





No second chances in the land of a thousand dances...

Ry Cooder

The program of this gallery has long been about the dismantling of distance. Nothing grand or political in this ambition – just a selfish need to live in a neighbourhood that offered more than merely local cuisine. This is not to decry the local, rather my thinking was that we might greedily consume both, and were that possible, there would be significant benefits in this.

Traveling has allowed us to judiciously extend invitations to artists to present their work in Australia and New Zealand and thereby dismantle some of the distance that irked me, particularly in the early years of the gallery. Fortuitously that very distance carried an inverse appeal to artists whose own world was framed by a different but equally restrictive regionalism. As a plan it unfolded organically rather than strategically, but now as I look back over those years I smile, because the endless visitations back and forth amounted to something.

Of course what we all delight in is shared enthusiasms and Liat Yossifor's magnificent exhibition *No Second Chances in the Land of a Thousand Dances* is a result of just that. It was the ardour of Liat's 'alla prima' comrade, British painter Erin Lawlor that first brought me to Liat's painting. Trusting as I am in Erin's views on the mysteries of painting, we conspired to visit with Liat at her Hollywood studio. Returning some months after that first visit, having been happily haunted by her work would confirm just how thrilling Liat's paintings are.



From that first visit I knew Liat Yossifor's paintings didn't only belong in L.A. Of course they are made there amidst the particularities of the California condition, the light, the bleached colour, the unswept horizon – and it is even tempting, in a slightly odd literal manner to see Yossifor's arcing gestures as series of turnpikes, viewed from above like desaturated urban metaphors for the City of Freeways. But of course they're not – and whilst it has become apparent that over the decades many West Coast artists – Mary Corse, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, John McCracken through to James Turrell have succumbed to the geographical determinism that California promotes, Yossifor's paintings resist these inducements in favour of a more Cimmerian conversation.

Sitting with Liat in her studio my first thought was that these works seemed to be more in tune with the emotional temperature of the Lower East side... more Rothko than McLaughlin, certainly more Krasner than Irwin yet the more we sat with Liat and the light in the studio dropped, the shadows lengthened across the gullies and ravines of her surfaces, I was brought back to landscape and action. Perhaps this is where the expanse and inescapable breadth of the California condition asserts itself in her work. But rather than the ubiquitous horizons of Agnes Martin and John McLaughlin these paintings prefer a low-flying topography. Seen from above, the scars in the surface reveal deeper, hidden strata of colour – a secret geological biography where sediment and process hint at distant sites.

But more than place, these paintings exist as a compressed recounting of spirit and movement. Curiously they manage to conflate, whilst simultaneously critiquing, the masculine heroism of action painting with the turmoil and vivacity of a newer, more agile performance. One thinks of Carolee Schneemann and the radical way that she used her body as a mechanism of expanded gesture and the way that Yossifor's excavations question the very notion of gesture and narrative. Yossifor unthreads the surface, in fact the body of the painting, tugging forcefully at the Ariadnean thread that lead her in. Though not as intrusive as Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* I have the sense that Yossifor is extricating a buried internal history and leaving us with a performative (land)scape shaped by a deeply authentic performance – a ceremony that is gratefully free of the irony and cynicism which have been the currency of recent times.



*Every gesture was one of disorder and violence,
as if a lioness had come into the room.*
Anais Nin, *Little Birds*





*Ideally, one should have more material
than one can possibly cope with.*

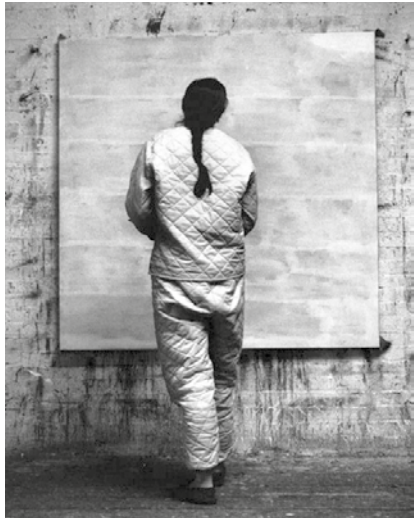
Frank Auerbach

The glorious melee of gesture and inscription that constitute the ground that Yossifor builds arises equally from removal as from addition. Pigment is not politely wiped away, rather Yossifor gouges and abrades the surface, carving at the paint in a powerful elliptical dance that simultaneously uncovers and conceals gesture. The expanse of ravines and gorges feel etched into the body of the paint, much like a glacial retreat engraves the landscape. John Steinbeck said, “...to be alive at all is to have scars” and when I look at Liat’s paintings, her metaphorical landscape points as much to anguish as to place.

