

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2, 2024

MANOUCHER YEKTAI

by Megan Kincaid



Manoucher Yektai, *Landscape of Italy*, 1959, oil on canvas, 75 × 68 .

Manoucher Yektai (1921–2019) was one of those roving twentieth-century figures whose biography unsettles the linear narrativization of modernist abstraction. His story is striated by looping migration and fragmentary accumulations of influence—attributes crystallized within his landscape paintings that scramble the genre’s conventions. To be sure, coherent representations of the natural world were among the twenty-two works on view in the late artist’s exhibition here. Yet, in examples from the late 1950s onward, emancipated gesture, collapsed spatial registers, and unsteady perceptual lapses mirrored Yektai’s own discontinuous, transcontinental movement. In his handling, the physical world surrenders its orderly sprawl to dysphoric space.

Contrasting expressions of containment and boundlessness intimate a belief in landscape’s non-neutrality. Formally, nature is a point of departure, perhaps even a pretense, for Yektai’s emotive outpourings—this was most evident in *Untitled*, 1960, which commanded the back wall of the gallery’s first room. Violent campaigns of Cimmerian pigment course from three corners; the centripetal forces threaten to engulf what appears to be the beginnings of a cheerfully rendered grassy knoll. Historicizing this work encourages comparisons with American action painting, such as Jackson Pollock’s all-over drips, which similarly choreograph suspended kinetic energy. Yektai’s sustained reference to landscape, however, negotiates a singular reinterpretation of this discourse. In *Landscape of Italy*, 1959, a blockade of vertical lines thwarted the viewer’s ability to envision traveling through the green terrain. Diaphanous lattices overlie pleasant pastoral scenes, signaling psychic or systemic forces that infringe upon mobility.

It's enticing to read the artist's biography alongside the formal splintering of his abstracted landscapes, to picture the disjointed journeys that marked his early life. Born in Tehran, Yektai received training that prioritized foreign models. At the Faculty of Fine Arts (later absorbed by Tehran University), his instructor, one Madame Aminfar, was an expatriate who taught the history of French painting. From the start, his interpretation of international aesthetics was shaped by the dynamics of cultural difference, imperialist allures, and stylistic translation. To plot himself along this adopted genealogy, Yektai and his soon-to-be-wife, artist Monir Shahroudy, attempted to relocate to Paris during World War II. Circumnavigating the Continent, they went first to India and from there sought refuge on a United States transport ship that shuttled two thousand Japanese prisoners of war to camps in Australia; they then continued across the Pacific Ocean to Los Angeles. A cross-continental train brought the couple to New York, and from there they traveled in 1946 to Paris, where Yektai studied at the École des Beaux-Arts and the atelier of André Lhote (notably a proponent of a classicizing strain of Cubism that embraced figuration). Later, Yektai doubled back to Manhattan, where he established himself among the city's leading Abstract Expressionists.

The artist's web of contact and dispersal served as a guide for a revised set of questions via which we approach these works. To periodize responses to a particular geography or indebtedness to artistic schools fails to account for Yektai's complex negotiation of placemaking. While his titles denote precise locations, the corresponding compositions mystify these references through faceted surfaces, conflated iconography, and impossible colors. For instance, it has been noted that the four exhibited works from his series "95th Street Landscape," 1958, redeploy the palette he honed while painting the Italian coastline the previous year. There's nothing of Manhattan's gridded and densely packed infrastructure to be discovered in the monumental tableaux dedicated to the view outside Yektai's apartment. Yet rhythmic strokes and blooming forms suggest the city's contagious, clamorous energy. Nearby, *Untitled*, 1976, extends other compound allusions. Here, a hillside doubles as an odalisque. His quote of a colonialist emblem of difference in a painting that encodes the liberatory syntax of Abstract Expressionism (and the broken brushstrokes of the Impressionists Yektai emulated during his student days) speaks to the rootlessness of his "landscapes," which document an irresolute, and potentially conflicting, multiplicity of origins.