

## [ The Universe That Is My Studio ]

A Conversation with Guy Yanai

**Joseph R. Wolin:** Your recent works seem redolent of the studio, not just in their choice of subjects, but in the way the paintings and prints speak of a studio practice. Both the small paintings of the Objects/Homages series and the Belgian Monotypes depict a set of things—bottles, vases, cups, fruit, flowers—that have been used for centuries as props in still lifes. The series called Political Science features potted plants on various stands in a room that, by the inclusion of a canvas leaning against the wall in a previous state of *The Dictator* (2009), is clearly your studio. Even your palette, dominated by purplish grays and olive greens evokes the institutional studio space of the art school. What is it about studio practice itself that makes it a central concern of your art? What do you want these images to mean to the viewer?

**Guy Yanai:** Objects/Homages came about in a strange way. I had been working abstractly for about two years and had just finished two projects—*Untitled 2006* and *Homage to the Etruscans*—of small works on panel and on paper. I began by doing tests for more works with a similar feel, and used empty plastic cottage cheese containers for mixing colors. At that time, I was eating at least one a day for breakfast. This cottage cheese is an emblem of old Israel, the good Israel, the kibbutz. The work was coming too easily for me; I was going through the motions. Suddenly, I started looking intensely at the beauty of the containers in the studio and had this urge to paint them, to paint something, a physical object, something of mine (though non-narrative). I've had this fantasy for many years of painting huge works with one small lone object, and had never been able to do it. Thus began *Objects/Homages*. I wanted to only use brushes, and to be very frank, without any pretense, without trying to impress, just to show an “honest” painting of objects that I have a relationship with.

The Belgian Monotypes conclude that project for me. For these, I worked partly from memory, partly from images. I think that the prints elevate the conception of “things,” objects, or even fetishes to what I had wanted to say. As for the objects themselves, yes, these are objects used by artists for hundreds of years. This was a subconscious thing that never came to the fore. One of the things that did not interest me in *Objects/Homages*, and still does not interest me in *Political Science*, is the notion of originality.

*Political Science* emerged from *Objects/Homages*. The physical panels were in the studio while I worked on the last half of *Objects/Homages*, so they (and the lexicon that was needed to produce them) were on my mind for a long time.

I have been painting plants forever, since the second grade. Maybe plants can be defined as having all of the immenseness of the universe in a domesticated setting. Maybe they are a way for me to paint a personality without a person.

Is studio practice a central concern? Yes and no. The studio and the discipline of working is very important. Maybe that little slant in *The Dictator* gave away some of the working process: this is done by a

painter working in a studio, from north light, with the artist facing east; and yes, that is me speaking about Cézanne, about Morandi, but the chalkiness of the colors is also me speaking about Piero della Francesca and Ucello. *Political Science* might be me using my studio to play out conflicts, forces of power, and theories through plants and observation in the universe that is my studio.

Also, every title started out as “Self-Portrait”—*Self-Portrait as a Dictator*, for example, or *Self-Portrait as Prime Minister of a Beautiful Nation State* (now *Policy*).

**JRW:** I am quite arrested by your statement that the cottage cheese containers represent an older, more idealistic, more socialist Israel. Similarly, you note that the plants might stand for something anthropomorphic, as well as the natural world in general. The series featuring the plants is called *Political Science*, and you say that they might “play out conflicts, forces of power.” Do other objects you've depicted have specific historical or allegorical associations? Can you say more about the possible political or existential meaning of your pictures?

**GY:** The cottage cheese made by Tnuva, with the logo of a house and a tree, represents a different, more “pure” Israel, an Israel of higher morals. It represents the moshavim, the kibbutzim, an Israel that, outside my studio window in south Tel Aviv, no longer exists: a place less fragmented, with more certainties, less individualism, fewer problems, and of a collective purpose; an Israel where you cannot go out and buy Parmigiano-Reggiano because there are only three kinds of cheese, one kind of bread, a tomato, and a cucumber.

Between the ages of seven and twenty-two, when I lived in the United States, this socialist notion of Israel became my image of the country—the notion that Israel, strangely enough, is this perfect place. Society here changed greatly from 1984 to 2000, but the image of the cottage cheese remains.

A plant, in itself, has no psychology; it has no parents, no siblings, no feelings, no irrationalities, no doubts. It, in itself, is perfect. To me plants are objects of extreme beauty, sometimes frighteningly so. Maybe I put my own irrationality, doubts, personality into the plants, although I do try to let them be themselves as much as possible. The paintings in *Political Science* and *Objects/Homages* do not have figures in them, but the presence of humans and all of their complexities are indeed present.

I recently read a quote by André Gide that can sum up all of my present and past work: “I am a being of dialogue; everything in me combats and contradicts itself.” The studio, the work, the conception, and I are all conflict and contradiction. It's strange because there is this paradox within me; I have ultimate faith in my work, while doubting every single aspect of every single work. Does this make my work existential? I don't know.

