

# CAESURA MAGAZINE

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### “WITH EYES LIKE RIPENING FRUIT”: MANOUCHER YEKTAI AT KARMA

by Patrick Zapien



Manoucher Yektai, Untitled, oil on canvas, 23 × 27¼ in, 1958

*Kill yourself right here / There is no possibility  
that tomorrow /  
From under snow in the middle of the desert / A  
flower of love  
could blossom for you / However    If you get  
the right tools /  
From a piece of felt / A beloved narcissus can  
be grown*

— Manoucher Yektai, “Between Us” (1956)

It’s not true that the world is ending — if anything, it already has. And yet life continues, alive in its death. These thoughts — speculations — give a perfunctory account of the work of the late painter and poet Manoucher Yektai, a member of the New York School whose first solo show in the city since 1984 opened at Karma two weeks ago. The paintings on view span his entire career, from intimate panels made in the 50s and 60s to larger, more torrid works and, finally, still-life-landscapes from the 80s to early 00s where the heavy impasto technique developed earlier becomes almost relief-like, more sculptural mass than painterly mark.

It’s the first of these groups that are strongest, particularly his work from the 60s. The canvases are arranged chronologically, with Yektai gradually departing from the realm of pure abstraction, “[f]rom under snow in the . . . desert,” and finding new life in an old and familiar tradition: the floral still life, descendant of Dutch Golden Age painting. The dialectic of life and death, which characterized this genre of painting as both a species of memento mori or vanitas and as a means of glorifying God’s creation, must have appeared to Yektai as an appropriate metaphor for painting itself, revealing something about the inextricability of its power and futility,

its simultaneous impossibility and continued necessity. If, as Barnett Newman once put it, a whole generation of painters “woke up to find [themselves] without hope — to find that painting [. . .] was dead,” [1] then this begged the question of its potential rebirth: its resurrection, its life after death. For Newman this was an occasion for forgetting everything that painting ever was, and thus proceeding as if from the beginning, but for Yektai, who recognized that the claims of the past cannot be settled so cheaply, it meant remembering what painting once had tried to be: a register for the quietest approach of redemption.

Flower (1962) presents a black void at its center, brushed in like a miniscule Kline, acting as a surface pitched up towards the viewer. On top, a single pink flower, its petals twisted and mangled in thick globs of paint, seemingly crushed by the force with which it’s been thrown or fallen from beyond the frame of our view. Is this a table, the ground, or something else? Maybe just the canvas itself. The image is fragile and devastating. It speaks of a loss, but one grown obscure and estranged, whose object is fading in memory even as a feeling of melancholy persists unabated. “Philosophy,” Adorno writes, “which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.” [2] The same is true of art; it reminds us of what we still have yet to accomplish: “A flower of love could blossom for you” . . . “for here there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life.” [3]

#### NOTES

[1] Barnett Newman in “Jackson Pollock: An Artists’ Symposium, Part 1,” *Art News*, (April 1967), p. 29.

[2] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 3.

[3] Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo”, in *Ahead of All Parting: Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, (New York: Modern Library, 1995).