

An abstract painting featuring a textured, earthy background of grey and brown tones. The composition is dominated by vertical, wavy brushstrokes in various shades of green, ranging from pale lime to deep forest green. Interspersed among these are horizontal and curved strokes in vibrant blue and bright yellow. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and layered color. The text 'DARIUS YEKTAI' is printed in a clean, white, sans-serif font in the upper right quadrant.

DARIUS YEKTAI

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Darius Yektai (b 1973 Southampton, New York) is an East End of Long Island painter with aboriginal roots in the Abstract Expressionist movement. Although at first glance, Yektai may seem like an outlier at the Grenning Gallery, he is exactly what we've been looking for; a bridge between our classically trained artists to the realm of dignified contemporary abstraction.

Interestingly, Yektai has a degree in Art History, not painting. Unfettered by the constraints that years of traditional training may do to yoke an artist's expression, Yektai is free to explore his subject matter and experiment with his materials. Every series is its own investigation and Yektai has demonstrated that he is both sincere in his inquiry and also unafraid of failure. His passion to understand great artworks from the past and integrate them into a Contemporary visual language has landed Yektai on a curious and brave path which has, luckily, intersected with us.

In early 2019, when Grenning Gallery's Manager, Megan Toy, suggested we visit Yektai's studio, I had my reservations. I had known Yektai personally and followed his work for over 15 years. I had noticed a shift in recent work posted on social media, so my curiosity won out. As we walked through Yektai's studio, I became mesmerized by the abundance of work, each of which was evoking joy with the rich, colorful, and bold brushwork.

It wasn't until I saw FLOWERS, that I knew we had struck gold. A large 7ft x 9ft canvas slathered in

layers of neutral toned paints on a natural canvas, highlighted by bright, shoveled-on brushstrokes of flowers, and just-in-case-you-missed-it, the word FLOWERS painted directly onto the foreground. Yektai describes this painting as "A Monet, if Monet knew about Pollock". Consider that; the French Impressionist responding to nature, liberally using gritty materials in gumptious motions, as Jackson Pollock did. This painting is the first in what has now become a new series of Falling Flower paintings. Here, I also see the influence of later works by De Kooning, with his lilting woven abstract swabs of paint.

Soon after that studio visit, we curated an exhibition titled "Thick & Wet" in June of 2019, which showed



"Flowers"
2018, oil on canvas, 88 x 109 ½ in



"Large Tulips Yellow Table"
2018, Oil on linen, 72 x 144 in

Yektai with the established Grenning Gallery classically trained contemporary impressionist painters; side by side, it all made sense. Yektai's rich expressive paintings are like a supersized version of a square inch of a Van Gogh canvas. After selling almost everything in the group show, we granted Yektai his first Solo Show for June 2020.

This debut opened in the middle of one of the darkest months of the global Coronavirus pandemic. Despite the government mandated shut down, we pushed forward with a 100% virtual Zoom-only Opening Reception. It was another near sell-out show!

Not only has Yektai impressed our clients, he has also impacted the minds and methods of some of our classically trained artists. When "Large Tulips Yellow Table" was on view in Yektai's 2020 Solo Show, a few of our artists were caught inspecting it closely. This 6ft x 12ft still life looks as if Yektai could have used a broom-wide brush to apply the paint!

The audacity to paint like this on a major scale has nudged other Grenning Gallery artists to experiment. We are starting to see more luscious and exuberant works flowing from other studios.

After an extraordinary debut with the Grenning Gallery, Yektai was inspired by his highly touted "Waterlily" from 2019 to create more on this subject. This year's Solo Show is filled with this oeuvre, which is splendid, experimental, imposing in scale at times yet meditative, and no doubt groundbreaking.

We can't wait to see what's coming next!

Laura Grenning March 2021

Published by Grenning Gallery
Sag Harbor, New York



“Calla Lilies In Blue And White Vase”
2012-2021, oil and resin on canvas, 72 x 60 in

AN ORIGIN STORY by Lloyd Wise

In the twentieth century, painting came under attack. Some artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, stripped painting down to its “zero degree,” draining it of all superfluity but its nuts and bolts; others, like Robert Rauschenberg, disappeared the medium into multimedia assemblage or collage. Still others flirted with violence: Artists such as Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana blasted their canvases apart, lit them on fire, or sliced them with razors. Niki de Saint Phalle shot her paintings with a gun.

Darius Yektai’s approach is a little bit different. Rather than assault painting with an attitude of avant-garde negation, he approaches the medium like a surfer who is really into math, or science. Instead of mourning painting’s death or attempting to destroy it, he joyfully subjects it to a spaced-out scientific method—the fractal reconfigurations of an acid trip.

In Yektai’s tireless, tinkering hands, painting’s supposed orthodoxies warp and explode in glittering recombinatory mutations, the medium’s constituent parts are re-sorted, its hierarchies inverted. Which is not to say Yektai’s compositions are psychedelic—far from it. By contrast, Yektai’s work—which spans the genres of still lifes, old-master reproductions, tenebrous self-portraits, and figurative sculpture—can at first blush appear stubbornly conservative. But if you take the time to look at them, to peek at and into the surface, you’ll find a spiraling Lysergic mind-fuck, a what’s-up-is-down mirror-world where the Order of Things grows unstable and begins to fall apart.

Take, for example, Yektai’s use of lacquer. Today, a “vernissage” is a somewhat affected way of saying “opening,” but as Yektai will quickly remind you, this is not the original sense of the word. At the French Salons of the nineteenth century, artists would varnish their paintings after their paintings arrived on site, in the gallery, and, on varnishing day, elite visitors received invitations to preview the show. This event, the so-called vernissage, represented the conclusion of the painting, the embalming final step. But for Darius, it can also be the beginning—or a moment in between. In many works made over the past twenty years, Yektai has flipped this sequence of painting around—or as he calls it painting’s “hierarchy”—such that the varnish, or lacquer, is no longer a final protective layer but an integral part of the composition itself.

This tendency is especially evident in Yektai’s recent paintings based on water lilies. In these pieces, which draw inspiration from the ponds by the artist’s Sag Harbor home, Yektai begins by laying down paint in a thick impasto—deft, economical, richly sculptural approximations of Monet’s blurry coloristic scenes. Next, he lays the painting flat and floods it with thousands of dollars worth of varnish, submerging the image in a frozen resin lake. Finally, after the lacquer dries, the slick, transparent surface becomes a ground for additional marks, such as a smear of pink or a loosely drawn willow branch. (These final gestures, intriguingly, are often like water lilies themselves:

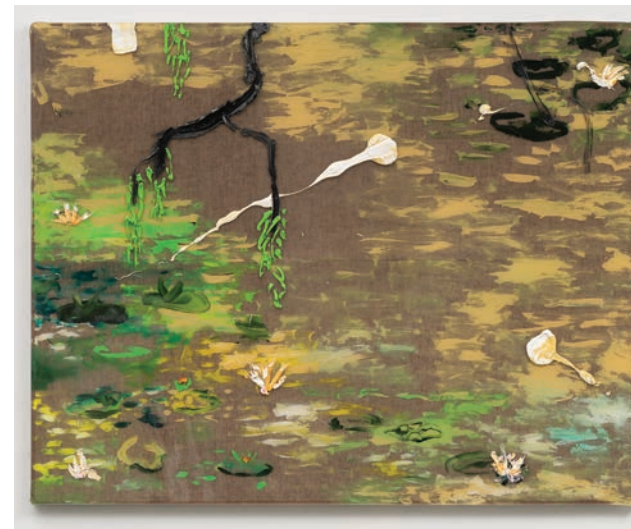
flowers floating upon a limpid pond.) The result is a series of layers that are themselves in conversation. You see the image with double, or even triple vision—a rich and vibrant conversation of which you the viewer are either a participant or not.

