MANOUCHER YEKTAI BEGINNINGS

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Yektai's NØ

Manoucher Yektai, *Untitled* (detail), 1962

Yektai, *Ilse with White Spoon* (detail), 1959

The portrait figure is no longer a symbolic statement . . . but rather a declaration of frustrated love-hate.

—Robert Pincus-Witten, "Yektai and Boldini: Formal and Symbolic Interchange," 1961

On an impossibly muggy summer day in New York City, I went down to Karma's storage space in Brooklyn, where the team had set out a lavish bouquet of paintings by Manoucher Yektai. For about an hour, I soaked up his brushstrokes like so much cool water—his troweled-on layups of color, his immoderate fruits and flowers, lemons and pomegranates, twisted vines, thick impasto grids, and beautiful women in armchairs.

As a painter, Yektai's twin impulses were equally abundance and thrift, evident in areas of delirious thickness and zones of stark restraint. The first thing I noticed was how this play between fullness and emptiness makes the space go from flat to round to flat again, as though gravity were not a mandatory thing. You can feel the pendulous weight of an orb of color, heavy like a melon, and yet somehow the object does not fall, but sits nestled by an ironed-out sheet of weightless color hanging next to it. It reminded me that Barnett Newman once called Cézanne's apples "cannonballs."

After about an hour of steeping in these painterly situations, I noticed this one odd thing: a funny diagonal red brushstroke that just didn't make sense in a 1959 painting called *Ilse with White Spoon*. It's a portrait of a seated lady, the painter Ilse Getz, wearing red lipstick, with one trailed-off end of a brushstroke emerging from her mouth, but not ending there; instead its crimson mark is dragged out sideways and downward into the rest of the painting until the color peters out. This little red line puzzled me, bugged me. It was a kind of diagonal arrow that pointed away from the figure and into the heart of the painting's impasto density. It seemed

so out of place, this snail's slimy trail. Why hadn't Yektai corrected it, wiped it away? It struck me as sort of vulgar, crazy, or even violent. But once I noticed it, I realized that there was in fact a diagonal *in every painting* in the room, and I went around in a kind of frenzy, taking snapshots of all the diagonal swipes and patches I found inside each one. This discovery was like getting the master key to the castle. The presence of a diagonal tugged against each work's otherwise stable rectilinearity, tilting each slightly out of balance, toward the verge of toppling over but never actually doing so. There was a fight going on, subtly, inside each work.

I remembered that earlier, I'd been struck by the motif of a diamond shape in another group of paintings by Yektai. I'd seen them in Bridgehampton, at his son Darius's studio—six still lifes in which the objects depicted were organized on a ground of diagonal chunks of shape, as though Yektai's initial instinct was to determine this kind of *ur*-form, a diamond, and place it in the painting first, like a tablecloth, before a still life could be populated with anything else. Now it struck me that the underlying diagonals in those paintings worked in the same way as crosshatching: they thicken a place, almost like building a nest. Once I saw these angular nests, I realized that to draw them, a painter—especially one using such rapid gestures as Yektai—has to make a diagonal gesture, top to bottom, that functions like a slash, a fast downward stroke, like crossing something out, or making a counter-stroke, or counter-construction, a terse sign of aggression or negation, like the slash of a swordsman, or the slash on an *O* that makes it into an Ø—in other words an OH made into a NO, or a ZERO. OH, NØ. A negation. This was Yektai's no, his refusal.

Every painting I'd seen by him contained not only this diagonal, but this edge, an intrusive gesture, a slash, a swipe, a YES but also a NO. Inside the bounty

Manoucher Yektai, *Untitled*, 1969

Yektai, *Portrait of Isa*, 1963

and pleasure and delicious abundance of his arrangements, his poignant women's faces, his tabletops and horizons so elegantly summoned and balanced, was this sign of negation, of inner struggle, of going against the grain; a descent, a curt exclamation, a slant that undoes, and yet a slant that declares something to be true. Sometimes Yektai uses slash marks to define something more clearly, to make it real: witness the strong diagonal swipe that indicates the leg of the sitter in *Portrait of Isa* (1963), like a stick that juts out diagonally, as though propping the figure up from the lower-left corner of the painting. Isa is rendered as both an elegantly seated woman, her legs crossed, gazing out at the viewer, and equally as a heap of diagonals, like a stick figure made of contrasting tones of dark and light. What's more, rhyming with the angle of her leg is another diagonal impulse in the painting's construction, a line of writing in Farsi scrawled onto the bare canvas, also swiped through diagonally with a brush or rag, and then a thick pink brushstroke above that, almost like an eyebrow raised at the whole thing.

Here I'd been looking at these fertile compositions of fruit, flower, figure, daub, stroke, slab, tabletop, yard, horizon, all in this color racket, and thinking that these things were meant to be luxurious, lyrical, built with the heft of old-fashioned painterliness, their juiciness made possible by oil paint's materiality.

And it's true, that's part of the work: the thrill of surface, of three dimensions rendered as two, and 2D opening back into 3D, with the sensation of weight and tactility that a painting may show you, the feeling of that push in your hand, the roundness of a lemon, how it may hang in space, how a painting of the slope of a table with fruit on it may summon both gravity and weightlessness, things dangling in spaces so perfectly still, balanced neatly on sharply uptilted planes. All of this made me appreciate how a painter like Yektai, who had deeply absorbed French painting of the first half of the twentieth century, may be able to render with heart-wrenching clarity the situation of a table set with vases of daffodils in the bright sun without ever depicting a ray of sunshine or any light source at all; how he may portray vases, or the cheeks of women, or the things in a room, as though you could hold these things with your hands, sense their weights and dimensions, yet distilled into a paradoxical state of both being there and not being there at all.

Which is to say negation is as much a part of Yektai's methodology as is his sensuous buildup. This sense of taking something away, of saying NO, reminded me that Yektai had indeed refused to stay in Iran, and had gone to New York City, and then to Paris, but had refused to remain in Paris, and had labored to get back to New York, and how later, after a certain period of success and then a period of disappointment with the art world, he had refused to participate in that world, though he never stopped painting. He painted every day for decades, obsessively, even, and it seems that in the act of refusing, he had only intensified his daily practice.

From here, I thought about how Yektai also refused to stop painting in the exact manner he had wanted, a combination of the old-fashioned School of Paris and its poised kind of placement, with the newer-fangled way of the New York School, something he developed alongside artists like de Kooning and Pollock and Krasner—a rougher, faster tradition from later in the twentieth century that Yektai also dearly loved, and that he partly adopted.

This was the struggle between addition and subtraction, the frustration and difficulty of *process*, and the antagonism a painter feels within her-or-himself while trying to render the feeling of the world, heaping paint on and then stripping it back down—a process that Yektai hung on to for dear life.

Manoucher Yektai, 1959