

Painting a Knotty Landscape: An Interview with Yevgeniya Baras

Marisa Mazria Katz



Yevgeniya Baras: Untitled, 2019

Yevgeniya Baras's small, knotty paintings look like talismans from an alien culture. Pushing aside painting norms, she works on both sides of the canvas to slowly conceal and reveal cryptic and voluptuous iconography—a meticulous process of building layer upon layer of paint, while simultaneously scraping away the surface, unearthing earlier manifestations of the image.

These paintings never strive for a quick read, each detail further complicates the next. What emerges is a highly personal lexicon of forms that conjure the forest landscape of her youth in Russia.

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Two years after the Soviet Union collapsed, Baras and her family joined the exodus of Soviet Jews, leaving their hometown of Samara, where the Volga and Samara Rivers converge in southwestern Russia, and settling in Philadelphia. She has now lived in the United States longer than she did in her native Russia, but she's always holding hands with her own history.

Before the pandemic took hold, Baras would shuttle from her home in New York to teach at both Sarah Lawrence College and the Rhode Island School of Design. As Covid-19 has indefinitely delayed a residency and teaching plans, there is a temporary stasis on Baras's normally peripatetic lifestyle. She is a 2019 Guggenheim Fellow and has been a resident at the MacDowell Colony and with the Chinati Foundation. And, as soon as life resumes in Los Angeles, she'll be showing a new set of paintings at The Landing gallery there.

Baras spoke to me by Skype from her home in Sunnyside, Queens, about making her own childhood toys, the resilience of immigrants, and her skepticism about social media narcissism as self-improvement. (Our conversation has been edited and condensed.)

Marisa Mazria Katz: *What has it been like to live in the epicenter of the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

Yevgeniya Baras: I moved to Queens after spending a decade in Bushwick and Williamsburg. This area is very Eastern European—Romanians and Bulgarians, primarily. They have an Eastern European attitude, like, "Shit happens." People here have worked in the US for thirty years, bought an apartment, but their thinking is still Eastern European. People have stood in lines in their countries. The panic is less palpable here. Supermarkets are not sold out.

Just a fifteen-minute drive away, though, it's completely different. That's where Elmhurst Hospital is, and there is more tragedy.

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Did anything make you panic when the pandemic took hold?

Mainly, I felt concerned about older and vulnerable people, including members of my own family. As for myself, I have a giant appetite for life. I want to pack everything in. I didn't want to participate in some Instagrammable version of self-improvement. And I definitely do not appreciate any comparisons to Anne Frank. I don't feel we will never see museums again. I don't think that culture ends in times like these. That said, generally speaking, in my life, I panic over *not knowing*. I am always aware that time is running out and I think about all the things I want to learn.

Your paintings feel very experiential, almost like walking through a landscape. And so much of your imagery seems to have been derived from the traveling you do. Is there a sense that if that stops, so will the inspiration for your art?

I have so much mining to do because of the many chapters I've already lived that I'm not worried about running out of material to build meaning from. And being an immigrant ends up being a blessing in this case because I speak two languages fluently. So I'm reading in two, I'm watching in two. I'm talking on Skype with friends in two. I have this larger world.

Yes, I'd love to sit in Bologna and have a coffee in a piazza with a friend. But on an everyday basis, walking between this apartment and the studio, and all that I have inherited—like the Yiddish writers I've wanted to read who were writing in the town my grandfather is from; studying Hebrew and maybe reading it one day; watching films in Russian; being so interested in Middle Eastern cinema, like Iranian and Lebanese films—it is fine.

So you have ventured out of your home to make work?

The first month and a half, I just drew and painted in acrylic in the house. But recently, I started carrying these drawings to the studio because I felt that the materiality I want is not really possible in drawing. And I started feeling as though

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everything I'm doing is like a skeleton of, or the anchor for, what will happen in the studio, but it's not *the* thing.

In the past, you've made double-sided paintings. Is that something you still do?

I only show them one way, but I do work on them from two sides. I think that probably relates to the fact that I studied crafts, not professionally. But that was the beauty of growing up in the Soviet Union: you could go put your child into a papier mâché class every Saturday at 10 AM; ice skating at 12 PM—and all of it was free. Everybody was interested in anything that was available—a book being passed around that's photocopied, a secret concert. So I labor over both sides of paintings as if they are objects of craft in the round—these are not sculptures, they are objects that are loved from both sides.

I still make papier mâché, I can knit, and it's all related to my childhood. I actually made my own toys. My mom made toys out of her dresses for me. When I was growing up, it was really hard to buy things, so much of what we had in our house was handmade and I really responded to it.

What do you think the art world will look like once this is over?

Right now, for artists, it's time to say what you really mean—time to sharpen your craft, get closer to your subject matter, hear yourself. But it is also being aware of the crisis, the grief, and all the changes that are taking place around us. I tell my students: "This is really the time to ask: Are you an artist? Are you going to make art with whatever materials and under any conditions?" Maybe that's also the reason I go to the studio now—because of the materiality, the need for contact with surface. Because, for me, drawing ends up being the carcass of the thing that gets sculpted later.