Importantly, Yektai's deployment of resin—and his reconfiguration or deconstruction of painting more broadly—is no mere gimmick: It has real aesthetic stakes. First, the resin is reflective—not overpoweringly so, like a mirror, but reflective enough. So when you look at the paintings, you also

see yourself reflected within them, an effect that redoubles the effect of the layers while emphasizing the painting's presence as a thing in space, and yourself as a body in confrontation with it. The otherwise inert canvas comes alive, *embodying* itself, less as a window or a mirror but both at once. Second, by entombing the painting, freezing it in amber, the resin in turn draws the viewer forward, beckoning him or her to get up close, to gaze within. What otherwise might be missed in these drowned landscapes of color become the quasi-scientific focus of our aesthetic attention.



Yektai standing between ““Large Dark Self 3” and “Large Dark Self 6” in his Solo show “Darklight” at Art Center at Duck Creek, August 2020



“Waterlilies”

2020, oil, acrylic and resin on raw linen, 61 x 77 in

An origin story - In the mid-1990s, Yektai was studying abroad at the American University in Paris, and visited the Prado. This was around 1996. Yektai found himself standing in the grand gallery with all the Velazquez paintings, including, most famous of them all, *Las Meninas*. He was entranced. But he was also not alone. He was traveling with a school group, and as the professor delivered his exegesis of Velazquez's masterpiece—giving names to the different figures, describing their history, unpacking the notorious labyrinth of gazes—Darius had gotten up close. And as he listened, with one ear, to the lecture echoing around the room, he peered at the painting's surface: the brushwork, the saturation and transparency of pigments, the glimpses of under-

painting. In this moment, the artwork appeared to him, transcendently, through a sort of double vision: as an art-historical discussion, overheard in the overheard lecture based on the illusionistic gestalt, and, simultaneously, as a plainspoken array of material facts. To Yektai's surprise, the students filed out of the room as soon as the lecture had concluded: None had thought to experience the painting close-up, as he had. This, to Yektai's mind, meant they missed half the story: the almost divine materiality—the thing they were looking at—the primordial drama and blunt facticity of art.

No painting is completely flat. Even the thinnest layers of paint add depth and volume—micro-thin strata that may be invisible to the naked eye but are present and perceptible nonetheless. Imagine *Las Meninas* lying flat on the floor. Next, imagine you are microscopically small, standing inside it. The landscape around you is not smooth but dotted with peaks and valleys. Each of Velazquez's brush strokes has carved a mountain range, every new color is a strata of rock. Next, imagine you're standing in the middle of Willem de Kooning's *Merit Parkway*: Towering ridges, glacial peaks.

Yektai takes painting's topography seriously, and while it is tempting to call his stratified, thickly impastoed paintings “sculptural,” or “relief-like,” they're more akin to living landscapes, full of chains of lakes, underwater rivers, ridges, glacial valleys, hills, and, in some cases, what seems like tectonic movement. A few of his paintings even inhabit quasi-geological timespans, transforming over long periods



“Moses And The Crossing Of The Red Sea: After Poussin 2”
2001, linseed oil and powdered pigment on linen, 45 x 63 in

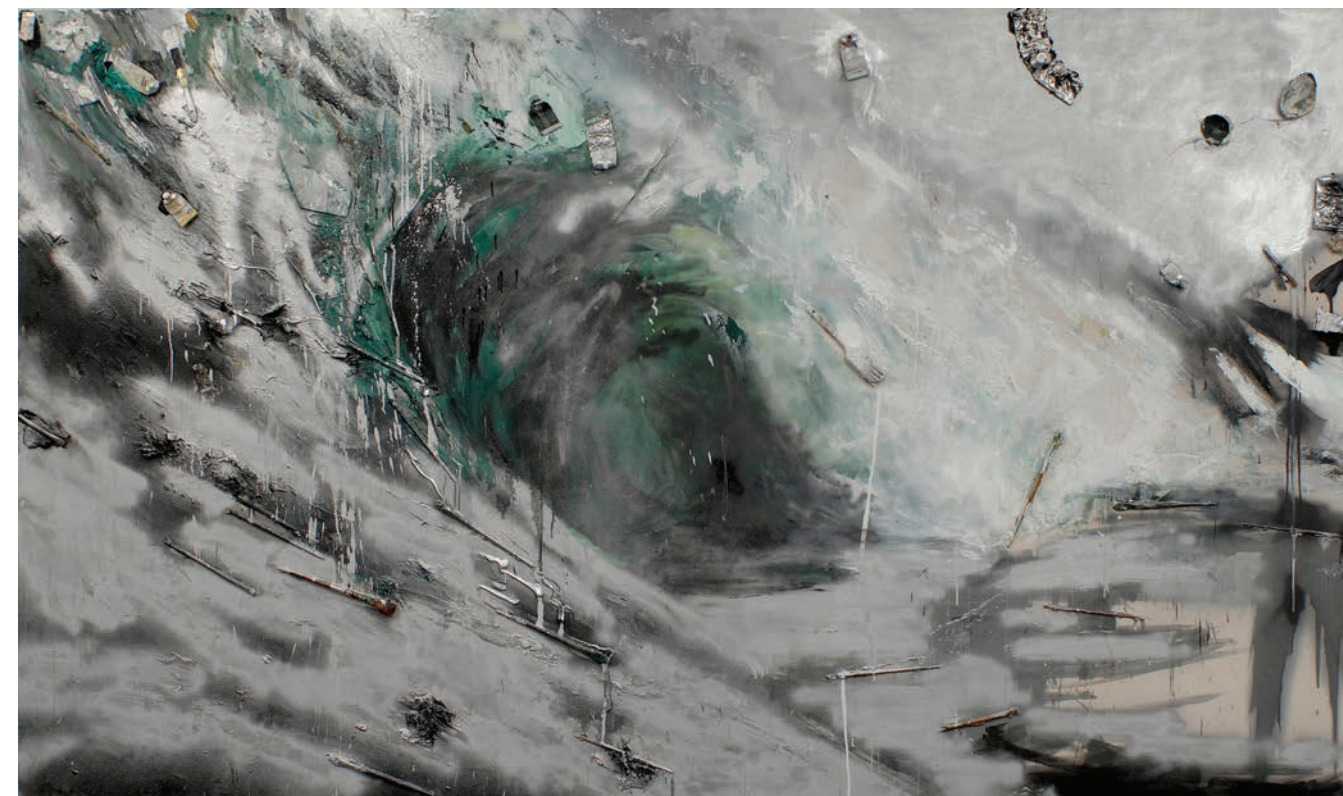
of time. Take for example, *After Poussin: Moses and the Crossing of the Red Sea*, 2001. The thick gobs of oil-soaked pigment at its center have been drying for two decades. Every few years, another drip appears—like magma oozing from a subterranean lake.

