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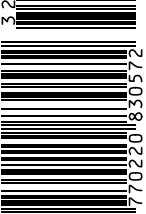
Artists

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The Future is Female: Cigdem Aydemir, Yevgeniya Baras, Bonita Ely, Emma Freeman, Michelle Hamer, Yuki Kihara, Wangechi Mutu, Glenda Nicholls, Rose Nolan, Izabela Pluta, Bhenji Ra, Marikit Santiago, Collier Schorr, Kaylene Whiskey, Anne Zahalka & more

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YEVGENIYA BARAS

Yevgeniya Baras makes paintings that speak their own language about process and materiality.

FEATURE *by* ALISON KUBLER

THE BARAS HAS TWO SIDES



YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2016–20
oil, wood, and paper
pulp on canvas
71 x 55 cm

Opposite
Top to bottom
YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2015–20
oil, wood, and paper
pulp on canvas
50 x 40 cm

YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2015–20
oil and wood on canvas
40 x 30 cm

YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2018–20
oil and wood on linen
40 x 40 cm

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YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2017–20
oil and paper pulp on canvas
50 x 40 cm

Courtesy the artist,
STATION, Melbourne,
Sydney and Nicelle
Beauchene Gallery,
New York

The strictures of social isolation have undoubtedly elevated the practice of looking at art at a remove. In our splendid solitude, so many of us have become connoisseurs of the digital realm, astute at navigating social media with a prowess formerly reserved only for the generation who created it. The art world, a late adopter of Instagram and the like, has found its spiritual home, as it were. For a visually-based medium, it is astonishing that it took so long for art galleries, dealers and artists to get on board. The genie is of course out of the bottle now, and platforms such as Instagram have arguably been the saviour of the arts in this time of lockdown. It is often said that much is lost in the virtual world – the physicality of the work, the ‘in the flesh’ visceral quality of the experience, the transferral of aura. All of these things are true, but they are not the only story an artwork tells. I thought of this when I was looking at the work of New York-based artist Yevgeniya Baras. She makes paintings that are really so much more than that which is implied by that particular medium. Baras often combines hard and soft elements, two- and three-dimensional elements, hessian, paint, glue, collage, to arrive at something that is quite unlike anything I have ever seen. It’s not pure painting, nor is it sculpture. It’s a marvellous hybrid

that refuses categorisation. There is something too, a quality to the works that I can only describe as nostalgic, almost as though they embody the past within the present. That is to say, they are wholly contemporary and yet redolent of a bigger history of painting.

At present Baras – who has a bachelor and graduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania (2003) and a Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2007) – is teaching at Rhode Island School of Design and Sarah Lawrence College. She was the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2019, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant and The Chinati Foundation residency in 2018, and the Yaddo Residency in 2017. She received the Artadia Prize and was selected for both the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program and the MacDowell Colony residency in 2015. In 2014 she was named the recipient of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Prize. Baras has also worked as a curator – she co-founded and co-curated Regina Rex Gallery on the Lower East Side of New York from 2010 to 2018. I spoke to the artist via email about materiality and scale, and hidden qualities.

IT CAN BE A LARGE PAINTING THAT WHISPERS OR A SMALL PAINTING THAT IS QUITE LOUD

Your works have an extraordinary materiality that is palpable even when viewed on social media. Can you tell me a little about the physical process of making and your choice of materials?

This happens to be the language I currently need in order to communicate, the language of materiality. My work is made by layering materials – some found, some sought out – and oil paint. The paintings are built up slowly. They gain layers over the years that they are being built. They also change and become more physical. The objects folded into the paintings function as talismans and demarcations of the time spent making the work. For example, if I worked on a painting in two different locations, it may have objects from both of those locations buried under the paint.

Ah, so that is one element you can’t see in reproduction! And these inclusions are inscrutable to the viewer? Almost as though you were reverse engineering an archaeological dig?

Yes, I am interested in the legible and illegible, hidden and revealed. If one could see in X-ray, they would see layers and objects trapped in the strata. But it would take a dig to find them. They are part of the meaning and the anchor of the work without being visible.

