

Painter Liat Yossifor (b. 1974, Tel Aviv) has forged a singular trajectory in contemporary painting over the past two decades. Through a process of layering, accretion, and removal of paint, she explores the limits of visibility. Collapsing the purported duality of abstraction and figuration in painting, she embraces its nuanced, multifaceted, and often conflicting nature. In her practice, Yossifor mines the disparities and discrepancies that are part and parcel of contradiction and paradox, skirting convention and eschewing trends.



*the gray feather a thrush lost (I, II, III)*, 82 by 218 inches, oil on linen, 2022.

Her most recent body of work features a striking triptych, composed of three primarily gray canvases, two slightly more vertical formats flanking a nearly square central piece. Titled *the gray feather a thrush lost*, this imposing ensemble—measuring 82 by 218 inches, roughly 6 by 18 feet—communes with a series of much smaller format works on paper—all 12 by 9 inches, about the size of a writing sheet—in a similarly gray palette with the exception of two black paintings that punctuate the sequence. The sheer physicality of the works, alternating between monumentality and intimacy, thus sets the tempo for the viewing experience. Up close, the sensuous swirling lines, the immediacy of spontaneous gesture, and the oozing voluptuousness of oil paint delight the eye and incite the hand to graze the textured surface. The lavish entanglement of lines begins to cohere as the viewer backs up to contemplate the tripartite whole. This step-by-step distancing brings the figure in movement into focus incrementally, like the frames of a stop motion animated sequence. With the small format pieces, the progression from painterly abstraction to motif occurs inversely—the image coalesces in proximity. Roving from one piece to another, the eye adjusts from far-sightedness to myopia and vice versa.

Although Yossifor’s standard technique of inscribing line into thickly layered paint has remained constant from her earliest works—a series of twenty-seven portraits of female soldiers in uniform—gradual shifts in this overall approach have yielded an array of chromatic, gestural, and textural possibilities that destabilize the figure/ground equation. Within these variations, there appears to be a sort of progression from the more figurative portraits, executed from 2005 to 2006, to the free-flowing sinuous lines of the virtually abstract canvases starting in the mid-2010s, and then in the past two years, a circling back to the mounting presence of lines that can be more readily associated with motifs or figures.



*Portraits (Nizan)*, 14 by 14 inches, oil on panel, 2005.  
Hammer Museum collection, Los Angeles, CA.

In the portraits depicting uniformed female Israeli soldiers, such as *Nizan* (2005), meticulously cross-hatched lines etched into a vertically striated monochromatic field of paint on board—in hues ranging from white and pink to red and black—produce spectral-like apparitions that shift between visibility and invisibility, depending on the ambient lighting and the position of the viewer. The progressive transition from figuration to abstraction, plays out in works such as *Dusk* (2006) and *Tear Drop* (2007), where amorphous black mounds of scored paint occupy a foreboding landscape, a kind of “mutilated world” wrought by destruction and death. While Yossifor scours the internet as well as exhibition catalogues for source materials, often related to the history of painting, these dramatic scenes draw their inspiration from photographic images of postwar commemorative monuments. As an American who was born and raised in Israel, it was at this juncture, with the perspective that distance often provides, that she gained greater awareness of the significance of place, especially at a time of war afar. Harking back to a long lineage of imagery dealing with humanity’s heart of darkness, the silent somber visions of a post-apocalyptic landscape allude to the monstrosity of violence obscured behind displays of blind patriotism and triumphant nationalism. These themes persistently haunt subsequent works, such as *Double-Headed* (2010), a

diminutive ghostly portrait of a male soldier merging frontal and profile views, and *Soldier* (2010), a tiny gray painting, which manifests the looser handling of paint and wider brushstrokes that come to characterize the artist's mature style.



*Double-Headed*, 10 by 8 inches, oil on linen, 2010.  
Private collection, Frankfurt, Germany.

