

# HYPERALLERGIC

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### THE IRANIAN POET WHO BECAME AN AMERICAN ACTION PAINTER

by Tim Keane



Manoucher Yektai, "Tomato Plant" (1959), collection SFMOMA, gift of Louis Honig (© Manoucher Yektai, photo by Katherine Du Tiel)

A new book introduces two Manoucher Yektai's: the stateless, anti-historical Modernist painter and the poet writing narrative verse exclusively in Farsi.

How did the Iranian-born artist Manoucher Yektai — a narrative poet and still-life painter who died in 2019 at the age of 98 — end up lumped in with American Abstract Expressionism and its subspecies, famously termed "action painting"?

Answers to this question emerge in the biographical and critical essays in *Manoucher Yektai* (Karma Publications, 2022). Its contributors wrestle awkwardly with these counterproductive art historical labels while setting the record straight about the Iranian-American poet and painter who won critical acclaim among New York's avant-garde of the 1950s — Harold Rosenberg was a fan, as was Mark Rothko — before Yektai slid out of favor, even as he continued to write poetry and paint well into this century.

Featuring hundreds of color reproductions of Yektai's work (he trafficked almost entirely in oil paint on canvas) along with personal photographs from a long life, Karma's catalogue reveals a painter with a signature style refined across 70 years of disciplined output. Its hallmarks are deeply saturated colors, hyperactive impasto (often applied with a trowel and even a whip), and an all-over picture plane — he routinely painted standing over canvases placed on the floor, producing the illusion of aerial perspectives on the imagery. He applied these strategies to an early phase of pure abstraction and then to buoyant semi-abstract still lifes, developing that repertoire further to include portraiture, interiors, and landscapes.

Occasioned by last fall's terrific retrospective on Yektai at Karma Gallery — along with a representative artwork, "Tomato Plant" (1959), on display throughout this year at SFMOMA — this new catalogue adds further fuel to the artist's posthumous revival. "Tomato Plant" exemplifies how Yektai honed a deceptively naïve technique that yields an aesthetic with a doubling effect: his paintings convey manic immediacy and expressive nuance at once.

As is the case with Yektai's explicitly representational paintings, the viewer can read "Tomato Plant" as a visual poem communicated through self-contained calligraphic and multi-toned greens, blues, and whites. At the same time, its horizontal and vertical brushwork maps vegetal textures and unruly growth — sunlight, stalks, leaves, and fruit dramatized in spontaneous ecological interaction.

How did Yektai arrive at this reconciliation between realism and abstraction? According to the catalogue's biographical narratives, he was born in 1921 to an upper-middle-class land-owning family in Tehran and, in the early 1940s, studied art at the city's Western-influenced Fine Arts Academy, supplementing that training with Cubist Amédée Ozenfant at Paris's École des Beaux-Arts. In 1945, he and his first wife, painter Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, landed in New York via California — decades before subsequent waves of Iranian immigration to the US. And though Yektai returned to France for short periods of study, his roots in New York grew deeper through classes at the Art Students League and showing at Grace Borgenicht Gallery and Poindexter Gallery (helped by introductions made by his Woodstock-based mentor, Milton Avery).

As a painter who wrote poetry in his native Farsi, he appears in the catalogue as both within and apart from New York's postwar cultural milieu. In fact, although his hard-driving, dense applications of paint reflect the uninhibited theatricality of American gestural abstraction, his art integrates so many cross-cultural influences that it defies such critical categorization. By his own acknowledgment, his vibrant palette owes much to the long tradition of miniature painting — especially the Timurid-era Persian artist Kamal al-Din Behzad — but Yektai's lyrical heat seems inspired by the French Fauvists and Pierre Bonnard's feverish chromatic interior scenes.

So while Yektai enjoyed attention from the New York scene, he was, we learn, aloof to the point of "arrogance," and impervious to their compulsive demand for newness. Like many of his contemporaries, he fell out of favor as Pop and Minimalism dominated in the mid-to-late 1960s. His adaptable, ever-changing New York peer Larry Rivers once asked the taciturn Yektai if he'd ever break from still life and paint, say, an airplane. Echoing Cézanne's boast that he would "astonish Paris with an apple," Yektai retorted, "I want to paint an apple until it flies!" as if to underscore how Modern still life aims to capture the interplay between the seeing subject and the precipitously seen object within the instant of its apprehension.

But such an ingrained aspiration is ill-suited to a marketplace easily swayed by flash and fads. Declaring “styles are meaningless,” Yektai — sustained in no small measure by a second marriage to the daughter of a Greek shipping magnate — resettled on Long Island’s East End, where he carried on working in relative obscurity for half a century. In fact, prior to Karma’s 2021 show, his work hadn’t appeared in a one-person Manhattan show in four decades.

Still, his story is local and global. The fact that Yektai remains well known in his native Iran as a published poet as well as a painter adds a compelling plot twist to the book. Unable to focus on poetry and painting at once, he took months and years off from one vocation to attend to the other. According to the book’s contributors, that creative bifurcation in a sense produces two Yektai’s: the stateless, anti-historical Modernist painter and the poet writing narrative verse exclusively in Farsi, attentive to Iran’s social and political traditions and undercurrents.

Though a few of his poems have been translated into English, his opus, the book-length *Falgoosh* (originally published in Iran in 1970), was a decade-long project that earned significant readership in his native country. Taking its title from a Farsi name for a ritual of seeking personal omens from listening in on strangers, the poem is described as being built on “idiomatic Persian and medieval poetic syntax.” Its narrative turns urban eavesdropping into an occasion for befuddled Iranian men to glean their futures — mostly in vain and in turns of “absurdist humor” — within an Iran pulled in conflicting directions by modernity.

While Iran’s Islamic Revolution shook the world, Yektai remained firmly rooted in the United States. And though the catalogue includes his 1961 commissioned portrait of the Shah, he never returned to Iran aside from brief one-off visits in the pre-Revolution era. As a result, establishing meaningful thematic or semantic links between his poetry and painting will require the critical labor of an unlikely scholar fluent in Farsi, educated in Persian poetic forms, and knowledgeable about Euro-American Modernism.

For now, it’s worth turning Yektai’s oeuvre away from the hair-splitting rhetoric of cultural histories. Instead we might understand the artist’s paintings as a nonverbal, universal form of poetry. The paintings are composed through a formalist, syntactic structure; each cultivates intimate disclosure about their objects and persons, as happens in lyric verse. Their extreme angularities and jump-cut perpendiculars find counterpoint in curved contours, culled from natural settings, and in domestic objects — fruits and cakes, curtains and coffee pots, windows and roses. Negative spaces invite reflective pauses amid the otherwise compacted imagery. Like a poem’s spontaneous yet precise language, Yektai’s action paintings draw voluminous meanings from impossible stillness.