

# Everything Being Equal: Painting as Relay, Painting as Engine

by **Nuit Banai**

One of modernism's principal narratives considers the interstices through which two of its most paradigmatic mediums -- photography and painting -- have flirted, rivaled each other, and struggled to define their specific fields of legitimacy and experience. The discourses surrounding this privileged relationship often hinge on the ways in which photography's traditionally empirical imperative and painting's radical renunciation of mimetic fidelity participate in the constitution and critique of aesthetic and social codes. Clearly, neither photography nor painting can be contained by the broad categorical strokes within which they have been habitually assessed -- 'empiricism' vs. 'rationalism,' 'original' vs. 'copy,' or 'figuration' vs. 'abstraction' -- as both modes of communication persistently shun strict operational boundaries. Nevertheless, the historical murmurings of this debate continue to be processed through contemporary image systems that vie to capture, mimic, duplicate, and re-present the dramas and banalities of everyday life. Indeed, it could arguably be proposed that the search for 'the real' as a contained event or dispersed sensation, micro-or macro history, singular transcription or serialization of effects haunts most aesthetic practices today. In this context, Guy Yanai's *First We Feel, Then We Fall* (2010-2011) is a striking and dexterous positioning of painting as both an 'open source' whose syntax is collectively and interactively invented and a singular method of perceiving the world. As this essay suggests, Yanai's formal techniques and expansive archive of references, situate painting as *a relay* and *an engine* -- a transmission system through which images are circulated and a site for their fabrication and critique.

First, the relay: The twelve works in the series, with their large scale and shallow depth of field, are redolent of public billboards hawking clothing and cruises or advertisements touting the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Yet their brightly colored surfaces emerge from a rather 'democratic' tribute to a cross-section of filiations, including photographic, print media and film sources, art historical precedents, and the artist's idiosyncratic memories and chain of associations. For example, *Marriage* and *Driving in Stockholm* are both inspired by Ingmar Bergman's television series "Scenes from a Marriage," *Woman Outside* takes a photograph by Swedish artist Hanna Liden as its point of departure, *David Hockney is Not Jewish* is partially sourced from a watercolor by the English painter, and *Holiday* is a combined response to a found photograph of St. Tropez

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and a picture of a boat that the artist observed in one of his nephew's books. Moving between different systems of images with no apparent motivation other than an affective connection, Yanai creates unique alliances. His sampling does not favor any one system, but engages with an expanded semiotic flow that occasionally intersects and, at times, materializes as a painting. How many images, we wonder, are still laying dormant in Yanai's collection and when will their time come to be 'outsourced' into a painting? His decision to compile and 'curate' an inventory of this source-material and expose it as a fundamental element in his artistic process is not without significance. What we can glean from this decision is that photography, painting, television, print media, and personal memory are all imagined as sites -- or archives -- that momentarily stabilize and organize the constant data flow of life as a form of representation. These media function as egalitarian apparatuses that give shape to the content of a communal imagination but cannot arrest or transform its frictions and differences into a conclusive composition. Yanai's artworks participate in this dynamic at two different levels: First, there is the frequent appearance of certain motifs, like the wildly exuberant succulent plants that grace interiors and exteriors alike. Seen in tandem with the artist's source material, we notice the numerous recurrences and 'migrations' of succulents across different contexts as, for example, in the oeuvre of Henri Matisse, the urban landscape of Tel Aviv, or an art fair installation by contemporary French artist Cyprien Gaillard. From this abbreviated inventory, we might surmise that Yanai's use of such motifs is a way of asserting his affinity to the shared visual imagination and libidinal economy of the Mediterranean region. Second, and perhaps more elusively, we start to discern that Yanai's repeated rendition of specific motifs is not simply paying homage to a territorial or cultural commonality but is also linked to the formal possibilities they engender. Look closely at *David Hockney is Not Jewish* and *Salon*, for example, and you may remark that the fragmented compositional structure of both paintings looks very much like the barbed, spiny stems of various Mediterranean plants. Yanai employs the jaggedness of the cactus leaf and unruly abandon of the palm tree not simply as decorative patterns, but as tectonic elements that organizes the internal configuration of each painting. In this sense, each canvas in the exhibition is a temporary assemblage, a concretized point in time that captures an unexpected and unscripted constellation of collective forms, utterances, and desires and transforms them into new formal possibilities for painting.