On a wall off Yektai’s kitchen is a twelve-foot-long painting of a wave. The composition, part of a 2012–2013 series, is breathtaking in its massive scale and scope, dynamic and expressive in equal measure. The perspective it offers is iconic: a surfer’s-eye view down the barrel of a wave, an archetype vision familiar from a million tourist gift-shop T-shirts, postcards, and teenage bedroom posters. But very much *unlike* these precedents, Darius’s painting is dark. It takes us far from the blissed-out pleasures of Venice Beach or Bali’s endless

summer, and plunges us into the icy water of a very different kind of ocean. The blue is steely and cold—an East Coast blue, a Winslow Homer blue. It is the green-flecked blue of January snowstorms and shipwrecked boats, and it brings to mind not something like William Finnegan’s description of breaks as “quick, violent events at the end of a long chain of storm action and ocean reaction.” (A similarly tempestuous atmosphere dominates other, smaller-scale pieces from the series: paintings such as *Winter Ranch*, 2013, *Hard Offshore*, 2013, and *Your Water*, 2012. In the *Night Tides*, a wave crests thunderously and emits a diaphanous, moonlit spray.)

Emphasizing this violence, and the unseen motile drama of the ocean, a vertiginous range of brushwork cascades across the kitchen painting’s surface: spatters of white paint, passages of impasto, gestural spurts, skeins of pigment, and shimmering silver accents. Such variation is par for the course in Yektai’s work—he has a restless, mandarin curiosity about the possibilities of pigment and their three-dimensional effects. But here, Yektai has also embedded physical objects into the surface: an apparently random assortment of half-empty paint tubes, rags, brushes, and more.

These items enrich the composition by providing additional painterly incident while also adding weight and three-dimensional heft: paint tube doubles as a daub of white; a paintbrush acts as stroke of dark blue. As Duchamp once observed, modern paintings are always-already “works of assemblage,” made as

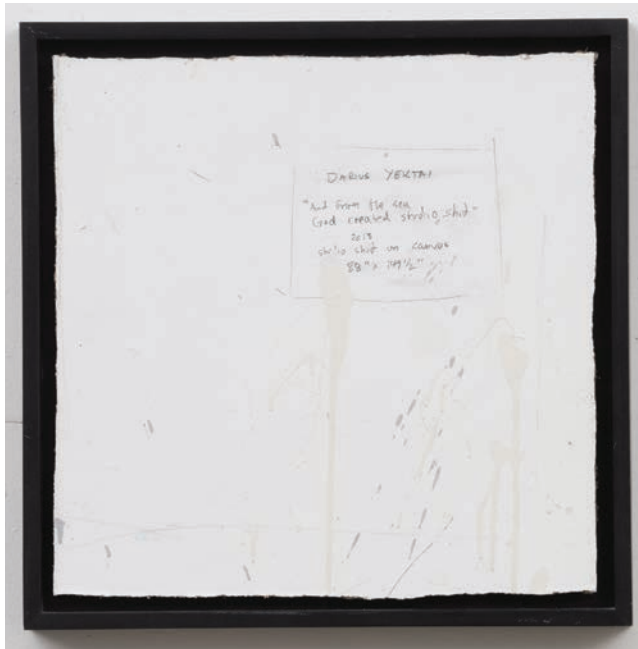


“And From The Sea God Created Studio Shit”
2013, studio shit on canvas, 88 x 149 ½ in

they are of a paint that is itself a product of industry. Here, the inclusion of these objects makes Duchamp’s point unavoidable and explicit.

Darius calls this painting *And From the Sea God Created Studio Shit*. When the name finally occurred to him, he wrote it in pencil directly on the wall, also adding data such as the painting’s dimensions (89”

x 149 1/2”) and date (2013) and materials (“Studio Shit on Canvas”), as in a stately museum wall label. When Yektai later cut out that section of drywall and set it within a frame, the ad-hoc label became its own independent artwork. The label, according to the artist, was not simply a descriptor. The work “encapsulates the whole”—it is a linguistic double and valid substitute of the entire painting.



“And From The Sea God Created Studio Shit 2”
2013, pencil and paint on drywall, 15 ¼ x 15 ¼ in

If Yektai’s wall label brings to mind Joseph Kosuth’s chair-bound meditation on sign and referent or Magritte’s famous pipe-that-is-not-a-pipe, it also offers a contrast. Hand-jotted and bearing spatters, drips, and rough-cut edges, the object emphatically foregrounds the artist’s hand, suggesting not the cool cerebral cogitation of Kosuth’s deadpan but the roiling and chaotic heat of creation: the life-giving ocean of the studio. In fact, Yektai’s work might even suggest a work of late ’60s dematerialized conceptualism that has been “pulled into” painting—and, in this light, his giant wave seems less like a wave

than a vortex, a widening gyre that has expanded beyond the canvas edges to hungrily swallow up that which might otherwise remain comfortably external to the picture. Nothing is safe: If we let this thing go too long, who knows what’s next. Leo Steinberg’s Flatbed Picture Plane—with its “symbolic allusion to . . . any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed”—has here become the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a voracious trash vortex consuming, devouring, and regurgitating every object in sight

If we agree with Duchamp (as Yektai leads us to), and see *Wave* plainly as an assemblage, which is to say sculpture, we might also agree to the inverse: That Yektai’s sculpture *Figure Painting* is a painting. Created in between 1999 and 2002, this was a watershed piece: the first of Yektai’s many experiments in sculpture and statuary. Standing nearly six feet tall, *Figure Painting* loosely portrays a man. He bends one leg and places his arm on his hip; his limbs are frail and thin, like a Giacometti. But quite unlike the art of the Parisian master, who created his figures via an act of subtraction, obsessively carving away plaster and clay to reveal attenuated torsos and legs, Yektai has produced this figure additively, glomming together an assemblage of all manner of studio shit: tubes of paint, plastic caps, gobs of dried oil, paintbrushes, and linen.

Rather than a Pygmalion, it is a Frankenstein, and, in keeping with Shelley’s Victorian warning about the dangers of scientific progress, the creature is less a

man than a monster: a painting-sculpture homunculus surfacing from art’s industrial waste.

Yektai’s move here is not a new one, art historically speaking. Painting-as-sculpture and sculpture-as-painting have been with us for a while now. Ever since Donald Judd identified the specific object and Frank Stella shaped a canvas, the deconstructed wreckage of medium-specific categories has served as a playground for generations of artists. Yektai explores the possibilities in this arena with enthusiasm, enlivening it with curiosity and creative intensity. Since producing the *Figure Painting*, Yektai has made dozens of additional sculptures and statues, many of which riff, with varying degrees of assertiveness, on their own flagrant medium *unspecificity*.

Some of these sculptures feel like jokes, such as *Crouching Figure*, 2016, where blocks of green-painted wood and chicken wire indicate a man who appears to breakdance on a pedestal that is also a framed canvas. Others are allusions to history, as in, for example, a group of works inspired by Manet’s *Déjeuner Sur L’herbe*.

Over the years, Yektai has created several versions of Manet’s second-most-famous painting—remaking it in black-and-white or with ultra-loose brushwork or zooming in on individual figures’ faces or experimenting in three dimensions. First, Yektai created a wooden armature modeled after the figures; then he stretches painted canvas on top of this structure, such that a painting of Manet’s lounging nude becomes a wooden *sculptures* of the nude.

Here, as with his paintings using lacquer and resin, the materials remain roughly the same as a “traditional” painting (canvas, stretcher, paint) but they come together in an untraditional way. The results, in turn, bear little resemblance to the stately figures in Manet’s hypnogogic fantasy. Distorted by Yektai’s disemboweling machinations, the statues, with their E.T. heads, are freakish little ghouls. No wax-museum verisimilitude here. Had the title to *Dark Figure From Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe*, 2002, not indicated its source, I never would have guessed.



“Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe: After Manet 1”
2001, oil on linen, 24 x 34 in

The apex of Yektai’s sculptural experiments is a monumental sculpture of Apollo and Daphne that the artist has been working on for the past seven years. Titled *The Chase, Apollo and Daphne—After Bernini*, the piece, at the moment and for the

foreseeable future, lives in Yektai's garage. (This a practical matter—it is now too large to move.) The scene unfolds on a platform that is approximately fifteen by fifteen feet wide, and that, as in some of his smaller sculptures, suggest a framed canvas. On this surface, Yektai has affixed hundreds of scraps of wood, orienting them vertically to create the effect of a rolling landscape—or a jury-rigged version of the topographical maps found in the visitors centers at national parks. A stream cuts through the terrain, with steep banks on either side. Paint is spattered everywhere, adding color, as well as, perhaps, additional dimension and physical depth.

And the scene itself? It is powerful, mythological, violent: full of sound and fury. Apollo stands at one far corner. His body is painted a fleshy white, with streaks of maroon that mark his eyes and mouth. Daphne has backed against a tree, as if she'd been thrown there by supernatural force. Her hair spiders out in pain and fright, a mirroring or doubling of the branches behind her that augurs the moment of mythic transmutation. Everything is provisional, expressive, as if brought into being with giant strokes of a brush. It has an intensity a drama, and is very much alive. (A horror-movie detail I like: The canvas-wrapping around the branches does not fully cover the underlying wooden armature. Two-by-fours stick out like broken bones through flesh.)

When I visited the studio in early 2021, Yektai had recently made a new addition to the sculpture, affixing, as he put it, a “donkey cock,” between Apollo's legs. Yektai hadn't decided whether to

keep the appendage. It was crude, sure, even funny in a puerile kind of way. But it's bluntness served a purpose, forcing him to see his subject matter plainly—the horrifying act of sexual violence implicit in the Apollo and Daphne myth—and to face it, to own up to it, and to reckon with its consequences. Such is the benefit of working on a sculpture for seven years—you grow along with it. And as you change, as your perspective changes, the artwork adapts, responsively. In turn, the artwork itself becomes a kind of diary, a reflection of your attitudes in time, a strata of the self.

In 2021, myths of male genius have rarely drawn greater scrutiny. Yektai, for his part, has a self-conscious yet unapologetic investment in those myths. Picasso, for him, was a genius, and a model to aspire to. The Master's paintings, in Yektai's view, flowed through him; there was no thought—only action. Yektai seeks to channel similar energy, and tap into it to achieve the same state of unthinking action. Pure intuition.

There is evidence Yektai has tapped this flow. For one thing, he makes a *lot* of work. His home is filled with canvas upon canvas, stacks and stacks of paintings cycling through and exploring a host of approaches and styles. (There are echoes, here, of those pictures of Picasso in Mourgins.) New experiments are always forthcoming: Recently, Yektai has returned to his paintings in cement, which he first began in 2015 after buying mortar to tile his kitchen. Because cement dries quickly, the medium demands Yektai to respond nimbly. There's no time to think. The forced

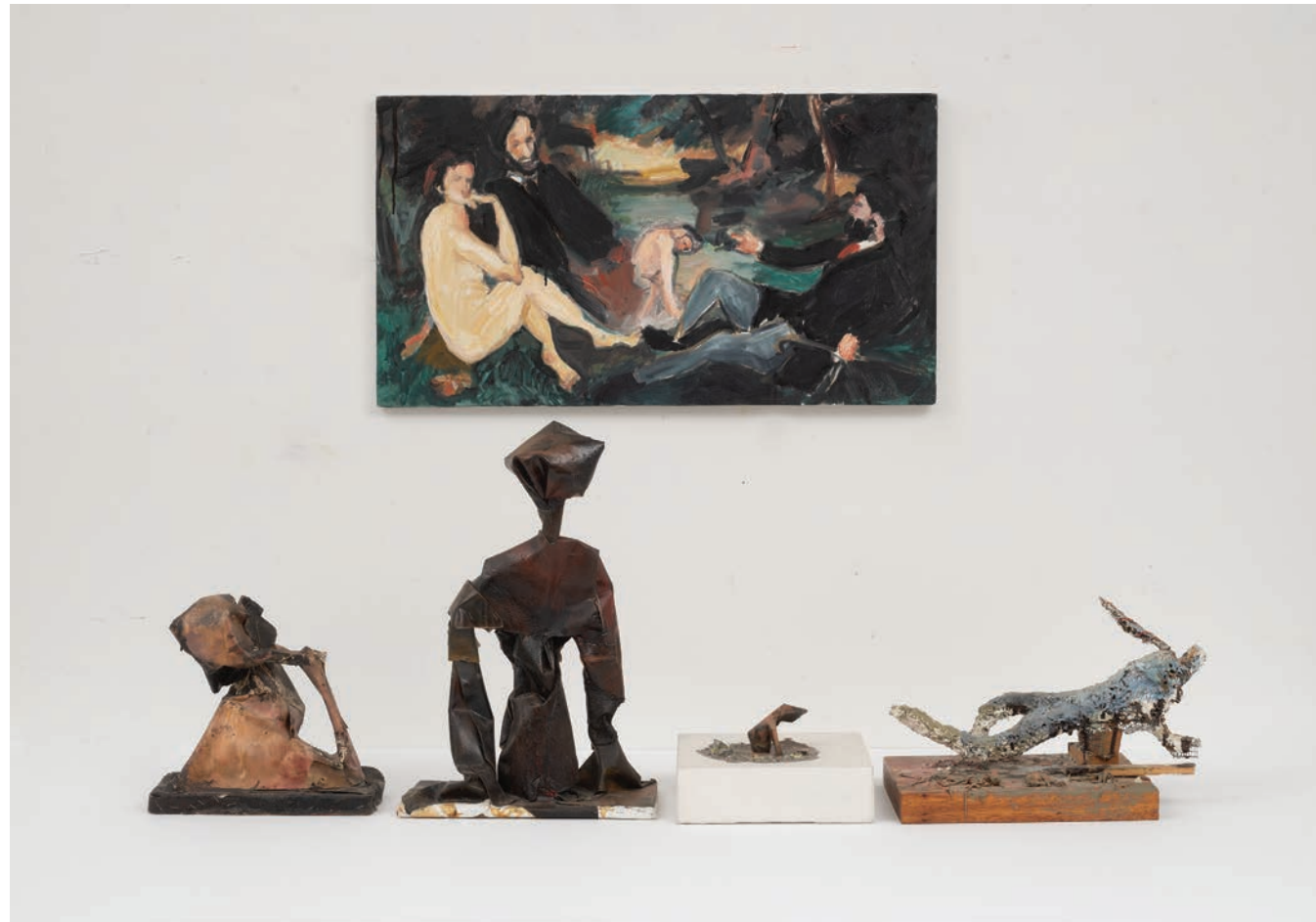
spontaneity has yielded productive results: finger-painted riffs on Michaelangelo's David, and various abstractions, all of them elaborations on and homages to the hydra-headed Pater Familias of art.