Large format canvases, occasionally in counterpoint with smaller works, predominate from 2011 on. The painterly gestures of the body in movement replace vaguely discernible figures. Wielding brush handles, spatulas, palette knives and random implements, Yossif slathers, slices, scores, and digs into the luscious ground of wet pictorial matter—a performative process in which the artist expends considerable physical and psychic energy for as long as the oil paint remains malleable. Sometimes the canvases are scraped, then reused, accumulating the residue from the previous layerings. The unctuous surface registers the bodily presence like a skin absorbing the unabated stream of phenomena in the world, while simultaneously capturing the memories, emotions, sensations embedded in the strata of the mind.



*Performers From a Future Past*, installation view, Angles Gallery, Los Angeles, 2011.  
Private collections, Los Angeles, CA.

Only very recently has the artist begun to deploy her hands to probe the depths of layered impasto, her fingers scratching, grasping, caressing, and dragging the fleshy pigment. In direct contact with the painting, the hand leaves its distinctive mark—reminiscent of the earliest forms of human mark-making on hidden walls or children’s playful exploration of viscous substances— announcing the artist’s presence, like a signature. This existential signpost appears frequently in postwar painting, notably in works by artists often associated with the European catch-all term *art informel*, such as Jean Fautrier and Antoni Tàpies, or perhaps more significantly, in Jasper Johns 1962-63 gray tone painting *Diver*. Metaphorically, the hand breathes life into painting; freed from their tool-grasping function, the fingers, equipped with thousands of nerve endings, almost electrify the pictorial plane. The finger marks therefore trigger the sense of touch. Yossifor seems to be enacting French painter Eugène Leroy’s desire to “touch painting, almost,” in his heavily laden canvases where the paint holds the figure in suspension.

In late 2020, right before the entire world went into lockdown mode, the artist turned her attention to making intimate works on paper—the forced introspection sparking an intense phase of experimentation. Melding color and line, she played with a broader palette, introducing jewel tones into mostly pale gray, but sometimes ochre or black grounds. Her repertoire of marks grew, too—dashes, slashes, dots, curves, stripes intermingle to suggest stick figures, emoji-like faces, spoked wheels, insignia, and patterns conveying motion. Much like alphabetical signs aligned to form words, phrases, sentences, stories, this pictorial language resembles a hermetic system of pictographic symbols.



*Letters Apart*, installation view, PATRON Gallery, Chicago, 2021.  
Private Collections, USA and abroad.

The title of this body of work “Letters Apart,” clearly points to their epistolary and diaristic dimension. Their serial nature echoes the repetitive reworking of the *alla prima* technique on the larger canvases, but also underscores the bond between pictorial language and writing, between the viewing experience and correspondence. Once she has deemed a painting finished, the artist uses an associative process to assign evocative yet often mysterious titles, thereby tethering the works to language and dangling clues for the viewer to approach the abstract imagery. Take *Flag*, for instance: at once a nod to Jasper Johns’s iconic painting and subsequent iterations, as well as myriad other artists riffing on the motif, and a subtle hint pointing to the complex issues of identity politics, patriotism, nation, and nationalism. While titles like *Soldier* and *Self-Portrait as a Patriot* seem to signal these ongoing concerns running through Yossifor’s oeuvre, other recurring ones such as *Wall*, *Figure*, *Body*, *Portrait*, remain relatively opaque. There is an openness and true generosity in this painting even though it tacitly obstructs facile interpretation.

The latest work, *the gray feather a thrush lost*, borrows its title from a line of the poem “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” written mere months before 9/11 by Polish exile Adam Zagajewski, who was born in what is today Lviv, Ukraine in 1945. The image of a stray gray feather, beyond the obvious reference to the muddied palette of the ensemble, as well as the most pervasive color across Yossifor’s oeuvre, sets a poetic tone while perhaps inviting the viewer to linger in a space of reverie that painting and poetry engender—the realm of the imagination, the artist’s true homeland.

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