

# Guy Yanai: The Middle of Somewhere

by James Trainor

To hear him tell it, Guy Yanai's solitary two-month artist residency in a desanctified 19<sup>th</sup>-century church in a rural section of upstate New York in 2009 was a season in the back of beyond, like stepping into the yawning gulf of a howling wilderness. The bucolic setting of this sudden cultural deprivation chamber, surrounded by trees, grass, hills, crickets, sweetly twittering birds, fluffy clouds drifting across a mindless blue sky at first only drove home just how cut off he was from the background sensory blizzard to which he was accustomed and addicted, living within the demanding and bustling city limits of Tel Aviv. "No phone!", "no signal!", "no stores!", "no Internet!" Yanai still enjoys recounting in detailed astonishment, as if these lacks were the harbingers of things far worse yet to come – potential bear attacks, slow starvation, madness. But the wild animals kept their distance, provisions were gathered, and then things started to happen.

Like a modern-day painterly Thoreau, (whose own self-imposed ascetic exile in the woods allowed him to turn four walls and very little else into an entire world, welling up from within), Yanai discovered that solitude and the abrupt cessation of the nattering 24-hour cycle of external stimuli to which we are all exposed, privately and collectively, was also the catalyst for a sudden creative outpouring. He started seeing and making the intimate acquaintance of all the things in his head that were there all along, waiting patiently to be called upon and attended to. In fact, he recalls that images began "puking out of me". The now-vacant former chapel started getting peopled with a congregation of pictures – of national flags, grisaille portraits of unsmiling men in Ray-Bans, fragments of text in Latin and Hebrew alphabets, a stray, dirty Morandis-esque sneaker, a perfect ripe avocado, ready to be eaten, tenderly rendered ancient Levantine ceramics, cactuses, cropped sections of roadway with their dashed centerlines banking out of frame, silhouetted pyramids, fantasy mosques, abstract arrangements of blocks of color, dreaded moose-deer hybrids and other wild animals (real or imagined), more succulents, a forlorn hot dog with a serpentine dash of mustard. There was a non-judgmental, egalitarian democracy of treatment in how he depicted his subjects, or as Yanai puts it: "Lindsay Lohan is not more important than a piggy bank or vice versa".

Pinging around from past to present, things found right at hand in his immediate environment and others seemingly recollected, mentally burnished in his mind's eye, the images began to form a wildly associative inventory or index. The walls and floors of his private sanctuary filled up like a community message board with notes, glyphs, scraps and declarative snippets, studies and neat little self-contained visual statements, and after two months he had over 80 completed small-scale paintings. It was the satisfaction of an obviously ardent hunger for the company of things, images, visual connectivity, talismans.

There is a contented lusciousness, a sensuousness in bringing things into existence where there had been nothing. Yanai, ever the magpie on the prowl for just the right useful or beautiful tidbit to wing back to the nest, is motivated by the look of things in the world – whether those things are in front of him or calling siren-like from a book or magazine, a movie or a mail-order catalogue. Like one of his heroes, the leonine French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, he is a collagist and a purloiner, a collector of scenographic fragments aligned with one history or another, an image-maker both fascinated by the material world – the beguiling, seductive power of consumer objects – while possessed of a self-reflexive skepticism and unease with those very same objects.

The title of one abstract painting from 2009, *Yellow Crate (Scandinavian Socialism)* seems to deftly capture an understated sense of mutually permissive attraction and distrust suffusing much of his work. The associations proliferate in this Ad Reinhardt-esque set piece of colorful squares and rectangles – the Utopianism of pure geometries and the inferences of Good Design, the Postwar political idealism embodied in modernist furnishings and uplifting objects by Kaj Franck, Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen and Georg Jensen and the inevitable dissolution of those ideals as transliterated into the IKEA megastore, the shipping crate, a formulaic universe of cheap populist crap cluttering a world already brimming with clutter. Another large recent painting, *Marriage* (2010), takes its composition directly from a famous shot in Ingmar Bergman's excruciatingly bittersweet domestic drama, *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973), showing a husband and wife in bed, each reading their own book, just a few feet apart but with an emotional chasm silently opening between them. In his painting, however, Yanai has fixated on the geometries and color schemes of their spare furnishings to graph the psychological tensions at stake in this relationship. This particular marriage seems just as tamped down by things as by emotional dynamics, as if the life they have chosen, embodied by their good taste, is slowly constraining and swallowing them up. The Mondrian-like rectilinear bands of color could be extensions of the enameled steel framework of their bed or just abstract mark-making on the painting's surface. Either way, they are weaving the figures into the fabric of their surroundings, binding them to their possessions, slowly shutting down one possibility after another. The color patterns in the painting are lifted straight from a selection of minimalist sofas Yanai came across in *Domus* magazine – the kind of advertising that promises that everything is going to be alright, repurposed for an empathetic critique showing how everything is going very wrong.