In some respects, Yektai's approach appears spiritually in keeping with Neo-Expressionism of the late 1970s and '80s. The flamboyant gesture, the earnest belief in painting, the mythological subject matter are all qualities we associate with artists such as Julian Schnabel, Enzo Cucchi, and Anselm Kiefer. But look a little closer, and Yektai's work is in fact very much a product of his moment. For a generation of painters who came of age in the late '90s and 2000s—artists such as Richard Aldrich, Wade Guyton, Michael Williams, and others—the controversies that had animated earlier epochs of painting had lost their urgency.

No longer fretting about painting's death, or feeling the need to defend it against perceived assaults, these painters were free to paint again, and they could do so in newly inventive ways. Thanks to the developments of the previous century's avant-garde, they had at their disposal a vast vocabulary of inherited artistic procedures. Why not cut a hole in your painting? Or singe its side while modifying it with assemblage? Why not paint a painting “straight,” then add collaged digital images of a different painting? Or make an old-master painting but add the varnish at the midpoint? No need to agonize—let's go. Strategies of negation had transformed into a positive force. Such is the attitude of freedom that Yektai at once espouses and partakes.



“Figure Painting”
1999-2002, oil, paint tubes, plastic caps, on linen
and wood, 70 x 22 x 33 in



“Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe: After Manet 3”

2001, oil on linen , 20 x 36 in

Sculptures starting from left:

“Female Nude From Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe” 2002, oil on linen, 11 ½ x 13 x 6 ½ in

“Dark Figure From Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe” 2002, oil on linen, 22 x 8 x 15 in

“Small Female Nude From Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe” 2002, oil and resin on linen, 5 ½ x 11 x 11 in

“Reclining Figure From Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe” 2008, oil and wire on wood, 10 x 21 x 12 in

Another Origin Story - When you talk about Yektai, you also have to talk about his father. Manoucher Yektai was born in Tehran in 1921. In 1945, he left Iran for Paris, where he studied art under Amédée Ozenfant, the cubist painter. After a brief visit to New York, he return to Paris, but was dissatisfied. New York, as the famous saying goes, had stolen the idea of modern art and Manoucher knew he had to find his way back across the Atlantic.

When he returned a few years later, he studied at the Art Students League, where he soon garnered the support of Leo Castelli. This led to friendships with Mark Rothko and Philip Guston, and, in turn, brought

him the opportunity to show at the legendary Stable gallery, where he displayed his work alongside figures such as De Kooning, Newman, Pollock, and Kline.

So what does this mean for Darius Yektai? On the one hand, there are obvious iconographic and visual parallels between father and son. Whether they are intended so or not, a number of Yektai’s paintings even appear like direct homages to his late father’s work. This is clearest in a group of still lifes made last year. Potted flowers sit perilously at the corner of a table, a surface Yektai smartly establishes with just a few thick and confident strokes of white. The backdrop is typically plain: a glasslike ground of resin



Darius Yektai, “Swizzle”
2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in



Manoucher Yektai, “Checkedered Tablecloth”
1953, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in

suspended over a field of monochrome white. The affinity with Manoucher's many floral still lifes—in which the potted flowers also appear against white grounds—is hard to miss. But the homage, while loving, is not always straightforward: In another piece by Yektai, titled *Boom*, 2020, an explosive passage of white paint seems to have tipped over a pot of blossoms.

But I think his father has exerted more existential effects, too. In significant ways, Yektai is closer to the art world than most anyone can hope to be. (How many painters can say their father was a ranking member of the New York School?) Yet he is also external to it. He lives “out east,” in Sag Harbor, and while he visits the city and has art-world friends and contacts, he isn't really *in it*. He doesn't partake in the sometimes-suffocating discourse and arguments that animate the politics of New York's evolving, ever-competing scenes.

This position of simultaneous proximity and distance—which is another way of saying estrangement, or alienation—provides one perspective on one of Yektai's oldest bodies of work: a series of dark self-portraits begun in 1999 and continuing to this day. In each of these beautiful paintings, some of which are quite large, Yektai's expressionless face leers out from a stygian blackness, bleak and occluded. “Rembrandt with the light turned off,” is how one critic described them.

To be sure, various “dark” emotions seem evident: doubt, depression, grief. He does not seem happy. But



Darius Yektai, “Boom”
2020, acrylic and resin on canvas, 59 ½ x 68 in

Manoucher Yektai, “Untitled (Lavender Bowl)”
1982, oil on linen, 36 x 40 in

I would argue they are not strictly images of despair. In each of these works, some of which are extremely large, his brushwork varies, and there is, as in so much of his art, a restless sense of exploration, reinvention, and curiosity about what paint can do. Indeed, these paintings suggest a vivifying sense of life made in and processed by paint. Yektai's face might disappear in shadows, but it also seems to surface into the light; likewise, the paintings convey a sense of self and paint in a state of becoming—at once alienated and at home in art.

New York City, New York
March 2021





"Water Lilies: After Monet"
2013-2019, oil and resin on linen, 44 x 62.5 inches (book cover)

WATERLILIES

How Darius Yektai dived into Claude Monet's pool.

by Anthony Hayden Guest

Until recently Darius Yektai was making two distinct bodies of paintings, figurative works and abstractions. The figurations, which he was showing, are bravura, painterly, taking their cues from works of Titian, Poussin, Matisse, and they include a painting of a moody young girl, which references the royal child in Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, a near *Mona Lisa* equivalent as an icon. "Which came first, the desire to paint *Las Meninas*?" Yektai observed in his Long Island studio. "Or that I had just taken a photograph of my daughter, and in the mirror behind her there I was, taking the picture? I had just gotten divorced and to stay connected I was taking snapshots, and making paintings of them. Did I need it at that moment? Yes."

His *Dark Self-Portraits*, a figurative series, consists of canvases where you can only make out the artist's features with difficulty, as if you are standing disconcertingly close to him in an unlit room. "You don't seem that dark?" I told Yektai. Indeed, he is a genial fellow to meet. "It's an exorcism of those emotions," he said. "The dark emotions that come up in a relationship, I put them in the paintings. I don't carry them with me."

The abstractions are just as highly charged but here the energy has been generated by Yektai's building of a pictorial language, no easy thing when the landscape of Modernism and Post-Modernism has grown so huge and become so densely populated. "You're up against mountains. Every time you put a mark onto a blank canvas," he says. "All the corners have been taken. Painting has reference built into it."



"After Velazquez: My Meninas"
2012, oil and wood on canvas, 100 x 72 in

It isn't just difficult because painting is difficult. It's difficult because it's ground that has been explored. But don't let that fool you! Even underneath the footprints of others there are stones that can be turned over. And something will be there." Yektai himself is continually exploring. Materials especially.

It was typical that while he was fixing up his kitchen, he should focus on the fact that the cement he was using was as archival as, say, acrylic paint. "So, I did a cement painting," he said. "And it was successful. It's a sculptural material. White paint doesn't float on the surface of the canvas the way cement does. Color has depth. Red comes forwards, blue recedes, but this is sand. A huge difference." So when Yektai needs such a specific effect, cement it is.

Accident may play a key role too. As it was with a small, dark, round lily painting with a bubbly surface, *Little Round Pond*. "This one is black, because there's a black foam-core behind the resin," he said. "I don't know what causes the bubbles, but I actually like the imperfections, what these pieces turn into. I don't like being absolutely perfect. This one is so gnarly it becomes more of an object. It becomes sculptural."