You left Russia in 1993, at the age of twelve, a time of mass exodus for many Jewish families there. How much has the country molded who you are and the way you see the world?

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I moved from a place that is very rich in history and has a relationship to landscape and language. It's a deeply soulful and cultured place, where Jews spent a certain period of time. I think we were passing through there. Still, I feel spending time somewhere for hundreds of years, you take that in, somehow preserve it in your blood and genes.

The Russian language is truly beautiful, and I feel lucky to be able to read and understand it. That's actually how I'm spending quarantine, by listening to writers and thinkers speak. I feel both that I am of that place and that we were temporary residents. I am really glad to have other chapters in this life in which I can look forward, as a citizen of the world, rather than only looking back.

Your pieces have so much physicality, sometimes it feels as if soil is mixed into the paint or you're using the paint itself as a kind of mortar to hold together incongruous fragments. How much do you think the landscape of your Russian childhood affected the aesthetic of your work?

I think it's really formative. We had a country house. I spent three months a year in nature. And while I don't have anywhere to garden here, I still recognize certain types of plants because I spent a lot of time with them when I was little.

We had a garden, and a very dense forest behind it. I was very close to the landscape, and the kind of deep dark woods where you're able to walk alone, be in sunflower fields that were way taller than you, and find wild cherries. I think that a lot of what I saw and felt at that time is connected to the mood of my work.

Do you still pine for that time or feel drawn to the country now?

I have reached a point where I feel really blessed to have been touched by the place and era in which I was born and yet free of the need to go there regularly. It exists in me in a really liberating way. So, when I go to a place like Morocco, and there's an old man watching over a cemetery in Fez, I'm open to connecting with him. I'm not bound by where I'm

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from. And this allows me to be the kind of traveler who is able to reach out to different cultures and people.

Have you considered getting out of New York City and leaving, amid all this?

I can't actually pack it up that quickly. I feel it's important to be able to stay long enough to understand and to contribute to this place that I call home. And what is a red flag to some is not quite enough of a red flag to me because of the things I have lived through. I want to stay in New York and be in this time of crisis with these people and with the community I have made.



This is part of a series of conversations during the pandemic between *New York Review* contributors and artists.

May 30, 2020

11 Emerging Artists Redefining Abstract Painting

Alina Cohen | Jan 6, 2020

The divide between abstraction and figuration is a false, but helpful, dichotomy. Painters who are primarily concerned with the interactions between color, line, and form also make marks and shapes that may suggest body parts, landscapes, and objects traditionally relegated to still lifes. Even monochrome paintings can conjure familiar settings: A gray canvas might evoke a rock face, while a blue one may suggest the sea.

This principle can go the other way, as well. “I would consider myself a figurative painter fundamentally,” artist Louise Giovanelli told me, “but I certainly have a loose idea of figuration—anything that suggests a form, even if this suggestion is faint.”

A new generation of painters, all 40 years old or younger, are rethinking what we might call, for lack of a better term, abstraction. For them, labels aren’t important. They’re more interested in the infinite ways paint can be applied to develop suggestive, beguiling, and transcendent compositions. They explore what it means to make a painting in the digital age and use contemporary research to generate new patterns and designs. Despite the diversity of these artists’ practices, a near-mystical devotion to the act of making and a desire to communicate via symbols and hues unites them all.

Yevgeniya Baras

B. 1981, Syzran, Russia. Lives and works in New York.

Yevgeniya Baras textures her paintings as she layers oil and paper pulp onto stretched and unstretched canvas. The rough surfaces alternately feature letters, numbers, squares, circles, squiggles, and a variety of suggestive shapes. Look hard enough, and you might see a keyhole, a river, or a clock. A sense of improvisation and play unites her disparate symbolologies—a tinge of the faux-naïf, perhaps, or an attempt to access some primal understanding of the world and systems around us.

Baras values the experimentation and invention that abstraction allows. “My process is rooted in my feeling for the material and for transforming those materials,” she said. Though her work appears abstract, she notes that it “considers the body” and attempts to capture ethereal emotions with concrete elements. Her paintings aren’t ideas, but gritty, swirling, explicitly three-dimensional objects.



TWO COATS OF PAINT

Yevgeniya Baras: Impastoed strata

By Jason Andrew | May 24, 2019



Yevgeniya Baras, *Untitled*, 2019, oil, wood, and paper pulp on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

Spend anytime out in the rural West, particularly the plains of southwest Texas, and you'll discover the daunting challenge of repelling dust and dirt. At some point, you just have to accept a little discomfort as a small cost of the region's wondrous horizons, desert winds, and moonlit nights. Returning from a coveted residency at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, painter Yevgeniya Baras incurred that cost and returned with a lighter palette and a renewed sensitivity to form in her new process-oriented paintings, on view in "Seam, Scar, Sign" at Nicelle Beauchene through May 26.

I came to know Yevgeniya and her work in the trenches of Bushwick circa 2010. She and a lovely group of artists founded Regina Rex around that time, and I included her work in a 2011 exhibition at my gallery Storefront, then on Wilson Avenue. Muddy, dark, and moody with thick impastoed surfaces and a synthesis of diverse subjects that allude to modern psychoanalytic theory, these paintings drew me in.