Then, the engine: Yanai is a *painter* – and would insist on this appellation -- so to neglect this appurtenance would be to overlook painting's particular capacity to engage with today's saturated image sphere. Indeed, perhaps the fundamental question that drives his ongoing investigation is what painting can do in its contemporary condition as a communication structure irrevocably intertwined with a constant drift of mechanically manufactured and reproduced information. What zones of experience can it distinctly represent if the structural limits between the painterly and the photogenic appear to be so indistinct? Despite its embrace of an open source code, this series argues for painting's explicit power. This is not immediately evident as it appears that Yanai's works have absorbed the distancing mechanisms that pervade most techniques of mass production. Most notably, there is a sense that the contents or events are happening 'over-there'

on a wide-angle panoramic screen and that they can be apprehended from a detached position of objective safety. There is also the critical function of the variously sized facets and bands of color, which simultaneously serve as the surface ornamentation and structural scaffolding of each canvas. Evoking popular references, the stacking of thin yellow, pink, and green strips in the top right corner in *Woman Outside* brings to mind a textile sample book while the color segments that traverse *Plant on Toast* suggest the graffiti-and poster-covered palisades erected around urban construction sites. Yanai does not shy away from the indexes of modern life and takes great pleasure in making evident the *indifference* created by their perpetual, transmutable circuits of exchange. Gilles Deleuze, writing on the works of French post-war painter Gérard Fromanger, offers an exceptionally apt description that seems to resonate with Yanai's project. He notes Fromanger's use of hot and cool colors and an aggregate effect of detachment that emerges from the "...indifference of the...planes of [each] painting; the indifference of the commodities in the background, the equivalence of love, of death, of food, of the naked and the dressed, of still life and the machine..."<sup>1</sup> With such complicity in the trafficking of signs, a careful demarcation of painting's particular force field seems to be even more urgent. And it is precisely here, at such a critical juncture, that Yanai's prowess as a painter comes to the fore.

If painting is an engine, it is one that raises difficult questions about its own possibilities. In "First We Feel, Then We Fall," Yanai agitates the potentially stultifying *buis clos* in which we may find ourselves if we subscribe to the idea of a hermetically-sealed loop of equivalence. Though we may approach these paintings as an assortment of media 'screens' upon which the image of 'the real' is continuously projected, the discrete planes of color that materialize each image also perform a poignant attack on imaging systems that (re)present the world as a naturalized whole. This disruption occurs at the level of color, which re-organizes the real by intensifying the chromatic saturation of the world of images. In Yanai's paintings, the reds are redder, blues are bluer, and greens are greener – his pigments diffuse a luminosity that modifies the real by a tiny fraction edging ever-so-slightly 'beyond the nth degree.' It is also through color that Yanai produces a type of visual 'static' within his own field of pictorial operation. The improbable red sliver that cuts through the vegetal lushness and turquoise skies of *South of France without a Woman* or the multicolored spectrum of narrow bands that veer through the domestic psychodrama of *Marriage* are a case in point. By unsettling any notion of compositional, chromatic, or thematic integrity these uneven, horizontal 'zips' generate static within the circuit of equivalence and nurture heterogeneous links to other aesthetic idioms and regimes of signs. Using the power of chroma, painting's engine critically assesses its own language as one that simultaneously participates in a relay of exchanges while evading equivalence.

1 Gilles Deleuze. *Cold and Heat*, in *Photogenic Painting*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999, p. 72.