

Darius Yektai: Love, Form, and Existence

Robert C. Morgan

“An artist cannot take life as it comes. He has to select what has significance for him and to impose form on what he selects.”

Rebecca West
Picasso and the Human Comedy, 1954

In the quotation cited above, art historian Rebecca West offers an important insight as to the function of art in relation to an artist's everyday life. From her perspective, Picasso was continually put in the position of having to decide what was worth painting. Upon further reflection, one might assess this conundrum not only as one reserved for Picasso. In fact, many artists who deal primarily with the figure derive influence from what they observe in their personal lives. The problem begins when one is forced to choose between what is significant enough to paint and what is not, keeping in mind that what is significant in life may not be the case in art, and vice versa. Once the decision is clear, the artist is then obliged to evolve a form capable of expressing some fundamental truth or allegory replete with mythical content. Ironically, it would appear that what is most intimate in an artist's life may also hold the greatest potential in capturing something universal, and thereby, evoking the human condition to which we all respond.

Darius Yektai, an artist of Iranian and Greek descent, studied painting in Paris over a decade ago. During this time he spent many hours in museums comparing works by Cezanne, Picasso, Bonnard, and Matisse, with the Old Masters. In analyzing the methods employed by these artists – their color, line, form, space, and composition --Yektai was able to deduce that successful painting is directly related to the coherence of the surface. Also, by allowing the brushwork to remain visible on the surface of the canvas, early modernists avoided the static varnished appearance that often appears in Baroque painting. Of course, there are certain exceptions, i.e. Hals, Rubens, Velasquez, the late Rembrandt, among others. Having absorbed these lessons, Yektai began to develop a looser, more open surface in his own work. He soon discovered that the major concerns for artists in the early twentieth century had become his concerns. I would refer to paintings, such as Cezanne's Mount St. Victoire (1904), Matisse's Open Window (1905) and Picasso's famous Les Femmes d'Alger (1907) – three works that reveal a visible brushwork. If we look closely at Yektai's Father Son Father (2009.) a painting in which we see the artist, his father, and son relaxing together in front of a panoramic window view of the outside garden, we see the evidence of what the young artist learned in Paris. The surface of Yektai's painting uniformly reveals the trace of the brush. Nothing is hidden or repressed. The way the painting is constructed is entirely visible.

Yektai is concerned with how to achieve coherence in painting without sacrificing intuition – in other words, how to access formal contiguity through one's painterly vocabulary. Ashley (2004-08), for example, is a portrait of a woman that expresses this point of view. The freely brushed surface, especially the dark green space of the background, gives a paradoxical energy within the relatively stoic poise of the subject. For Yektai, whatever painters made happen in the past had to be reevaluated in the present. His challenge became one of moving the surface of a painting to another level, not simply repeating old ideas, but extending them in an entirely new dimension.

Given the artist's Sasanian lineage, one might speculate on the two cultural traits – Greek and Persian -- embedded in the way the artist thinks about art. It may also account for the kind of commitment he gives to the elements of color, space, texture, and line that result in a psychological (or existential) form of expression, as shown in two other portraits, titled *Amy's Wish, I* (2007) and *Amy's Wish II* (2007 – 08). Through the artist's manipulation of these formal elements, one may discover a freshly conceived, reawakened sensual coherence.

As Yektai once told me: "It's not what you paint, but how you paint it." Although it was not the first time I heard this statement, I found it refreshing to hear these words coming from a young painter in the twenty-first century. Yektai wants to open up certain aspects of modernist painting that have been taken for granted and to explore them in a different way. For example, in *High Wired and Uncertain* (2008) or the marvelously restrained painting, *The Dog Yard* (2001), the artist has taken visual ideas from early modernism and transformed them through his own uninhibited language. One must look – and look again – at what is actually present in these paintings. There is little in the way of theory (as it is known today) that can substitute for direct experience. Yektai admits to being a formalist prone to employ sentimental subjects in his paintings. As shown in Picasso, Yektai also works from the perspective of what happens in everyday life in the space of the studio, among friends, family, and children. Paintings, such as *Bound and Alone* (2004-09) or *Heatsmoke* (2009) -- as different as they appear -- are possessed by common emotions: sentiment, conflict, and dignity. Emphasis is given to existential isolation through Classical form. This would include the recent large-scale sculptural assemblage, titled *All I Know About Love at Thirty-Six* (2009).

As with much of his work over the past four years, Darius Yektai subsumes the intellect in favor of the emotions. Through the use of ceramic shards, tubes of paint, scraped pigments, torn canvas, steel armatures, wood supports, and other forms of detritus, his sculptural assemblages manifest an expressionist aesthetic by projecting the illusionist figuration of painting into three-dimensional space. It is through this tension and balance-- working from his innermost feelings -- where the mythic grandeur in his work begins to take hold. Here we may discover the admixture of two divergent cultures, a synthesis that returns us to the Sasanian era in Persia a century after the conquest of Alexander when the ideal and expressive dimensions of the body began to intersect through art and, in the process, opened the world's eyes to another way of seeing.

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