While the new set of paintings move beyond their mysterious predecessors, they remain *deep image painting*—a concept I derived from the unexpected juxtapositions and surrealist leaps made by poets of the 1960s. It's well suited to Yevgeniya, whose raw

TWO COATS OF PAINT

imagery conjures a world that floats between the real and the dream and inspires symbolism and mysticism.

Eleven paintings, all made in the last two years and all untitled, make up the exhibition. While the works are easel-sized, existentially they scan way bigger. Acutely attuned to the human condition and imagining the canvas as an extension of the body, Yevgeniya has continued to layer her surface (often heavy burlap) with impastoed oil paint, rocks, bits of wood, and paper pulp. Though she remains alert to darkness, optimism prevails in the new work by way of frothier, fresher, and looser composition. Dusty pinks, lighter blues, and even patches of white have fostered a new approachability.

“At Chinati I was alone,” Yevgeniya explained via email. “There were no other residents when one is invited to make work there. The time for me was a very focused time. I walked a lot in the landscape and I felt that my color palette shifted towards the sandy tones. I did a daily walk to my studio experiencing the open areas and observing the color of the plains and desert scrub.”

Time equates with labor, which is important to these paintings. “There are two surfaces in the show which were begun seven years ago,” Yevgeniya told me. The work accordingly embodies both the durational and the performative: layers framed within a proscenium. In this connection, Yevgeniya’s intent is not unlike that of Natalia Sergeevna Goncharova (1881–1962), who designed sets for Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe and anchored modern set design by utilizing abstract patterns and introducing decorative flatness. She grew up just hours away from Yevgeniya’s hometown of Syzran, Russia. Like Goncharova, Yevgeniya draws heavily on the palette and character of Old Russia through her stylistic references to Russian icon painting and *lubki* prints while placing them in a dynamic context.

Yet Yevgeniya’s work is far more than cultural tribute and synthesis. It is as expansive as it is reflective. Each painting is made up of an unorthodox matrix of structures that crisscross the surface in raised relief. Think seams and scars: topographic records of the damaged and repaired. “These are ways for me to draw three dimensionally,” says Yevgeniya. This conceptualization allows her to deepen the open-ended symbolism of her work with an additional stratum of content, hinting at what might come next. In some instances, raised fragments form letters of the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets. We recognize the script but its meaning, placement, and purpose remain unarticulated.

In one piece, Yevgeniya paints a still-life on the verso of a painting stretcher, as she has elsewhere. Wood stripes further animate the radiating meatiness of a group of dark-violet chrysanthemum-like flowers stuffed into a pink vase set on a green table. The painting thus riffs on cubist arrangements and demonstrates her ability to address art history with a painting vocabulary that is at once personal, innovative, and forward-looking. With a slew of recent solo shows on both coasts, Yevgeniya has arrived as one of the outstanding painters of her generation.

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Guggenheim fellow Dara Friedman's *Mother Drum*, 2016.

Guggenheim Foundation Names 2019 Fellows

April 11, 2019

The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation announced that it will award fellowships to 168 scholars, fellowships to a diverse group of 168 scholars, artists, and writers, including Dora Budor, Dara

Friedman, Colin Gee, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Jane Hammond, Guadalupe Maravilla, Catherine Opie, and Aki Sasamoto.

Appointed on the basis of prior achievement and exceptional promise, the fellows were chosen from a pool of almost three thousand applicants. They hail from twenty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and two Canadian provinces and represent forty-nine scholarly disciplines and artistic fields and seventy-five different academic institutions.

"It's exceptionally satisfying to name 168 new Guggenheim Fellows," Edward Hirsch, president of the Foundation, said in a statement. "These artists and writers, scholars and scientists, represent the best of the best. Each year since 1925, the Guggenheim Foundation has bet everything on the individual, and we're thrilled to continue to do so with this wonderfully talented and diverse group. It's an honor to be able to support these individuals to do the work they were meant to do."

Since its establishment in 1925, the foundation has granted more than \$360 million in fellowships to over 18,000 individuals. This year marks the foundation's ninety-fifth competition. The fellows in the Creative Arts and Humanities categories are as follows:

FINE ARTS:

Yevgeniya Baras
Dora Budor
Julie Buffalohead
Elena del Rivero
Mark Dion
Daniel Duford
Merion Estes
Jane Hammond

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Elliott Hundley
Fabienne Lasserre
Michelle Lopez
Guadalupe Maravilla
Daniel Joseph Martinez
Matthew Mazzotta
Suzanne McClelland
Tiona Nekkia McClodden
Ann McCoy
Maryrose Cobarrubias Mendoza
Aki Sasamoto
Jim Shrosbree
Hồng-Ân Trương
Fatimah Tuggar
Entang Wiharso
Carrie Yamaoka
Deborah Zlotzky

Art Fairs

5 Outstanding Discoveries at Miami Art Week's Satellite Fairs

Thousands of artists are showing in Miami right now. Here are a few that stood out from the crowd.

artnet News, December 7, 2018

Who: It's much easier to locate Yevgeniya Baras's expanding influence in the art world than her paintings' exact place in the discipline. In 2018 alone, the Russian-born artist paired solo exhibitions at LA's the Landing and Berlin's 68projects with prestigious wins of both a Pollock Krasner grant and a residency at the Chinati Foundation. She will follow up this banner year by opening two solo gallery exhibitions in 2019: one at Detroit's Reyes Projects, and another at Lower East Side mainstay Nicelle Beauchene, with whom she previously showed in 2016.