So to the genesis of the current series. Like most artists, Yektai keeps examples of his own work around the place, both new and old, but in his case it's not with an uncritical eye, especially when he focuses on the abstractions. "I take them out and live with them for a year," he says. A few don't maintain their full energy in his view, one of these being a canvas he had made in 2013, had liked, and continuously re-worked. "Now it was looking overworked to me. I was questioning it," he says. "But doubt and risk can be a good place to be. Better than confidence". It had stayed on the wall.

Just what it was that brought Monet's totemic *Waterlilies* floating into Yektai's stream of thinking



"Cement Lilies"
2020, cement on canvas, 39 x 64 in

with regard to his own work he doesn't remember. That said, now that Picasso and Duchamp have been so exhaustively mined, he is not the only Post-Modernist to be looking back to the forefathers a generation before to recharge his batteries, and for Yektai the most important forefather was Claude Monet. "I always thought of late Monet as the precursor to Jackson Pollock's all-overs. Pollock comes from that," he says. "His surface is the surface, he's not painting the surface of a pond, he's painting the surface of the painting. I was always thinking about how to incorporate Monet into this new language that Pollock had given us, which was paint for paint's sake."

One specific add-on came from his own growing up. "They do obviously go to the *Waterlilies* of Monet," he says of the planned work. "But it's also the willows and lilies from my childhood. I would wade through

the ponds with a fishing rod. It's very connected for me. It's nostalgia for where I grew up, tied to this giant of art history."

It was Yektai's compulsive investigation of materials that kickstarted the project though. "I had recently discovered a new language with resin," he says. "Resin allowed me to separate the top layer from the bottom layer in a way that let me quote from things that maybe artists might stay away from, because of rhetoric. Like the Impressionist brushstroke." He was hungry to put this language to appropriate use and in late 2019 his eye fell on that abstraction of eight years before, the one he had liked, but decided was perhaps overworked. Giving himself no time for second thoughts, he took it off the wall, and into his studio poured a thick, clear coat of resin on it and, as soon as it had dried-dried, he got down to work.

"I didn't know even it was going to be waterlilies," he says. "But there was a yellow and green color to it".



"Gold Lilies"

2021, acrylic and spray enamel on linen, 36 x 80 in



"Little Round Pond"

2021, oil and resin on raw linen, 24-inch diameter

Waterlilies it became. "I painted this very quick raw figuration of the pond - the lilies and the tree and the willow - on top of this total abstraction. So now you're looking *through* the surface, not across the surface. That was how this whole gig started. And it took a few months before I did another one".

Thus, was the *Waterlilies* series born and its birthing provided the template for the whole ongoing project. There's a *Cement Lilies*, a *Gold Lilies*, a *Dark Lilies*, doubtless the work of that Dark Self, and there are also always the required abstractions, which are pre-existing, so wholly unconnected with the pools

into which they are transformed, and often they are abstractions he has loved. "Take a risk," he says. "Because there's always a risk, painting like this. Especially when you have to go on top of something to create something. It takes you a long time sometimes, to build up enough separation from the original love affair with the abstraction to finish the thought."

You must sometimes lose good paintings, I proposed. "I lose a lot; I lose a lot. You take a risk."

The separation of levels of paint handling that the resin enables are crucial. "The *Waterlilies* are best when it's a total abstraction that is underneath the surface and it's the waterlilies that create that



"Sunset Pond"

2021, oil, acrylic, gold, and resin on linen, 36 x 48 in

distinction between figuration and abstraction," he says.

"The abstraction beneath, the lilies floating on top. It changes the perspective. It's about the quality of the water and the quality of the paint." Indeed, the resin-created perception of levels is so key to the project that Yektai won't sign the individual works on the front. "I worry that it floats on top of everything else," he says. "I can't do it. I feel it would interrupt your eye. I'm jealous of people signing paintings, I love the way Guston signed, I love the way Picasso signed."

He now has a settled modus operandi which you could call quick/slow/quick. "I'm still trying to figure out how to paint," he says. "I get ideas, and I run down the road. And it's sometimes a dead end. And then I turn around and come back. And try another idea. I also keep in mind a thought of Andy Warhol. In one of his interviews, he spoke about the strike; that if he could just smack a painting and have it just show up, that would be the ultimate goal."

It can be a long wait though. "My kids are funny!" he says. "They come in here and see paintings everywhere, but joke that they've never seen me paint. Because I can sit and look at the canvas for five hours. But then, when it's time to paint" - He clapped his hands together twice.

Yektai describes the leaves and branches that he added to that first *Waterlilies* as "quotations from Van Gogh's drawings. As few syllables as possible". The resin upon which it is painted has a lustrously

watery sheen. Yes, like the surface of a pool. “And this abstraction underneath is really agitated,” Yektai adds “It was a beautiful painting on its own”.

There’s a historical point to be made here. Piet Mondrian in part developed his grid from tree drawings, some of which he showed in 2007. De Kooning and Lee Krasner’s great Ab Ex canvases often reference landscape and the human figure. Peter Lanyon, the woefully underknown Brit Ab Ex, based much of his work upon his visual input as a glider pilot.

Yektai, contrariwise, is by no means the only painter using figuration to charge up the often samey, retro practices of abstraction but one of the most interesting. He likes to paint, the whole process. “Some look and feel like objects”, he says. “And some look and feel like something existential. I’ve touched this a thousand times. And I could touch it a thousand more. And I’m still running down roads, trying to find my course. The waterlilies will end when I catch myself repeating myself. And I’m not there yet. It’s still dynamic, it’s still going.”

New York City, New York

March 2021



“Water Lilies: After Monet (Like Looking At A Bad Black And White Photo In An Old Textbook)”, version 1
2020, acrylic on linen, 24 x 20 inches

WATERLILIES

Darius Yektai



“Edge of Pond”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 24 x 20 in



“Cook Pond”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 24 x 20 in



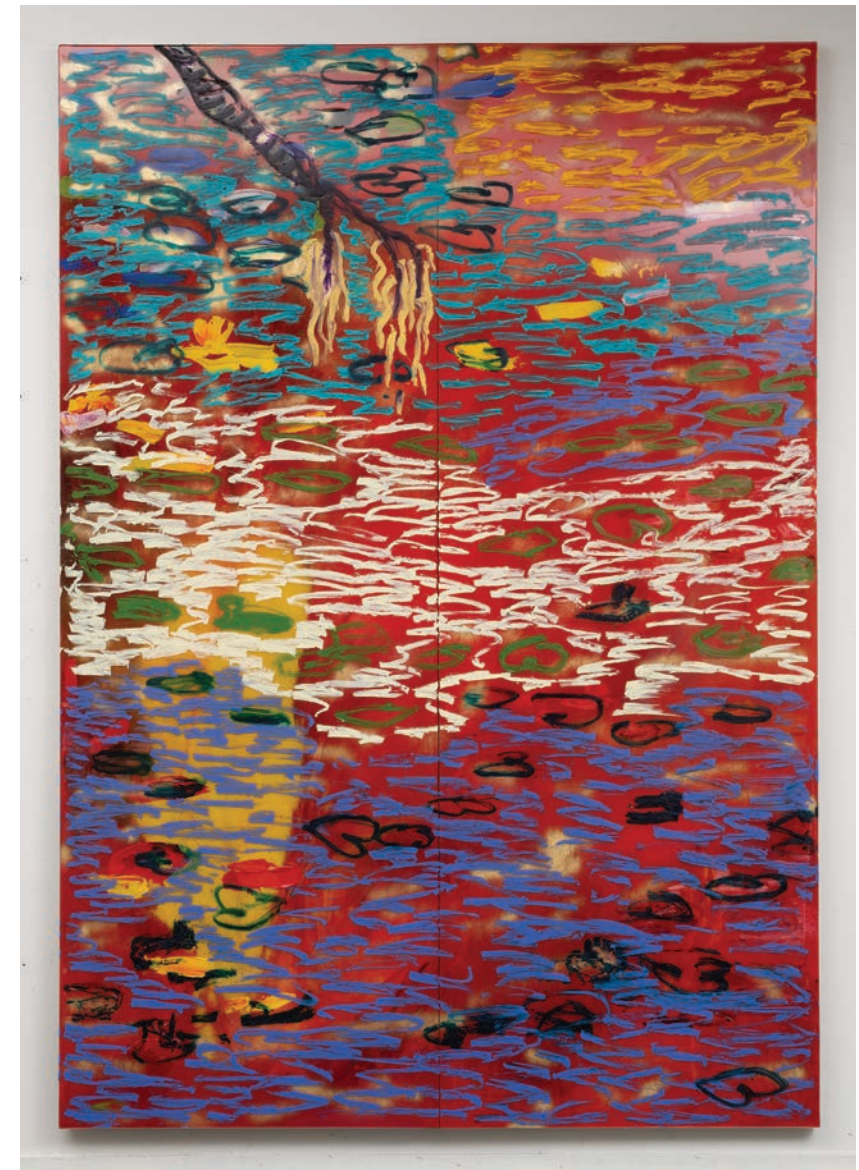
"Turtle Pond"
2020 oil and resin on linen 30 x 40 in



