they seem

noncommittal; everything is forever in transition and neutral. But they are actually about the state of transition like no other work. They are action paintings without the bravado of "action" and so they offer no relief. All this I admire. Which brings me to something I wanted to tell you when I saw your work for the first time: I find it uncompromising. Your work is a multifaceted experience that demands real attention from the viewer - perhaps a lot to ask in these times of easy offerings. I think this happens with your work for many reasons, but I want to ask about your palette, the choice of subdued colors in your work?



Liat Yossifor, *The Stand II*, 2016, 90 by 80 inches, oil on linen, courtesy of Paramo Gallery, Mexico

EL: The more muted color in my work initially came about because of a shift in solvents; the solvent seems to refract the color, delivering it up slowly, over time. I'm glad the work seems

demanding! It's something I'm quite evangelical about, that specific time of painting, slowing down

But you seem to effect a much more deliberate muting, or even a stifling, of color - your whites, greys, and even blacks, sing in a quite extraordinary way. I was fascinated in your recent exhibition to get up close with some of the smaller works and see residual traces of bright colours (burnt orange?) at the edges and within the scraping of the marks... I was reminded of how in some Australian aboriginal art important information is put down and then covered over to keep it secret. There is something very tantalizing about those glimpses. Is it a deliberate "burial"?



Liat Yossifor, Detail of Eyes, 65 by 60 inches, 2016, courtesy of PATRON Gallery, Chicago, IL

LY: Nizan Shaked wrote an exhibition essay for my first show in Los Angeles entitled *The Secret and the Surface*. These questions about what is hidden, and why is it buried, come up in studio visits. When I paint, I am constantly editing, rather than concealing. Every line has many interpretations and I am trying to choose a line that is not explicit, but can be descriptive and hieroglyphic. Most of all, it has to come from the act of painting; it has to show up. Maybe I keep burying the obvious to find something more surprising.

As for the colors... The grey is color lines engaging each other in speed until they neutralize. The edges (the orange you saw) are under-paintings, but the color marks in the paintings are residues. Cancelling color lines is also a burying, and a by-product of the visual editing. Sometimes, a painting is edited so far that it turns into a ghost of what was.

The greys are impossible. A friend once said to me that the grey paintings always win. I can't win! It is hard to pump a heartbeat into a grey and to create a presence for the viewer. Sometimes I think they are a form of sabotage. They seem to me to need to be compositionally stronger than my black-on-black and red-on-red works for example. This of course keeps my interest because they are something to push against.

It is so hard to separate content from form or process. Even when my work had a visible "subject" and a politics, it is the act of painting that makes the politics elastic (I dare say philosophical). But, that elasticity has to be explained through painting. I have not found a way to say what I need to say about the work without exhausting a non-painter who simply wants to know what the work is about. With my current work it is even harder to do so; the process is so important I cannot shortcut the explanation.



Liat Yossifor, Detail of The Rider, 16 by 12 inches, oil on linen, 2014,
courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

EL: In both of our work it seems fairly impossible to separate content from form or process; I would even argue that a coherence of all of those things is something we aspire to - it is where, despite the visibility and even readability of the mark-making, the work goes beyond process painting. While we are

both very conscious of paint as a language, and of its grammar, we are trying to produce paintings that are “complete,” that are finished entities or stories as it were, and not just words. I do feel that the recent obsession with process has led a number of artists to get lost in the semantics of their language.

I think we both try to keep that balance between a painting that is fully achieved and open, and yet also leaves traces of the make-up - those marks have their value in the final image, and are also what present the way in for the spectator. The eye tends to try and follow the brush-marks, and hence the process; the marks become a sort of Ariadne’s thread, leading the viewer through the pictorial spaces, and even through the time of making. In that sense I would argue that the painterly process is precisely one possible way in for the viewer, however untrained the eye.

I was initially surprised by your title of Walls, a word that seems to invoke a neutral surface - and yet your walls are anything but neutral.



Liat Yossifor Wall II, 2017, 80 by 78 inches, Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

LY: There's a video clip of Storr describing Richter's *Cage* paintings in which he reveals that Richter was following the war in Lebanon while making these works. There is no reference that ties the immediacy of the paintings back to something that is not as immediate as the paintings; however, the response to the war is in the work as a state of

being (or an essence). I talk about my work in this way too, let's say, in terms of movements. To wit, my paintings are records of movements that are inclusive of all that is circulating around me. And these subjects, memories, and histories end up in the paintings without sticking to the surface.

EL: Yes, that seems to me to be very important. The surface in your work - however resolved - is directly in correlation with all that is within, so much below that is sensate and indirectly communicated. I'm not sure that that would be the case without your earlier, more figurative years; there is body and structure and there are stories, even if they are buried. And perhaps they refer back to your own experiences of war, and the various possible significances of walls, the reasons and impetus that go into their building. And yes, walls keep things in, as well as out – they can contain, protect and hide, as well as being projected onto. It seems to me your walls do all those things.

[1] Eugene Leroy (French painter, 1910-2000) whose more abstract works have sometimes been compared to those of Milton Resnick, but who always in his compositions remained resolutely attached to the notion of the figure.



Liat Yossifor, Exhibition view, 2018, courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY



Erin Lawlor is a London-based painter. Recent solo exhibitions include 'onomtopeioia' at the Mark Rothko Art Center, 'hiraeth' at Fox/Jensen Gallery, Sydney, and 'Paint: Now' at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Museum, Denmark.



Liat Yossifor is a LA based painter who was born in Israel. Recent solo exhibitions include 'Pre-Verbal Painting', The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 'A Body of Water', PATRON, Chicago. Yossifor is currently included in 'Modulaciones, Pintura 1898-2016', Museo de Arte de Zapopan, Mexico.