This alloy of beauty and grief is also present in Liat’s small paintings on paper. Like Yossifor, Frank Auerbach disrupted the layers of the paint. There is such physicality in their shared approach - no polite intention to describe form, rather it emerges from a determined mining of the layers of underpainting, folding and shaping it as if to exhume the composition. However viscous and agitated, their violence is calmed by their sheer love of the material. For both, these wilfully marred surfaces delivers their vulnerability and humanity to surface. They feel to me for all the world like a wild flurry of Coltrane – vigorous even fierce bebop held tight as a composition by virtuosity and the knowledge that each note is there for a reason.



In this exhibition of new paintings Yossifor has made two dramatic shifts. One is colour and the second is proportion. To this point her decisions about scale and the systemic way that the canvases she chooses measure her own physical extent do remind me of Agnes Martin. The decision to paint the same Vitruvian scale time and again, the narrowing of the chromatic range suggest that Yossifor too seeks a solemn, reflective awareness through the joy of repetition. Now the relative neutrality of her familiar square form is joined by a grand portrait format that is well over 2 metres tall. One of these new sized paintings is prosaically titled *Tall Red*. It could not be any redder. As I look at it, I hear the strains of Jason Molina's poignant lyric "your hair is coxcomb red and your eyes are viper black". For this is painting that has a visceral intensity and an inflamed temperament. Yossifor's passionate excavations now dovetail with a colour that rouses their innate potency even further. The equanimity of the square and the self-possession of the black and grey pigments gives way in *Tall Red* to a grander portraiture that signals Liat's desire to unbridle the regulation of the square and the discipline and regime of the black and grey paintings.





...the valley of ten million insanities.