Yevgeniya Baras, *Untitled* (2017).
Photo by Tim Schneider.

What: Baras's paintings stick in your brain largely because you can't quite figure out where else in the world they quite belong. Her painted vocabulary alludes to linguistic or religious symbols without invoking any actual examples of either. Rather than allowing her satisfying earth and jewel tones to peacefully co-exist, she sometimes pollutes each with the other to yield an unsettling amalgam of hues. And her surfaces simultaneously embrace and subvert assemblage, as she wraps (but doesn't necessarily "stretch," *per se*) her stretcher bars in canvas or knobby burlap before adhering elements like wood, stone, and rubber. The results nag you like a cliffhanger ending long after you've walked away.

Where: The booth of the Landing, Los Angeles

How Much: Works on view at the Landing's booth were priced at \$4,500. The gallery said it had placed several by the end of the fair's opening day.

—Tim Schneider



Amy Sherald.
October 10, 2018 at 1:23pm

POLLOCK-KRASNER FOUNDATION AWARDS \$3.9 MILLION TO 125 ARTISTS

The Pollock-Krasner Foundation has awarded nearly \$4 million to 125 artists and twenty-five organizations for its 2017–18 grant cycle. Among this year’s grantees are Artadia in Brooklyn, New York; Beta-Local in San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Whitechapel Gallery in London.

The organization is also giving \$100,000 to the Madison Square Park Conservancy, in support of Martin Puryear and his US pavilion commission for the 2019 Venice Biennale, and \$228,000 to artists and organizations that were affected by the devastating hurricanes and wildfires that occurred in California and across the US earlier this year.

In addition to naming its annual grant recipients, the foundation announced that it has presented artists Mel Chin, Chris Drury, Alfred Leslie, Don Nice, Morgan O'Hara, and Masami Teraoka with the Lee Krasner Award in recognition of their distinguished careers and has given Amy Sherald, whose portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama was unveiled in February, the 2017–18 Pollock Prize for Creativity. The prize is given to artists whose work embodies high creative standards and exemplifies the impact of art on individuals and society.

“Our 2017–18 grant and award recipients demonstrate the depth and breadth of the artists and organizations the foundation is able to serve, thanks to the legacy of Lee Krasner,” said Ronald D. Spencer, chairman and CEO of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. “We are honored to be able to support Martin Puryear through his commission for the US Pavilion for the 2019 Venice Biennale.”

The 2017–18 grantees are as follows:

Artists

Zarouhie Abdalian, New Orleans

Inbal Abergil, New York

Rachel Beth Abrams, Brooklyn, New York

Tomer Aluf, Brooklyn, New York

Deborah Anzinger, Sparks, New York

Ines E. Aponte, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Lawrence Baker, Cleveland Heights, Ohio

Yevgeniya Baras, Sunnyside, New York

Frances Barth, North Bergen, New Jersey

Robert Bergman, Richfield, Minnesota

Carlo Bernardini, Milan

Hermes Berrio, Miami

Colleen Blackard, Brooklyn, New York



Yevgeniya Baras:

"I have travelled to many ancient places out of the sheer desire to see them with my own eyes, but also so that I could experience that feeling of awe and humbleness as a dot on that long trajectory. Of course, that had an imprint on my work."

www.yevgeniyabaras.com

text and interview by Christina Nafziger

Featured image:

Yevgeniya Baras
Untitled
oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches



Yevgeniya Baras
Untitled
oil on burlap
20 x 16 inches

Each painting created by artist Yevgeniya Baras is an exploration in meaning, material, and depth formed through her strong visual language. The materiality of each piece is an essential element of the artist's practice, which becomes evident upon inspection of her paintings' multifaceted surfaces. They are not just textured, but layered with a plethora of fascinating materials, not lacking in diversity or uniqueness. In this, a roughness is created that further traces the lines and forms that live within her work, leaving the compositions rich with a palpable physicality.

Baras rightfully refers to her work as a kind of "invocation", as each piece's symbol-like aesthetic conjures a thought, a message we are compelled to decipher. Influenced by ancient art history—which she of no coincidence teaches—her work often brings to mind the motifs and materials that perhaps might have been found on the wall of a cave. Baras explains that her most recent exhibition at the Landing gallery in LA, titled *Towards Something Standing Open*, draws influence from poetry. Join us as the artist shares with us her roots in art making, her experience after graduate school, and the way her practice reflects back on history and time.

AMM: Where did your journey in artistic investigation begin?

YB: I began learning to paint when I was six. That is when I became wired for becoming an artist. Not just by the formal lessons I was taking, but by learning the pleasure of being with the work. For hours I listened to records at home and painted. Storytelling is very important to me, maybe because I was read to from the beginning of my life. As a child, I preferred to narrate what was in my head on paper with painting and in gouache.