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Like David Hockney, Fairfield Porter, and another of his figurative “painters’ painter” forebears, Alex Katz, Yanai seems to often assume the role of implicated anthropologist, the participating chronicler of the life and times of a very particular cultural milieu, a creative class of people that likes to imagine itself as somehow special and exempt from easy categorization but still conforms to its own conventions, its own discernable behavioral patterns and tastes. Katz gave to the world a visual shorthand for how a circle of city-dwellers, New Yorkers of a certain generation, saw themselves – cool, urbane, sophisticated, both naïve and cynical, buoyed by potential. Likewise, Yanai looks and records – sometimes critically, other times willfully not – and finds pleasure in what may be transitory or superficial and yet true. It is the pleasure of being both *of* a world and *outside* of it at the same time. That is when something resonates far below the surfaces of things, in keenly knowing your subject from a clinical distance while having been in bed with it all along.

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During a conversation in March 2011, Yanai spoke about what it was like to put down temporary stakes in the wilds of New York’s Hudson Valley:

**Guy Yanai:** It was lonely. I couldn’t stop these images and associations and about 10 million other things going through my head. Everything became about identity, even my ethnicity – I’m half Syrian and a quarter Polish and a quarter German – and I started painting all these portraits of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, and his father, the former President Hafez Al-Assad, and deconstructing the German flag. It was about being alone in the middle of nowhere and feeling totally disconnected. I think Columbia County is about as far as you can get from South Tel Aviv. It’s a civilizational change, in every way, shape or form. I mean, I like things quiet, but *that* kind of quiet, it’s frightening! At night I was reading my way through a massive six-volume biography of Winston Churchill.

Then, all this stuff came out. Maybe I had suppressed it so long. I kind of had to let everything in, and then let everything out. I called those little paintings “aphorisms” because they are kind of like small little sentences. I picked a small size I could travel with and take with me. I wasn’t going for anything monumental and if I went down to the store and saw a pineapple, and I thought “I like the way that looks” then I painted a pineapple. Or if I ate a hot dog, I would end up painting a hot dog. Whatever went into my head, I just did it. I hadn’t worked that way in such a long time. It started out very playful and fun, but then turned very serious, wondering “how deep can I get into this”?

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**James Trainor:** It feels like you were shuffling and re-shuffling a deck of cards, where the cards are this internalized set of interests, fixations, sources, things you like, things you don’t like – a whole vocabulary of possible images – and you are playing them out, making them share space, seeing which ones can hold their own and stand up to scrutiny.

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**GY:** Yes, it is like creating a sort of index. There are millions of different things that we are bombarded with every day and I feel I am putting myself in the role of editor. It comes very naturally to me to take everything in around me and then to sort of hoard it. I really like the idea of that and to get away from the idea of style. Every project I do has a distinct set of linguistic parameters for me – subject, themes, and also surface and size. It would be too easy to just repeat these parameters and I am constantly trying to trip myself up, while constructing building blocks on top of the work. The whole issue of style is analogous to the situation with musicians like Miles Davis or a composer like John Zorn, who are always switching musical forms and genres while always finding something consistent throughout. The freedom to be able to pick and choose your particular framework is very appealing.

**JT:** How do you manage the anxiety that comes with kinships and influences and the whole history of art stacked against you? It is like being in a big room with all of these people or things you love and are drawn to and balancing how you express those relationships.

**GY:** That's the hard thing. The big challenge is to figure out how to transform your influences. It's kind of like speaking with the painting and letting the painting tell you what to do. It tells you: "no", "yes", "no", "yes", "yes", "no". I draw a lot, but it's never really preparatory drawing. It's more a matter of going to work directly on the surface, and correct, and correct, and change, and radically change, and wipe down, etc. Just talking about it makes me nervous and fills me with anxiety. In the end each painting, until it is finished, it nearly kills me in a way, until I find a way for it to become linguistically independent, a whole new kind of phrasing or expression. The whole process just wears you down. For example, there is a little painting that I did of a Mies van der Rohe *Barcelona* chair – I was trying to abstract a Mies van der Rohe, which is a kind of losing battle in the first place – and afterwards I was sick for two days with a fever. With another work, *David Hockney is not Jewish*, I basically took a little watercolor of his and went and fucked it up, messed with its DNA, trying to see how far I could take it. It is in effect like a transcription of the original.