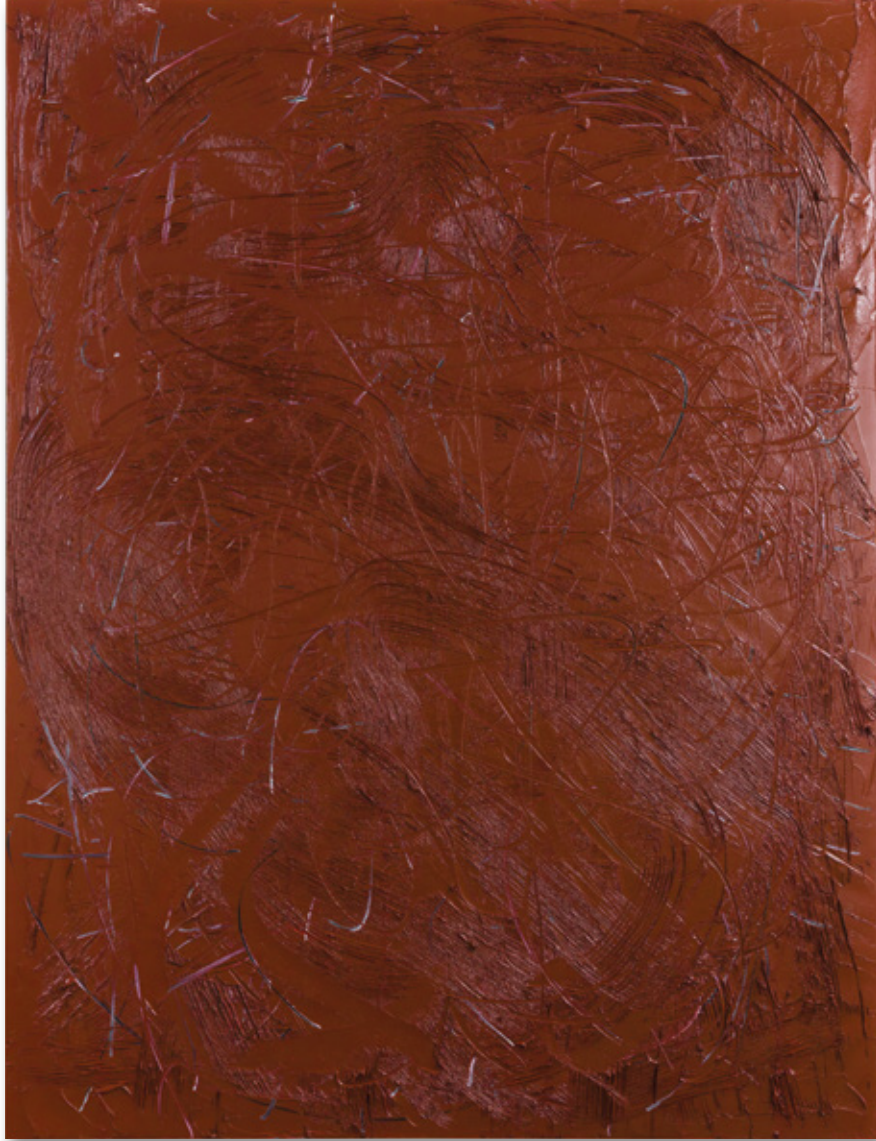
Ry Cooder

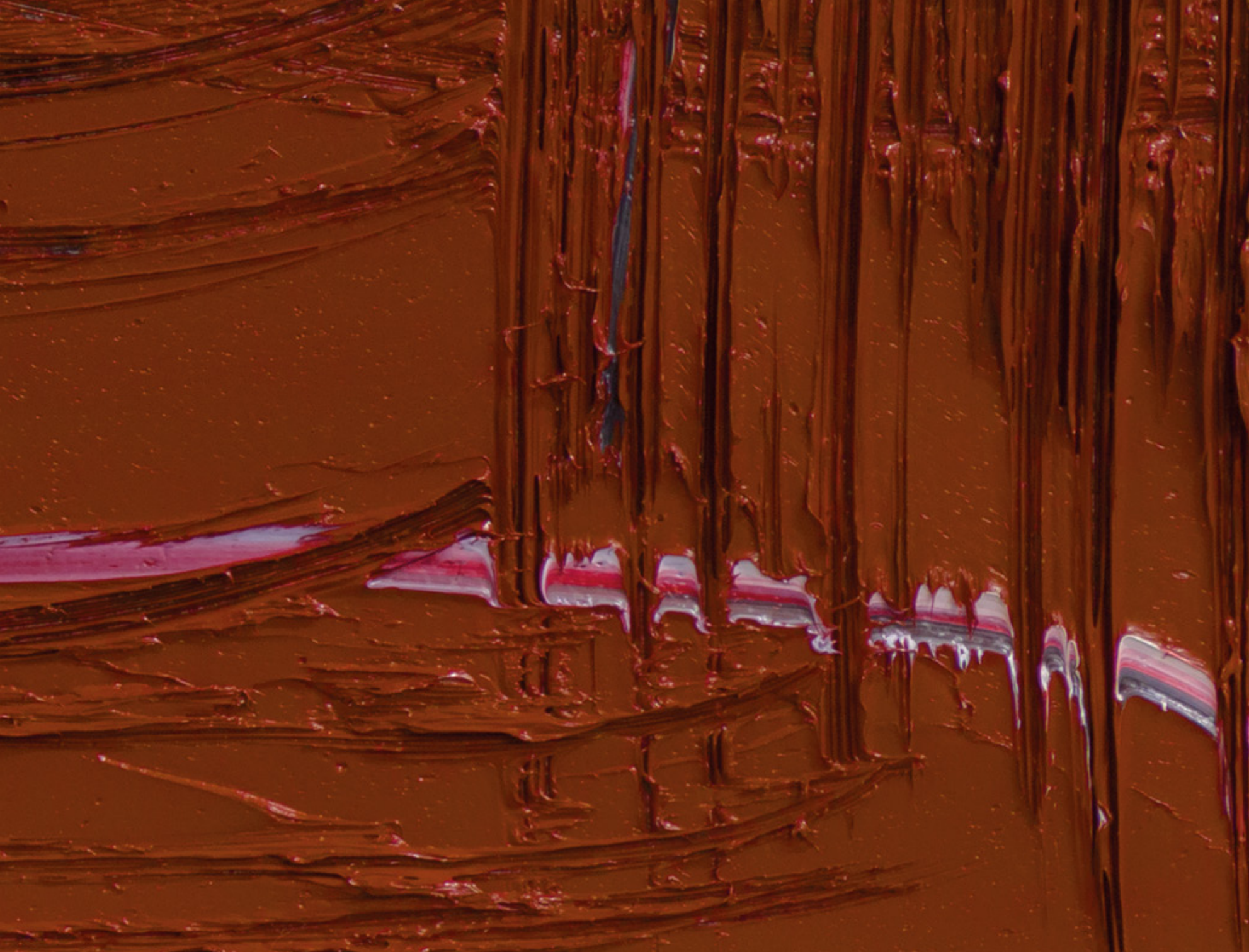
Whether black, grey or red, all of Yossifor's paintings deliver a deeply felt aggregate of physical and emotional perseverance. One can't help but feel the sweep and arc of her gesture, each and every pivot and turn. As objects and records of performance they permit this curiously resilient act of painting to re-emerge as a fundamental agency of a deep unlanguage communication. At a time when we are being encouraged to listen it is equally vital that we see. With so much painting capitulating to the seductions and rewards of entertainment, being reminded of paintings particular capacity to shoulder both the burdens and aspirations of 'felt' expression feels overdue. Liat Yossifor believes devotedly in paintings' unflagging readiness for this responsibility and indeed in its Rasputin-like indomitability as expressed by Carolee Schneemann - "I'm a painter. I'm still a painter and I will die a painter."