However, I think the most concentrated learning happened in the years after graduate school in New York when I did not have an artist community yet. I was encountering the city, with its plethora of culture and art to see; yet the only dialogue necessary to understand the information was occurring within me. I was still hearing the voices of my graduate professors in my head and was discerning which voices were valid and which voices needed to be silenced. I was trying to hear my own work and its needs by spending a lot of time alone in my studio. That is the time I began to recognize what it means to be an artist—the routes in the studio as well as what it means to lead a life as an artist, the fuller picture.



Yevgeniya Baras
Untitled
oil on canvas
25 x 19 inches

AMM: Congratulations on your recent solo show at the Landing gallery in Los Angeles! I love the exhibition title, "Towards Something Standing Open." What does this title reference?

YB: "For a poem is not timeless. Certainly it lays claim to infinity. It seeks to reach through time. Through it, not above and beyond it. A poem is a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the - not always greatly hopeful - belief that somewhere and some time it can wash up on land on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something. Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable. Through, toward an addressable reality."

This is a quote from a speech given by one of my favorite poets, Paul Celan. When I read it I thought about paintings and poems as a kind of invocation. They are porous creatures looking for someone to receive, to interpret, but they are also concerned with carrying the weight.

AMM: Can you tell us about the work included in this show?

YB: At the Landing there are 21 paintings, which are considering text,

short bilingual poems as well as notes occur on their surface. There are fringes that function as frames, hairs, macramé siblings and rug relatives. Some of these paintings I've worked on for years; they are each a kind of tightly wound universe. It is interesting to have an exhibition in a city in which you do not live because the paintings are out in the world humming somewhere and you cannot visit them. Also, the architecture of Los Angeles provides new issues for installation. I think the way my work is hugged by the vast space around it is quite lyrical. So much light and space there—my paintings are used to caves.

AMM: Many of your paintings appear to have an aesthetic that harks back to prehistoric art or symbols found in ancient artifacts. Was this intentional?

YB: There is a way one's life leads them back to their core concerns over and over again. I am interested in history, remembering, and lineage. I have travelled to many ancient places out of the sheer desire to see them with my own eyes, but also so that I could experience that feeling of awe and humbleness as a dot on that long trajectory. Of course, that had an imprint on my work.

Then, five years ago I began teaching ancient art history. I had to look at and speak about prehistoric art on a regular basis. The ancient lens



Image (top):

Yevgeniya Baras
Untitled
oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches

Image (bottom):

Yevgeniya Baras
Untitled
oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches

helps me think about time, reaffirmed and erased narratives, layers, the need to speak, cycles. It is one of the lenses through which I peek.

AMM: You have a highly developed style that has a very textural aesthetic. What materials do you use in your work? Does your creative process happen directly on the canvas?

YB: Some of my materials are found, some are inherited, and some are simply bought at an art store. Sometimes people close to me bring me materials as offerings. Sometimes I encounter a material that I have not touched before and the physical newness of the encounter gives me an opportunity to diverge in my process, serving as a fork in the road; a new problem to solve in as far as how that material can live in the painting. The physicality is important to my process. Touching materials and the process of transforming them leads me to understanding the image, which needs to occur on the surface of the paintings. I draw as well, but mostly directly on canvas.

AMM: The surfaces of your paintings appear layered—almost sculptural. Has your work ever advanced into a three-dimensional form?

YB: I do think of my objects as paintings in relief. There was a very brief moment eight years ago when I made ceramics. But otherwise no, I have not made sculptures. My paintings are often in low relief, maybe a bit like the bison at the Altamira cave, part protruding from the surface, part additive mark making: 12, 500 BCE.

AMM: In some of your work, the canvas is exposed, becoming integrated into the composition of the painting. Do you consider the canvas to be another material used to create the piece itself, rather than just a surface in which the materials are applied?

YB: Yes, since canvas can have different characters and levels of resistance. It can present various sorts of battles depending on the type of weave. I pay attention to that and I take interest in the way a material can play different roles, dress up in new costumes.

AMM: Was there ever a time in your career as an artist when your artwork diverged paths dramatically, or perhaps you decided to go in a different direction artistically?

YB: I think of building slowly. What may seem like a large leap to me for sure will not seem so to others. The biggest mental shift had to do with the switch from illustrating an idea to having the object embody the idea through process. This meant trusting my hands and my body more.

AMM: What or who are your historical influences?

YB: Chavela Vargas, Florine Stettheimer, Lin Jaldati, Anna Akhmatova, Elizabeth Murray, just to name a few.

AMM: Do you have any upcoming projects that you would like to share with us?

YB: I am excited to spend part of the upcoming summer at the Chinati Foundation making work and exploring Marfa. I am thinking about waking up very early and walking around vast empty spaces, the town, and nature.



Yevgeniya Baras
Untitled
oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches

How Yevgeniya Baras' pictographs carry a language all their own

By David Pagel Feb 05, 2018 | 7:00 AM



Detail from Yevgeniya Baras' "Untitled," 2017. Oil and wood on burlap, 20 by 30 inches. (The Landing)

Sometimes painters make paintings to communicate with others. Sometimes they make paintings to carry on conversations with themselves — internal dialogues that clarify what they are doing in the studio.

