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3 ART GALLERY SHOWS TO SEE RIGHT NOW: MANOUCHER YEKTAI

by Will Heinrich



Manoucher Yektai's "Still Life With Cantaloupe," from 1976, at Karma gallery.
Credit Manoucher Yektai Estate and Karma

The Tehran-born painter Manoucher Yektai came to New York in 1945 and had his first solo show at Grace Borgenicht Gallery in the early 1950s. With the exception of a couple of extended stays in Paris, he stayed here, painting, until his death at age 97 in 2019. A large survey of his oils at Karma, in the East Village, includes canvases from just after that first solo show till 2002, and all the way through, you can watch him wrestle with the still life. Taking elements from Abstract Expressionism without ever quite letting representation go, he simplifies, exaggerates and twists fruit and flowers almost to the breaking point. One untitled piece from circa 1961 struck me first as a cartoon fairy snowball fight, with multicolored circles and force lines zigzagging in all directions.

He also lays on paint so thick that it casts shadows, further upsetting your sense of scale. In his 1976 "Still Life With Cantaloupe," a white vase outlined in blue sits on a bloody pink table, against a tan curtain, holding up a cluster of broad green strokes. In a bowl nearby are a dozen fruits as brightly and distinctly colored as Crayola crayons. Impasto this extreme usually comes with a kind of sensuality, but in this case, the overall effect is distinctly dry. Yektai left sections of blank canvas to either side of his figure, and even the paint itself, unvarnished and scraped energetically across the surface, feels strangely ascetic.