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MAN OF ACTION

by Elroy Rosenberg

Manoucher Yektai, *Untitled*, 1957, Oil on canvas © The Estate of Manoucher Yektai. Photo courtesy the estate and Karma.

Among the instruments Manoucher Yektai used to accomplish his paintings are brushes, spatulas, blocks of wood, trowels, scalpels, and whips. When an image came to him and demanded its fullest expression, any old tool would do. The landscapes now on display at Karma burst with the energy of a man at the mercy of his evanescent inspiration. In his 1958 *Pennsylvania Landscape*, long, diagonal strokes of rose-pink paint careen upwards across the canvas, culminating in hard, blood-red clusters that demarcate the top third of the picture. Beneath, murky swaths of green and yellow seem to shapeshift. Trees? Hills? Old stone? Somehow, a structure comes miraculously into appearance, rough-hewn but legible. One imagines the kind of impassioned state in which this canvas was forged.

When, in his essay "The American Action Painters," Harold Rosenberg described the "encounter" at the heart of the new style—the artist, "material in his hand," wanting "to do something to that other piece of material in front of him"—something like *Pennsylvania Landscape* might be what he had in mind. Yektai, who befriended Rosenberg, is today considered a New York School artist because he lived and painted in New York in the Fifties, because he played poker with Jackson Pollock, and because his work lends itself to having words like "gesturality" and "object-ness" ladled over the top of it. Who doesn't love a forgotten talent, and a misunderstood one, too? Nobody, it seems, ever really knew what to make of him. Was he in thrall to his Persian heritage, or did his seventy-year residence in America quell those influences? Did his tendency towards figuration disqualify him from Abstract Expressionism, or did it stretch the boundaries of the movement?

Judging from the landscapes, we can at least say that Yektai embodied something of the modernist spirit. The great art historian E. H. Gombrich believed modernism separated itself from its antecedents by its paramount desire, simply put, "to create things." You'd be forgiven for thinking this a little reductive, but if the modernist

catchcry to “make it new” were taken literally, it would become, at its core, an obligation to fashion an object that did not exist before. The modernists’ emphasis on creation is germane to understanding Yektai. For one, the paintings feature details—sagging portions of canvas, hard clumps of paint, untreated edges—that draw attention to their manufacture. In addition, these landscapes, mostly left untitled, have a certain oneiric quality. They are lost moments reanimated. They seem not to depict a real Vermont, Italy, or Pennsylvania, but rather geographic mirages recollected as in a dream, with all the details blurred but the essence more vivid than real life.

Yektai operated in a language known to filmmakers and lyrical poets: he made dream visions real. Ingrained in his canvas is something of the teenage years he spent scribbling wistful poems in Farsi before he took a chance on Tehran’s newly founded Faculty of Fine Arts and enrolled there in 1940. (His poetic yearnings never left him: for most of his career he alternated between poetry and painting, and of the several literary works he later published, the epic poem Falgoosh continues to garner particular renown in his native Iran.)

His large-scale *Landscape of Italy* (1959) demonstrates how Yektai’s poetic affinity came to the fore not in the emotional content of his paintings, as they do in a Van Gogh or a Francis Bacon, but in what we might call their sonority. Set within a fairly conventional structure—upper third sky, bottom two-thirds land—the scene pulsates with rhythm, the meter occasionally breaking as details, such as stems, petals, sky, grass, and trees, reveal themselves one by one like new verses. The flowers, stridently vertical, appear to be growing before our eyes. They ascend upwards in a kind of crescendo until, like the final couplet of a stanza, they meet the sky and turn into great clusters of warm paint protruding from the canvas. Yektai’s contrapposto of strong, bright primary colors produces a radiant harmony that sings the scene into life.

Would it be appropriate to cite here the possible influence of Persian prosody, or would that “orientalize” our subject? It depends on whom, and when, you ask. For the early reviewers, Yektai’s Persianness was everything; for the current cataloguers it’s everything too, though in a freshly orthodox way. Yektai, whenever pinned on the topic, was largely uninterested. That he took from sources near and far seemed to him, with some justification, an entirely conventional phenomenon for an immigrant artist. Yektai gleaned his approach to foregrounding and backgrounding from Cézanne and deployed at times a liberated, almost Fauvist approach to color, but he also considered himself “an inheritor of the legacy of [Persian] miniature painting.” The Persian calligraphic tradition was often invoked in reviews of Yektai’s work, despite the fact that his lines and colors bear almost no trace of the hard edges and schematic precision of Farsi script. Then again, his four principal characters in *Falgoosh* are identified only by where they’re from.

In short, Yektai cut an elusive figure. The exhibition’s press release states that Yektai worked “both improvisationally and from memory,” as if there were some meaningful difference between the two. What’s certain is that he never drew on his canvas and never attempted to sublimate his method to the demands of figuration. It was all action, gesture, push and pull. The landscapes are plenty rich evidence for the enigmatic approach to representation that Yektai trafficked in. Often they feel most related not to Kamal al-Din or Henri Matisse but to relief sculpture, the painterly illusion of three dimensions giving way to a bona fide volume, elements

receding and projecting in constant motion. His early landscapes usually feature an anchor point around which everything revolves and onto which the viewer gratefully latches himself. An untitled piece from 1957 depicts a small house on the waterfront, hills and trees rolling upward around it until they reach a luminous sky dappled with pink, all appearing to project diagonally outwards from the building. If this is a dream, we're invited into it.

His later works are considerably less animated, executed mostly in pale colors and shades of white. Sometimes he barely covers half the canvas with paint. If an artist over time becomes surer of his method and his mission, equally can his resolve of approach turn to rigidity. Yektai's late works are closed off and inflexible, and the gallery's decision to locate them in a skylit room exacerbates their pallor and stringency. Any vestige of an anchor point finds itself sacrificed at the altar of stylistic purity, a tendency that Rosenberg, the theorist of the action painters, had warned against.

Perhaps the older painter lost the alacrity and exuberance of his youth; perhaps he wanted to avoid becoming mannered and programmatic. But if Yektai regarded himself as "a new painter—a painter of the time" with any sincerity, then we must inevitably shuffle back to those early works, executed at the burgeoning of a great period in American painting. Somewhere in that time, an obscure Persian man produced several of its great achievements. Yektai's landscapes owe their success to a movement that dictated, in Harold Rosenberg's words, that nothing "get in the way of the act of painting." The best of Manoucher Yektai beseeches the viewer to witness the action, the ravishing color and exuberant movement, the abstract and the expressionistic—all harnessed in numinous reverence for the act of creation