Neither describes what it's like to visit "Towards Something Standing Open," Yevgeniya Baras' terrifically enigmatic exhibition at the Landing. The 21 paintings (all untitled) that make up the New York painter's first solo show in Los Angeles seem to be talking to one another — while mumbling to themselves.

Occasionally, two or three of Baras' roughly hewn pictographs on burlap, wood and canvas appear to be shouting across the gallery. That happens when scattered letters from the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets are present in each composition. The visual volley is complemented by similar rhythms among biomorphic blobs whose shapes echo one another's and simple patterns that look as if they have been cut from the same cloth.



Yevgeniya Baras, "Untitled," 2017. Oil on burlap, 20 by 16 inches. The Landing



Yevgeniya Baras, "Untitled," 2017. Oil on canvas, 16.75 by 20 inches. The Landing

These recurring elements make for paintings that resemble rudimentary landscapes or primitive diagrams that chart passages of time, both seasonal and celestial. Whether landscape or diagram, Baras' primitive symbols stand in for features that might mean the difference between life and death, meaning and nothingness.

More often, individual paintings look as if they are talking to themselves, so intimately and intensely that nothing else matters — neither the artist who made them nor visitors to the exhibition.

These are Baras' most captivating works. Compositionally, they consist of two halves that nearly match. The left-and-right or top-and-bottom format suggests either-or, before-and-after, yin-and-yang dramas. All are enacted by a pair of characters whose similarities are matched by significant differences.

Never pretending that everything will fall into place — or that the world would be better if it did — Baras makes a virtue of inconsistency. Make-do adaptability is her bread and butter. And it's never looked better than it does in paintings whose internal murmurs draw you into worlds you can only imagine.

The Landing, 5118 W. Jefferson Blvd., L.A. Through March 10; closed Sunday-Tuesday. (323) 272-3194, www.thelandinggalleries.com



Yevgeniya Baras, "Untitled," 2016. Oil and wood on canvas, 16 by 20 inches. The Landing

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Yevgeniya Baras, untitled, 2017, oil on burlap, 17 1/2 x 20".

LOS ANGELES

Yevgeniya Baras

THE LANDING

5118 W Jefferson Blvd

January 27 - March 10

Yevgeniya Baras's abstract paintings embody a beauty we don't see much of these days: scummy, grubby, and gnarled. She has a knack for using colors that are somewhere between merely unappealing and utterly revolting: mustards, moldy grays, dirty peach putty, and bilious greens. Against these she sets forms in black, white, lavender, bright blues and greens, fluorescent orange, gold, copper, and silver. The result is not exactly luminous, but she makes her hues ignite like flint against steel. Baras pulls off a similar trick with the physical construction of her works: She sometimes paints on burlap as coarse as a potato sack and awkwardly affixes it on the backside of stretcher bars, so that the burlap sinks in around the crossbars to create a topographical texture she either uses pictorially or ignores. The gritty accretion of paint on these funky structures, along with pieces of adhered wood and yarn, lends her surfaces a simultaneously excremental and archaeological quality.

The artist's imagery is an idiosyncratic mixture of Cyrillic text and private pictograms, sometimes legible as a uterus, landscape, or plant-like form, but often inscrutable. One picture (all works untitled, 2016 or 2017) closely resembles a tantric Shiva Linga painting, and indeed Baras spent time in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan in India, where the Shiva Linga painting tradition originates. Her twenty-one works on view surprise with unexpected choices and improvisations, orchestrating color, line, and shape to lock each image together in singular balance. Looking at the paintings, you might feel unable to put your finger on something, even though it is right there before your eyes.

— Daniel Gerwin

Art in America

YEVGENIYA BARAS

Nicelle Beauchene

Yevgeniya Baras's "All Inside of Itself, Close" was the artist's second solo exhibition in New York and her first with Nicelle Beauchene. Displaying tight compositions and keyed-up color, the fourteen untitled paint-

Yevgeniya Baras:
Untitled, 2016, oil
on canvas, 16 by
20 inches; at Nicelle
Beauchene.



ON REVIEWS

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ings on view (all 2016) demonstrate a significant leap from the pieces in her first solo show, at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects in 2015.

The new works (most no larger than twenty-five inches on a side) are thick with colorful garlands of oil paint and have the presence of wrapped gifts. Baras built up their stuccolike surfaces in layers; to many of the canvases she attached pieces of wood and gnarly bits of material, producing an irregular support for the paint. Her abstract imagery has an organic, mystical quality. The compositions feature hot colors over cool grounds, and scrawled markings that recall runes, children's drawing, or graffiti. In one work, bright orange lines and squiggles read as primeval depictions of energy, while pink, blue, and red forms resemble lava lamp blobs; there is a pleasurable confusion as to where the support—a canvas affixed with triangular wood pieces—ends and the paint begins.

