



Photos: Gary Mamay

EXPLORING LAYERS TO THE CORE OF DARIUS YEKTAI **BY HEATHER BUCHANAN**

If there is one word to describe the paintings of Darius Yektai it would be “alive.” There is nothing still about his still lifes. Motion is essential to Yektai whether it is the visible stroke of his brush or his surf board sensing the perfect wave or the movement of the viewer required to fully experience the work. Working on large scale canvases, he leaves the mark of his physical process, epitomizing painting as a verb as opposed to a noun. “I tend to push painting towards sculpture and sculpture towards painting,” he comments, “The work is very much about material and process.”

Yektai’s paintings present as three dimensional using different layers of paint and resin with small waves of oil paint leaping from the surface. “I studied geology before I switched to art history,” he explains, “You can use deductive reasoning and figure out a painting from looking at the edge.” The reason he chose to study in Europe was to be close enough to the old masters’ work to decipher the artist’s journey and not just the destination.

The home and vaulted-ceiling studio he built in Sag Harbor 18 years ago contain a treasure trove of racks and racks of his prolific work with enough wall space to hang a painting for months to see if the initial enthusiasm holds up over time. While his work embodies immediacy his critical eye takes a longer lens. When asked how he feels about one of his paintings from 2002 which is currently on view in the permanent collection in Guild Hall he says with a smile, “It’s like a really good painter broke into my studio and did this painting.” But while

his technique and skill are always improving, he admits the struggle is constant. “Any time I think I have something figured out I have to move in a new direction. The engagement has to be there.”

His current body of work represents variations on themes of Monet’s water lilies. Yektai comments, “It’s a reference to Monet but seeing if there is something new to say. I end up with a cement painting or a gold one. When I add the layer of resin, it creates depth. The viewer now is looking through the painting’s layers into its narrative process. The resin also reflects light like facets on a diamond in response to a viewer’s movement, and reflects the exterior world.” He adds with a laugh, “I even use the black one as a mirror before I head out of the house.”

You could also say artistic talent is in his DNA. He remembers summers in the Hamptons with his father Manoucher Yektai who was a prominent part of the New York School of abstract expressionists with work in the Museum of Modern Art. “He was wary when I wanted to be a painter,” recalls



Yektai, “He cared if I was going to be a true painter or a dilettante.” It took him time to reconcile his father’s influence. “There was a moment when I stopped not trying to be influenced by my father. I was aware of his work and I can quote my father just like I can Van Gogh. It took almost 20 years to not feel the shadow and step into the light.”

Yektai does not naturally gravitate to the idea of branding and marketing but does resonate with those who tell his story like Sag Harbor gallery owner Laura Grenning who had a vision to expand his audience. She comments in his show’s catalogue, “Yektai is exactly what we’ve been looking for, a bridge between our classically trained artists to the realm of dignified contemporary abstraction.” He also recently has signed with an Iranian gallerist based in Marbella, Spain for more exposure in Europe and beyond, a nod to his father’s Iranian roots.

Yektai’s deep emotional connection to his work has almost a Jungian shadow feel. His hot pink water lilies contrast sharply with his dark, brooding self-portraits. “I dig into the darkness and create something that brings joy,” he explains, “It’s like listening to a sad song. It holds all the sadness and the human condition, but doesn’t make you sad. It helps you not feel alone.” As his passion and career grow it seems Yektai will need just one more thing – to build more space to accommodate his expansive and vibrant body of work.

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