**JT:** You've mentioned that you don't want to have any comfort zones, and what you are describing doesn't sound like an always comfortable process you set up for yourself.

**GY:** It is all about anxiety – the process, being in the studio, everything. I can't actually work if I think to myself "I am comfortable doing this thing". Basically, for me, I think as far as art and painting are concerned everything begins as a big problem. I'm never solving it, and everything I am attracted to contains some sort of problem. Not that I even end up solving it. It's just that I'm a painter and I can't do anything about it. I am really jealous of all other mediums. I'm absolutely jealous of writers, or film directors, or architects and video artists. Anyone who can inject true psychology into their work, which I sometimes think is sort of an impossibility for me. That's why I love all these people and things.

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The problem isn't that painting is some puzzle to be solved. I'm not interested in paintings about paintings. Once I thought that I needed to choose sides in a painting, decide between opposing forces. But now I don't want to choose any sides. I want to leave all these conflicts, skirmishes and oxymorons irreconcilable. I want to make a painting where that constant tension actually works – even formally, introducing brushstrokes that are in a completely different language or making marks that in one part of the painting can be descriptive and yet in the other can mean something altogether different – that is what is exciting. And somehow the viewer immediately picks up on and understands these differences. So these pictures negate easy explanations or easy readings. There's no story there. In the Renaissance you had to tell a story with paintings. And then later Clement Greenberg said, "no it's not that, it's pure Formalism". But it's not that either. For me, negating these two opposing functions of paintings isn't itself a negative activity – it's liberating. The physical act of painting is something that I love. When I start mixing paint it's like heroin to me. The medium itself is so seductive to me even though I want to get past the medium.

**JT:** Is this jealousy partly the source of the big problems you're talking about?

**GY:** It is kind of hard to admit, but it's true: when I see a Vitra catalogue I start to drool, in a very superficial, materialistic, capitalist way – on the level of "ME WANT THIS". I love Charles and Ray Eames, Jean Prouvé, I love all this "stuff". It is hard not to fetishize it. But they are also part of these questions: how do we live now? How do we choose to lead our lives? How do we sit in this chair? What kind of lamp are we going to read our books with? They are all playing on us at this fantasy level too. Although the objects, like the Eames chair, now have this stigma of being found in every nice high-end store and home, these people were working at a profound level.

I wrote a motto on my studio wall one day with a pencil, it is covered up now. It said: "I'm now painting an object toward which I have many conflicted feelings and opinions". You love something, you hate something. It's so beautiful that you think it's ugly, it's so ugly that you think it's beautiful. You're so conflicted about how you actually feel about this thing. Some things are simple, but most things are not. There is this full parliament of feelings about the subject, from Neo-liberal embrace to Marxist rejection, from total attraction to total repulsion. It's knowing that you are among the suckers who love something, the object or the way it looks in the world. Right now I am making a painting with a life size iPhone in the middle and I am one of those people who loves his iPhone and I am aware that this love is pathetic. But I want to see what happens when you do that.

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**JT:** There is always an interesting seesaw effect going on in your work between abstraction and representation, as if you had discovered that Barnett Newman is somehow lurking in those Domus magazines or Vitra catalogues that you flip through covetously.

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**GY:** He is!

**JT:** And Ad Reinhardt is busy designing a better reading lamp...

**GY:** Yes, it is this kind of tension that has always been there and when I was much much younger I used to absolutely separate them – small abstract works and these large figurative paintings, acrylic and oil, and it was like two completely different worlds. It took me a long time to be comfortable with the realization that there is no single direction and that I don't need to reconcile the two. There is something deeply seductive when abstraction and representation come together in strange ways. I'm inherently drawn to and seduced by both, and this is actually the motherboard, the nerve-center of painting for me.

*James Trainor* writes about art, books, film, architecture, landscape and contemporary culture. His columns, essays, editorials, interviews and reviews have appeared in *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Cabinet*, *Art in America*, *Metropolis* and other periodicals. He lives and works in New York City.