In *Political Science*, the whole world, all of those tensions of power, those push-and-pulls, were in the studio. My little beautiful plants became Western Civilization, Dictatorships, Modes of Government, Palazzos; the plants and studio formed alliances, started and resolved conflicts, and were big actors on a big field.

**JRW:** To make work about conflict and contradiction that essentially takes the form of relatively straightforward depictions of quotidian objects or private spaces seems counterintuitive, especially to do so in what is, perhaps, the most contested bit of territory on the face of the earth. In other words, as

an Israeli artist concerned with politics, with national ideals, with Western Civilization, how do you justify making paintings of plants in the studio? By what mechanism might the viewer unacquainted with your thoughts make sense of these works in terms of the context that produced them? What are the ethics of doing what you do?

**GY:** There would be nothing easier, more obvious, temporal, and rational than taking the noisy day-to-day conflict with Israel's neighbors as a basis for art. Personally, I find that boring.

Although, obviously, I am conflicted about this, I am not sure that I see myself as an "Israeli Artist." Yes, I live and work in Tel Aviv, but the question of identity, especially personal identity has no interest for me. When Milan Kundera started to write about identity, his writing instantly became monotonous and dull. It's always much more real and much harder, and yields more profound works of art to stick your own voice, your own quietude.

In the same sense, I do not see the works in Political Science as making any clear political statements; maybe they just portray political, or pseudo-political, situations. The viewer is asked to view these as aesthetics, besides the image, to get lost in the surface, the physical paint on the panels, maybe even to find some humor in the seriousness of the works. I would like the context to be a context of art, of painting, from Lascaux to late de Kooning.

**JRW:** You've shown me a few of the paintings from the Political Science series in progress, still under way in your studio. They have had words and phrases, like "monarchy" or "city-state," written across them in large letters. These seem to get painted out as the paintings evolve. Did all of these works start out with their titles inscribed upon them? How does that title, buried deeper and deeper under layers of paint as the painting develops, as if being buried deeper and deeper within the memory of the painting, influence the depiction of the subject?

**GY:** Almost all of the paintings started out that with the title, or something else, written on the panel. The text is, firstly, an aesthetic decision. I think that it made it easier for me to approach the panels. It was like a big Post-it to remind me of the condition that I wanted to paint, to remind me of the first image I had, and as a way to help me sustain it. Some paintings, especially, The Dictator and Yellow Crate (Scandinavian Socialism) have been altered radically throughout the process, while some works have remained true to their primary vision.

**JRW:** Yet, having stared for a while at images of these paintings, correspondences between titles and subjects begin to appear. City-State, for instance, depicts a lone spiky plant—a succulent, perhaps— isolated against a black backdrop on a periwinkle blue floor or surface. Looking at it, I start to think about the polis, or a self-contained, self-governing polity that stands out from the flat, undifferentiated sea around it, and that, in and of itself, may be complex and contradictory. Monarchy, similarly, a view of a small flowering plant through what seems to be a hole in a red curtain, makes me think of the sort of blinders or tunnel vision that someone convinced of the divine right of kings might have. The empty chair in The Dictator, which in a previous state held a potted plant, seems like an expectant seat of power. Is any of this intentional? Am I wrong to be seeing it?

**GY:** You are not wrong to be seeing this. It is very intentional.

**JRW:** What about the painted frames within the frames that almost all the works in this series share? To me, they seem to emphasize the artifice or constructedness of the representational, relatively realist image. How do you intend that emphasis to inflect the meanings of the paintings?

**GY:** After priming, all of the panels were painted in an earth red pigment: the harmony under everything that is always present. Starting these on white was inconceivable. Although the panels are of three sizes, I really wanted each painting to come into its own exact size, its own roughness, its own boundaries. This meant that the relationship between the image and the panel—the picture plane—was also an issue. Sometimes, I had to emphasize the proportions, and painted sections over with the same red as the underpainting. And where there is a "real" image, a form that correlates to something that we know and recognize from life, the question of the "realness" of the picture plane, dealt with like this, becomes more pronounced, or felt more conscious; in certain parts of an ostensibly realist work, it's obvious that I am lying. Yes, it's a painting of something, but it's also a painting of nothing. I was hoping that if the whole proportion was right, that if the key relationships were good, then that would, by default, make the meanings, the "idea" of the paintings, clearer.

**Guy Yanai** was born in Haifa, Israel in 1977 and lives and works in Tel Aviv. Between the ages of seven and twenty two he lived in the Boston area. Yanai studied at Parsons School of Design, The New York Studio School, and received a B.A from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA. Between the years of 2004-2006 he was the owner and director of Gallery 33, since then he has been in numerous group exhibitions internationally and locally and has been the recipient of two residency grants. His work is included in many private and public collections.

**Joseph R. Wolin** is an independent curator and critic in New York, and a frequent contributor to Modern Painters, Time Out New York and Canadian Art.