If Schneemann made the viewer hyper aware of the/ her body as an agent of extravagant and atavistic gesture, then Yossifor's paintings also serve as potent reminders that the separation between body and mind, indeed with history, is a fiction. Her paintings are performative and richly allegorical, not because of what they say but because of what they make us feel...turbulent, vulnerable, giddy and alive.

- Andrew Jensen, 2020







your veins are using up the redness of the world.
Frank O'Hara, *Meditations in an Emergency*





When I first painted a number of canvases grey all over (about eight years ago), I did so because I did not know what to paint, or what there might be to paint: so wretched a start could lead to nothing meaningful.

As time went on, however, I observed differences of quality among the grey surfaces – and also that these betrayed nothing of the destructive motivation that lay behind them. The pictures began to teach me. By generalizing a personal dilemma, they resolved it.

Gerhard Richter











That flag is a symbol we attach our emotions to, but it isn't the emotion itself and it isn't the thing we really care about. Sometimes we don't even realize what we really care about, because we get so distracted by the symbols.
Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*



Works

P. 1

Nothing is Black Nothing is Grey, (detail) 2019
oil on linen, 204 x 178 cm
Private Collection, Auckland

P. 2

Howard W. Koch
Still from *Untamed Youth* USA 1957
© United Archives GmbH

P. 4 - 5

Wide Black, 2020
oil on linen, 203 x 198 cm

Carolee Schneemann

Up to and Including Her Limits, 1973
crayon on paper, rope, harness
dimensions variable

Performance MoMA, New York City
Image courtesy Carolee Schneemann, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017
© 2020 Estate of Carolee Schneemann
Photograph courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co and P.P.O.W. New York

P. 7

Wide Black, (detail) 2020
oil on linen, 203 x 198 cm

P. 8 - 9

Letters III, (detail) 2020
oil on paper, 30 x 22 cm

Frank Auerbach

Head of J.Y.M II, 1984-85
oil on canvas, 66 x 61 cm
Private collection © Frank Auerbach

P. 10

Agnes Martin in her studio, 1960
Photograph courtesy of Alexander Liberman
Photography Archive, Getty Research Institute.
Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust

P. 14 - 16

Tail Red, 2020
oil on linen, 215 x 165 cm

P. 17

Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)
Jane Fleming, later Countess of Harrington, c.1778/79
oil on canvas, 239.4 x 147.5 cm
© Courtesy of the Huntington Art Museum, San Marino, California

P. 18 - 22

Wide Red, 2020
oil on linen, 203 x 198 cm

P. 23

Judean Desert, Israel

P. 24 - 25

Nothing is Black Nothing is Grey, 2019
oil on linen, 204 x 178 cm (each panel)
Private Collection, Auckland

P. 26 - 27

Nothing is Black Nothing is Grey, 2019
oil on linen, 204 x 178 cm (each panel)
Private collection, Auckland

Erin Lawlor

Over the Plain, 2018
oil on canvas, 180 x 260 cm
Private collection, Auckland
Installation: *Wet, Wet, Wet*
Fox Jensen McCrory, Auckland 2019

P. 29

Letters I, 2020
oil on paper, 31 x 22 cm

P. 31 - 33

Letters II/IV, 2020
oil on paper, 29 x 20 cm

P. 34

Marsden Hartley
Portrait of a German Officer, 1914
oil on canvas, 173.4 x 105 cm
Courtesy of Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949
Photograph Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

P. 35

Small Red, 2020
oil on linen, 40 x 35.5 cm



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