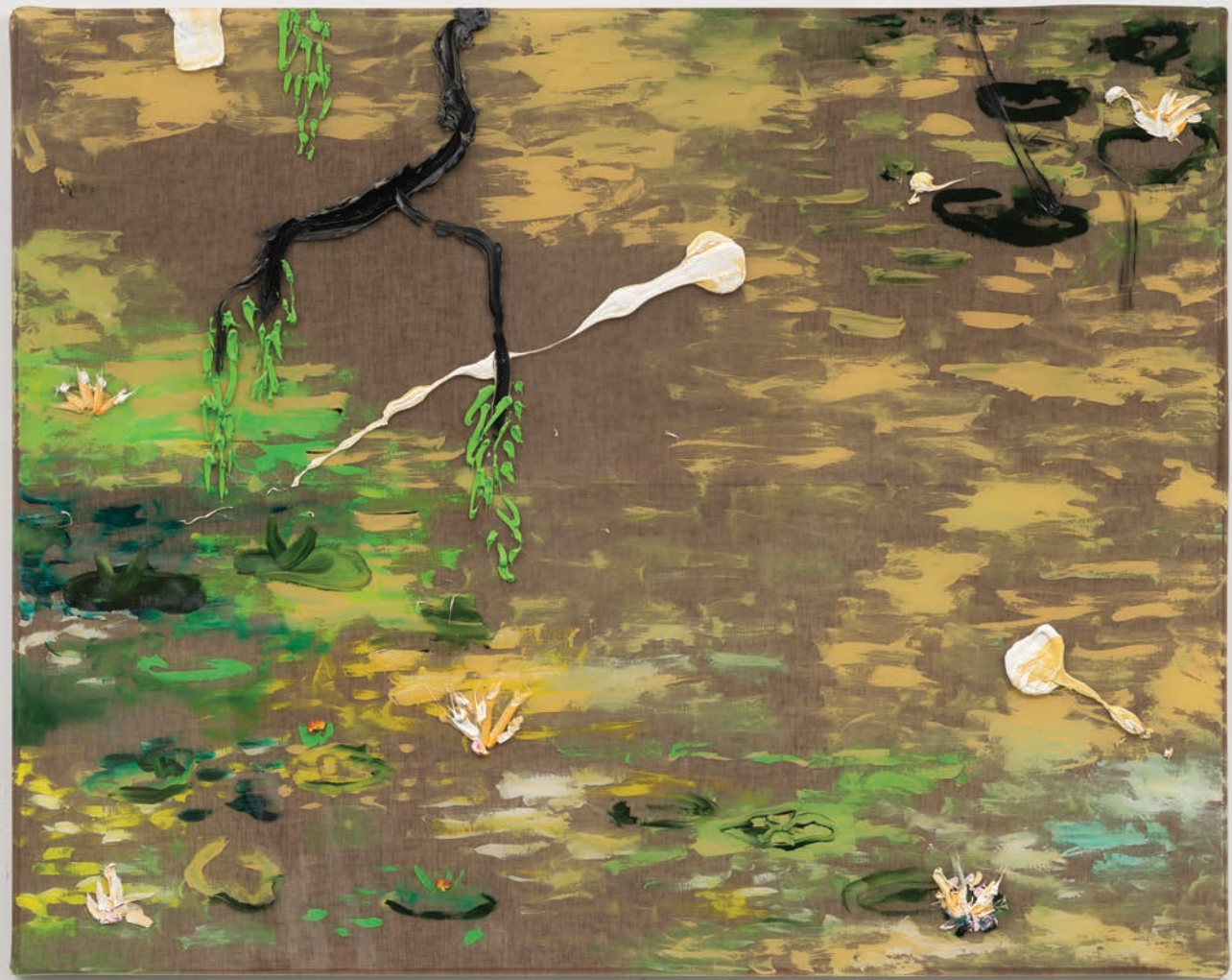
"Two Holes of Water"
2020, oil and resin on linen, 40 x 60 in



“Wind Blown Lilies”
2020, oil, acrylic, and resin on raw linen, 61 x 69 in



“Persian Lilies”
2020, oil, acrylic and resin on linen, 120 x 84 in



"Waterlilies"

2020, oil, acrylic and resin on raw linen, 61 x 77 in



"Woven Lilies (Over and Under)" 2021, oil, acrylic, and resin on linen, 62 x 132 in



"Night Lilies", "White Lilies", "Magenta Lilies", and "Teal Lilies" 2020, oil, acrylic, and resin on linen, 77"x 55"