The paintings vibrate with the labour embedded in them. I understand you work both sides of the canvas. How do you ‘settle’ on a side, as it were, and how is this practice part of the process? Is the making as important as the final object?

At times I work on both sides. That has to

do with the fact that paintings are objects to me and I need to consider my own paintings from every angle. But in the end one side contains private considerations that feed the public side but do not need to be viewable. They are the guts. And they are important in so far as thoughts towards the building of ‘objecthood’, but not necessarily to be seen. There was one exhibition where I showed a piece from both sides, my first solo show in New York at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects. But just that once.

It is always obvious to me which one is the painting and which one is its support system.

Your work seems redolent with symbolism, as though you have created your own iconography from letters (what I assume is Russian alphabet?) and shapes. They are almost folkloric. Can you tell me about this aspect of the work?

It is important to me that the work is multilingual, but less important that the viewer understands the languages I use because letters in this case become forms and symbols. Symbolology developed over time, like another language that I speak in painting. Symbols have variations – they don’t always mean the same thing in every painting. It’s an established but shifting alphabet that can expand and change.

The work is also very much about translation. Translation from one language to another, which I do in my head. Translation of experiences and materials, of something ethereal into something more concrete, from one medium to another. I am highlighting rootedness and changeability.



The works are seemingly so labour intensive – do you start with a plan in mind, a landscape you are looking to construct or realise or is this aspect more serendipitous? The end result is almost sculptural.

I begin with drawings. They are often quick and they serve as kind of demarcations of locales, determining where potential events may live. The events may be a flock of brush strokes, or a set of symbols, or a word. And then it is intuition, experimentation, listening to the work, responding and reigning it in until it becomes something that has a sound. That can take a decade or two years. In my experience, my work cannot leave my studio for the first year of its existence. During that year we are still in a very close conversation and it has needs only I can fulfil. After that it can enter the world.

You have lived in the United States for a long time now, and yet your work seems redolent with a kind of European sensibility. Is there something in this?

Immigration compels a person to write their own history out of their roots, their newly found home and whatever they choose to forage along the way. I have lived in the United States for the past 27 years. My eyes and artistic sensibilities were trained here but some of my deeply rooted associations and dreams are located in my childhood and the culture of my family.



YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2016-19
yarn, wood, and oil
paint on canvas
40 x 50 cm

YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2015-19
oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm

YEVGENIYA BARAS
Untitled, 2015-2019
oil, wood, and paper
pulp on canvas
66 x 80 cm

Courtesy the artist,
STATION, Melbourne,
Sydney and Nicelle
Beauchene Gallery,
New York



You are both a teacher and a very prolific artist. How do you balance of teaching and making?

Making art for me is movement between a hermetic process and allowing the world to feed the work. When I am not in the studio, what I do in other realms of my life is in conversation with my studio work.

Teaching is the process of exchange. I receive as much as I give. It is also something I truly enjoy – thinking about the work of others, how it communicates, what could help it to communicate better, how it could be contextualised, who it is speaking to in art history and in contemporary art communities. When thinking about the work of others, I am sharpening the tools for thinking about my own work.

Your paintings are relatively small in scale – how important is scale for you? I would imagine they get quite heavy given the layers of materials? Are you interested in working large?

I am interested in working in a variety of sizes. There are paintings in my current Los Angeles exhibition that are 44 x 73 inches and 8 x 10 inches. Working on different kinds of surfaces – larger, smaller, older, newer (some paintings in Los Angeles were started in 2010) – provides me with interesting new visual problems. I like a range of problems occurring at the same time. And the paintings, when done, speak in different volumes. It can be a large painting that whispers or a small painting that is quite loud. **V**

Yevgeniya Baras is showing at STATION, Sydney from December 12, 2020 to February 6, 2021.

Yevgeniya Baras is represented by Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York and The Landing Gallery, Los Angeles.

yevgeniyabaras.com

nicellebeauchene.com

thelandinggalleries.com

stationgallery.com.au