Holes in two of the canvases underscore the paintings' objecthood and counter any sense of preciousness that the small scale of Baras's work might suggest. Baras also plays up the three-dimensionality of the canvases by painting their sides or, in some instances, rendering the compositions on their versos. In one work, a wood frame is attached to the front of the canvas; wavy, looping red and blue lines meander around the canvas and up onto the wood, which is painted pinkish brown and notched with marks suggesting the surface of bark. Forrest Bess's symbolic landscapes in dark, weathered frames come readily to mind, though here the conceit of painting wood patterning on real pieces of wood provides a subtle touch of humor.

Some of Baras's painted passages read as portrayals of natural phenomena like weather patterns, mountains, and planets. The feathery brushwork evokes that of the American visionary Charles Burchfield. Yet for all their swirling colors and eccentric pictorial space, the paintings have a curious stillness. It is as if the energy put into them crystallized too quickly into aesthetic realization.

When Baras enters territory closer to sculpture, her works have a livelier, fresher feel, as seen in the two shaped canvases on view—a wonky trapezoid and a craggy, shieldlike form. These pieces have an almost jigsaw quality, their compositions made up of various clearly defined areas of color. Two red lozenge shapes in the trapezoidal work seem talismanic, as if they offer "evil eye" protection. Both of the shaped canvases display less obsessive handiwork than that of the other pieces, and they function simultaneously as energetic surfaces and solid objects.

With today's rampant image-sharing culture, painters too often focus on making photogenic compositions. There's something refreshing about Baras's tactile approach to her medium. She can be viewed in the context of a cross-generational community of painters, including Chris Martin and Katherine Bradford, whose work playfully combines early American modernism and so-called outsider art while demonstrating a belief in paint as a material that can transcend pictorial representation.

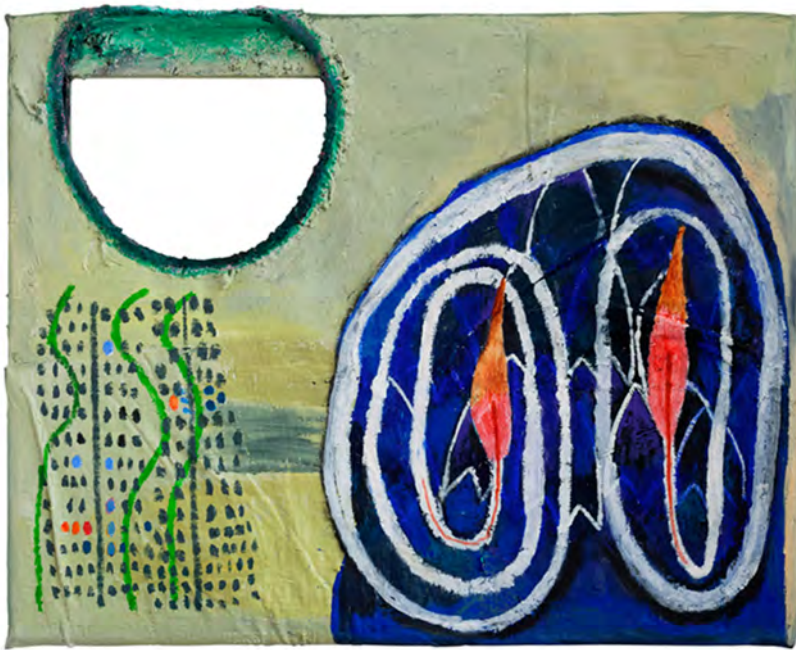
—Nora Griffin

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER, KAREN ROSENBERG and KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 22, 2016



Yevgeniya Baras's "Untitled" (2016), an oil on canvas, at Nicelle Beauchene. Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

‘All Inside of Itself, Close’

Yevgeniya Baras

*Nicelle Beauchene Gallery
327 Broome Street
Lower East Side
Through Oct. 9*

With their runelike markings and their strange lumps and bumps, Yevgeniya Baras's paintings claim a right to privacy. Naturally, this cloistered quality — echoed in the title of her latest solo — makes them deeply intriguing.

Ms. Baras, who is also a founder of the Lower East Side gallery Regina Rex, seems to align herself with early-20th-century American visionaries — in particular, Forrest Bess, with whom she shares an interest in small-scale canvases and intensely personal symbolism, and Arthur Dove, whose mystical landscapes and deep, jewel-toned palette come to mind. Some of the works in this show (her first at this gallery) experiment with a slightly bigger scale but continue to use a Bess-like vocabulary of amoebic splotches and short parallel marks, given added interest by Ms. Baras's stuffed, dented and punctured surfaces and by the little talismanic objects glued to them (slivers of wood, scatterings of pebbles).

In one work (untitled, like the rest), a deep-blue double spiral on the lower right portion of a celery-hued canvas balances out a large spherical hole on the upper left. The exposed section of stretcher bar, painted viridian, becomes part of the composition. On the bottom left are neat columns of tiny, stabbing brush strokes, which make up one of many evocations of ancient writing systems.

Enhancing the work's hermetic, coded sensibility is its resistance to the camera, which may pick up the strong colors and graphic lines but passes over the subtle topographical shifts and embedded treasures (which include human hair and family bedsheets, according to a news release). Ms. Baras reveals a lot about her inspirations and her process while still holding something back.