"Willow Pond" 2020, oil, acrylic, resin on linen, 61 x 96 in



"Yellow Pond"
2021, oil and resin on linen, 61-inch diameter



“Crossing Willows”
2021, oil and resin on raw linen, 38 x 51 in



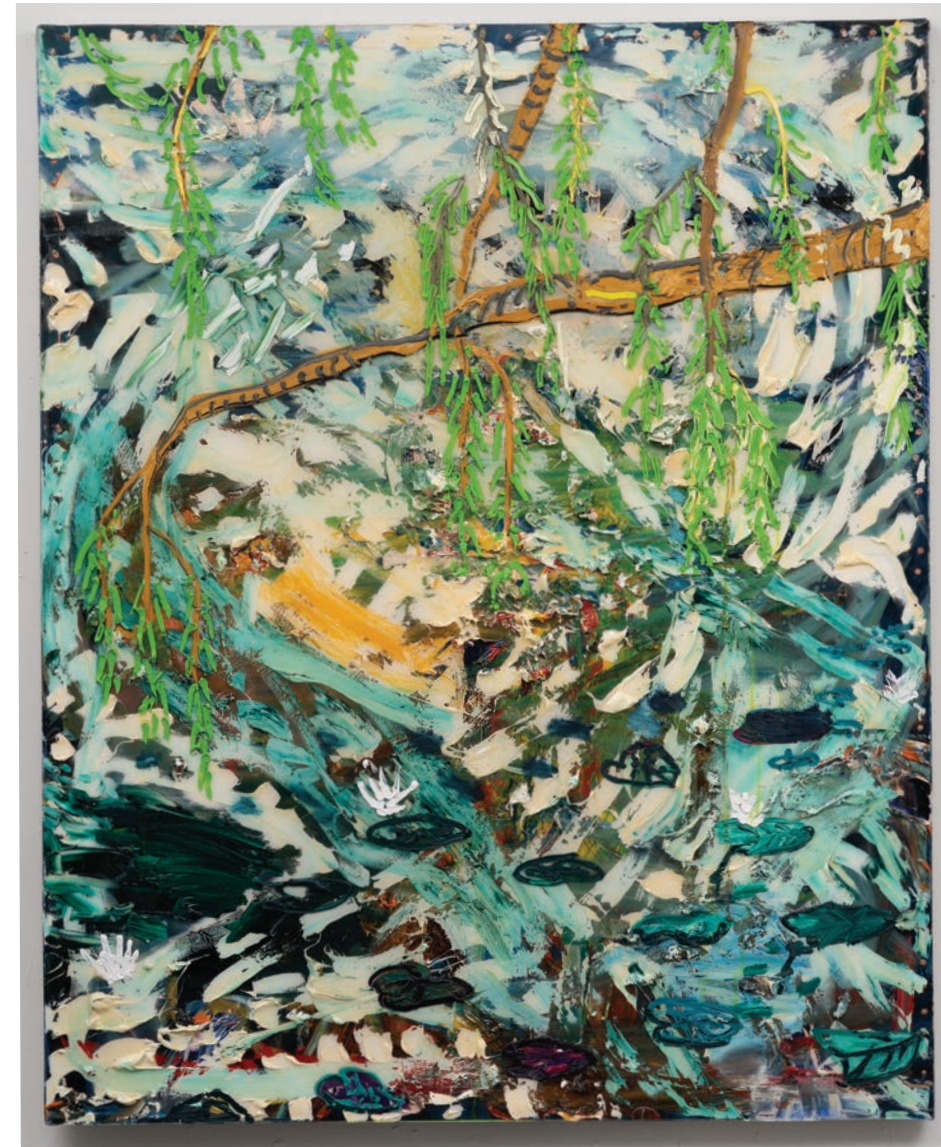
“Blue Mimeo Lilies”
2020, acrylic on canvas, 36 ½ x 31 ½ in



“The Lily”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 42 x 36 in



“Deer Drink”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 12 x 24 in



“Long Pond”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 84 x 68 in



"Crooked Pond"
2020, oil, acrylic and resin on linen, 30 x 40 in



"Garden Pond"
2021, oil and resin on raw linen, 31 ½ x 36 ½ in



"Nymphaea Odorata"
2020, oil and resin on linen, 61-inch diameter



“Bridgehampton Pond”
2021, oil and resin on linen, 20 x 24 in



“Emerald Pond”
2021, oil and resin on linen, 36 x 48 in



"Sunrise Pond"
2021, oil and resin on linen, 20 x 24 in



"Sunset Pond"
2021, oil, acrylic, gold, and resin on linen, 36 x 48 in



"Persian Lilies II"
2021, oil and gold on linen, 36 x 48 in



"Gold Resin Lilies"
2021, oil, acrylic, spray enamel, and resin on linen, 36 x 80 in



“Water Lilies: After Monet (Like Looking At A Bad Black And White Photo In An Old Textbook)”
Version 1-4, 2020/21, oil on linen, 24 x 20 in



“White Willow Lilies”
2021, oil, acrylic and resin on linen, 36 x 48 in



"Little Round Pond"
2021, oil and resin on raw linen, 24-inch diameter



"Mirror Lilies"
2020, oil and resin on linen, 24 x 20 in



“Cement Lilies”
2020, cement on canvas, 39 x 64 in



“Light Shades”
2020, oil, acrylic, and resin on linen, 30 x 40 in



"Wildflower Table Pond"
2021, oil and resin on linen, 36 x 48 in



"Waterlilies Hierarchy: After Monet After Lichtenstein"
2021, oil, acrylic, pastel and resin on framed pastel board, 27 ½ x 35 in



“The Reflecting Pond”
2021, oil, acrylic, and resin on linen, 72 x 48 in



“Roses at Lily Pond”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 40 x 30 in



"Waterlilies Hierarchy: After Monet"
2021, oil and resin on linen, 30 x 40 in



"Fresh Pond"
2020, oil, acrylic and resin on linen, 36 x 48 in



"The Willow"
2020, oil and resin on canvas, 64 x 46 in



"Willow Lily Pond"
2021, oil on linen, 55 x 77 in



"The Vow"
2021, oil on linen, 55 x 77 in



"Prussian Pond"
2021, oil on canvas, 81 x 108 in



“Yellow Tulips on Sag Pond”
2020, oil and resin on linen, 20 x 24 in

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *Waterlilies*, The Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor NY
- 2020 *Darklight*, The Art Center At Duck Creek, Springs NY
- 2020 *RESINance*, The Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, NY
- 2017 *Darius Yektaï*, KEYES ART PROJECTS, NY
- 2015 *Touch Thoughts*, Tripoli Gallery, Southampton NY
- 2014 *Two Weeks in Umbria*, Tripoli Gallery, Southampton, NY
- 2013 *On Country Ground*, Tripoli Gallery, Southampton, NY
- 2009 *All I Know About Love at Thirty-Six, Part 2*, LTMH Gallery, NY
- All I Know About Love at Thirty-Six, Part 1*, Salomon Contemporary, NY
- 2006 Salomon Contemporary, East Hampton, NY
- 2003 *Darius Yektaï: Survey 2000 - 2003*, Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
- White Grass*, Sara Nightingale Gallery, Water Mill, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITS

- 2020 *Drive-By-Art*, New York organized by Warren Neidich
- 2019 *Thick And Wet*, The Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, NY
- 2017 *Yektaï*, Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
- 2015 *Selfies and Portraits of the East End*, Guild Hall Museum, Easthampton, NY
- 2012 *Thanksgiving Collective 2012*, Tripoli Gallery, Southampton, NY
- Watercolors*, Phillips de Pury & Co., New York, NY, October 1 - 19, 2012
- 2010 *Thanksgiving Collective 2010*, Tripoli Gallery, Southampton, NY
- Tehran-New York*, LTMH Gallery, NY
- 2009 *Recent Acquisitions*, Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
- Before We Let Go...*, Tripoli Gallery, Southampton, NY
- In Stitches*, LTMH Gallery, NY, curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody
- Iran Inside Out*, The Chelsea Art Museum, NY, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath
- Selseleh Zelzeleh: movers and shakers in contemporary Iranian art*, LTMH Gallery, NY, curated by Leila Heller and Dr. Layla S. Diba
- 2008—1997 Contact Grenning Gallery for more information

RECENT PRESS

- May 2020 The New York Times - *A Drive-By Art Show Turns Lawns and Garages Into Galleries*
- May 2020 Hamptons Magazine - *Darius Yektaï - Taking Up Space*

AWARDS Guild Hall Museum's annual members show:
2010 Best Representational Work - Benjamin Genocchio
2008 Best Sculpture - Linda Jablonsky
2002 Best in Show - Amei Wallach

EDUCATION

1998—1999 Studio Art, San Diego State University
1994—1996 BA Art History, American University in Paris
1991—1994 Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA





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