KAREN ROSENBERG

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NEW YORK

To Do: September 21–October 5, 2016

Twenty-five things to see, hear, watch, and read.

Published Sep 18, 2016

Art

1. See **Yevgeniya Baras: All Inside of Itself, Close**

Intensity and simple prettiness.

The one-block Broome Street stretch between Chrystie and the Bowery is laden with great galleries showing new artists. Case in point: the little gritty, glowing, magic-in-the-night paintings of newcomer Yevgeniya Baras. Visions between abstraction and figuration with bits of wood, bedsheets, and other detritus blend into metaphysical labyrinths of structure, shape, strokes, and precision all breaking off from meaning. —Jerry Saltz

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, 327 Broome Street, through October 9.

The New York Times

Yevgeniya Baras: ‘Of Things Soothsaid and Spoken’

This impressive New York gallery debut introduces a painter of small works that are visionary but self-aware, subtly irreverent and build convincingly on the achievement of Forrest Bess. Motifs suggesting sunrises, forests and other feats of nature as well as a possible book are rendered in simple forms and blunt brushwork supplemented with bits of relief. Wonderful, and wonderfully promising.

— ROBERTA SMITH



Yevgeniya Baras, *Untitled*, 2014,
oil on canvas, 24" x 16"

YEVGENIYA BARAS

STEVEN HARVEY FINE ART PROJECTS
FEBRUARY 21 - MARCH 29

Hovering between abstract, symbolic, and figurative, the paintings in "Of Things Soothsaid and Spoken" evoked the works of Forrest Bess, but these were pricklier and darker, with heavy layers of oil slathered over the canvases, raised frames, and bits of added wood. Somber tones were enlivened by touches of vermillion; lines were sometimes scratched into pigment, and landscapes were often implied. Albert Pinkham Ryder and Paul Klee came to mind.

In addition to being painted on the front, each work has a hidden image on the back, and one untitled painting made in 2014 was displayed on a pedestal so that both sides could be seen. The dark circle obscuring the mystical crescent moon on the reverse appears to be slipping off a raised round wood disk to continue over the lower canvas ground. At the edges, light is conveyed through stipples of pink, red, and white.

Another untitled painting features an image of a triangular eye painted over tinfoil. Sparkling lashes pop up from under thickly brushed purple and black and the shining silver pupil at the center is encircled at its edge by luminous blue-green.

Filled with compressed tension, these small paintings had a ritual, almost fetishistic aura, suggesting the long gestation period and considerable thought leading up to their final incarnations.

ELISABETH KLEY

Art in America

APR. 01, 2013

Yevgeniya S. Baras



Yevgeniya S. Baras is a contemporary painter and cofounder of Regina Rex Gallery and Bull and Ram Gallery, both in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. Baras received her BS in fine arts and psychology and MS in education from the University of Pennsylvania in 2003 and her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007.

Regina Rex and Bull and Ram have exhibited artists as diverse as EJ Hauser, Nancy Haynes, Katherine Bernhardt and Peter Gallo.

Baras's small, intimate paintings are densely layered abstractions of

saturated, nuanced color. Her work was most recently on view at Zürcher Gallery, New York, in an exhibition titled "Encounter" (Jan. 17-Feb. 24), which she curated, alongside Joshua Abelow, Avi Sabah, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Fransje Kilaars and Amy Feldman.—*JASON STOPA*

How did you start Regina Rex Gallery?

Thirteen people founded Regina Rex two years and nine months ago, and the same 13 people run it today. Together we have worked on 35 exhibitions, lectures and projects.

The fact that we put on exhibitions is a byproduct of our entangled, active relationship as artists, thinkers and collaborators, and in turn, what we produce binds us as parents are bound by sharing a child. We gather every week to discuss what we have seen, what we are interested in seeing more of, what we think about a particular body of work and the way one body of work exists in response to or against another. Regina Rex is a collaborative effort, a think tank, and hence the "I" has to be regularly reconfigured as it is tested against the "we."

What role does Bushwick play in the New York art scene?

Bushwick is a stew that contains fresh, raw ingredients. It is packed with studios where artists are thinking in interesting ways. There is a wide range of art being made, spaces being run, conversations being had. It's alive; it is a producer of culture. Bushwick is the latest version of what has happened in the New York art world many times before. I am aware that I am a part of something current that has occurred in other variations. It's healthy for the art community at large for there to be a place with a sense that anything can happen. Bushwick questions more traditional art institutions and hierarchies of power. It's a community that shakes things up.

Are your curatorial endeavors an extension of your studio practice?

I am an artist who curates. When I conduct studio visits I approach an artist's practice as a maker, an insider. I want to understand their work from within, considering the psychological reasons behind it. These conversations fuel my own thinking as an artist. If painting is alchemical, so is curating.

Curating parallels concerns I have in my studio. It is another platform for making, another material to sculpt with, a way to bring a vision forward, to surprise myself, make mistakes, surpass expectations, to see things anew. Curating is also a way for me to think through ideas that will not materialize in my own studio. It is an opportunity to have very close conversations with people whose work I respect. It is a way to make connections between people, create a platform for dialogue, propel ideas and create ground for future projects. Curating is active and potent.