

# ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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## Showings in Four Dimensions



*Showings in Four Dimensions* (installation view L-R), Darius Yektai, *Waiting For Death Or Slavery: After Delacroix*, 2022, Elise Ansel, *Celestial Lounge Chair*, 2021, Darius Yektai, *Untitled Falling Flowers*, 2021 & Kyle Hittmeier *Natural Le Coultre*, 2022. Photo: AB NY Gallery

As soon as the formula codified that a contemporary artist could reach a new level of institutional engagement once they proclaimed their inspiration from generations of art historical masterpieces, the flood gates opened to practitioners solely deploying references to the canon to project their careers farther and faster. With encyclopedic museums refreshing their image by aligning themselves with the success of the contemporary art world's darlings, by connecting their creative process to roots foregrounded in the rich mire of historical artworks, new publications and programming surfaced. Notably The Artist Project at The Metropolitan Museum of Art was launched in 2015, and most recently even the gilded age indulgence of The Frick Collection created their exhibition series *Living*

*Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters* at their temporary home on Madison Avenue.

Over the last half decade, the art world has become a bastion defending the plague of easy art milking this formula to attain higher prices, serious critical consideration, and of course institutional support for their artworks. Viewers and gallerists alike have become jaded to the artworks whose substantiation of importance relies solely on late 18th century French court paintings or 17th century Dutch still life painters. When a press release emphasizes a mid-career artist's debt to art historical forebears, one takes a sharp inhale to clear the malaise from their system. A fresh curatorial consideration by Sarah Scribner, Director at AB NY Gallery, of which vocabulary–of process and of historical mores–inform a group of contemporary painters (of all things) should be lauded for capturing an elusive spark missing from many other projects.

An ethereal paint stroke of polychromatic active matter is the centerpiece of each of Elise Ansel's three paintings in the exhibition. Emanating from a vacuum devoid of color, resembling a galactic pitch black, an undulating wide stroke lives on as a shadowy afterlife of the paintbrush's initial use. Subtle gradient tones illustrate the motion of the artist's hand, while the electric and acidic highlights of *Celestial Slide II* (2022) mimic biological heat mapping or microscope slide dyes. While the self-conscious and conspicuous process of painting is brought to bear in each canvas, the vocabulary of its illustration is deeply rooted in the kinetic sphere of the hard sciences: chemistry and planetary physics. The works titles explicitly reference both as in *Celestial Slide I – III* (2022) and *Celestial Lounge Chair* (2021), which sneaks in a modernist reference for viewing the trajectory of its singular curve. The color scales appear to freeze a streaking pulse of electromagnetic radiation, which is the heat transfer process that provides the glowing palette of the Aurora Borealis or the Northern Lights. Even the ancient linguistic origins that named this celestial phenomenon make this aesthetic form a perfect allegory for the generative creativity that results in a finished artwork. The Roman goddess of the dawn–*Aurora*–in combination with Greek's North Wind–*Boreas*–connotes the spark of inspiration, often described as light, with the wind's speed or "rush" of creativity. One might contemplate Ansel's primary muse for these works may indeed be this wonder of our earth's atmosphere.



Elise Ansel, *Celestial Slide III*, 2022 Oil on linen, 30" x 24" Photo: AB NY Gallery



*Showings in Four Dimensions* (installation view L-R), Elise Ansel, *Celestial Slide I, III & II*, 2022. Photo: AB NY Gallery

It certainly was the inspiration for the photon design for Microsoft's screensaver option in the 90s. This parallel invokes a nostalgic association between Ansel's palette and computer technologies that are now completely embedded within the foundations of today's society. Perhaps invoking this realm of relativity and activated photonic particles connotes the present questions surrounding web3 and the Metaverse as newest frontiers of exploration, which inherently combines expansion and commodification. Ansel's ethereal wisps of extraordinary chromatic skill cover millennia of references—mythological, linguistic, visual, and scientific—that ground us again in the present zeitgeist. This sophisticated approach towards Ansel's technical process of painting encapsulates the accrued expertise of her lengthy practice, enhancing the viewer for traversing the multiplicity of layers at play upon the plane of the canvas. The dimensionality of this series rewards deep looking and lengthy consideration to reflect upon these layers of active matter.

In equal measure, the precision of Kyle Hittmeier's application of paint upon canvas accentuates the physical distinctions between foreground and background to reveal discrete temporalities signaling the heights of two economic booms in the

last forty years. As a highly trained painter who graduated from RISD's MFA program, Hittmeier is able to translate two entirely disparate lighting schemes, two different depths of field in the focus of each image layer, as well as different source images both accessed from the quotidian corporate cubicle. The montage impact of these individual realms draws the eye in with bold colors in uncanny arrangements of hyperrealist imagery. These aesthetic feats utilize trompe l'oeil technique to create a nuanced approach to surrealism that feels vital. Activated by coded symbols of desire and productivity, Hittmeier's works instantiate the entangled states of tourism—a motivator to achieve rest and relaxation—with the multiplying tasks of corporate productivity. Each encased in fluorescent square post-its, which must be identified and conquered to earn such tropical respite. Each square ironically appropriates post-war art historical principles of minimalism and seriality which have been institutionalized then co-opted investment vehicles—as universally welcomed office lobby furnishings. Yet, each note's color in the fluorescent palette of familiar to corporate supply orders, expresses a sense of urgency to task yet to be inscribed on their surface, while simultaneously linked with day-dream-worthy environments for the 5 second microbreak that keeps a cubicle's resident laborer sharp and hungry for their authorized two weeks of out-of-office revitalization.



*Showings in Four Dimensions* (installation view L-R), Elise Ansel, *Celestial Lounge Chair*, 2021, Darius Yektai, *Untitled Falling Flowers*, 2021 & Kyle Hittmeier, *Natural Le Coultre*, 2022. Photo: AB NY Gallery

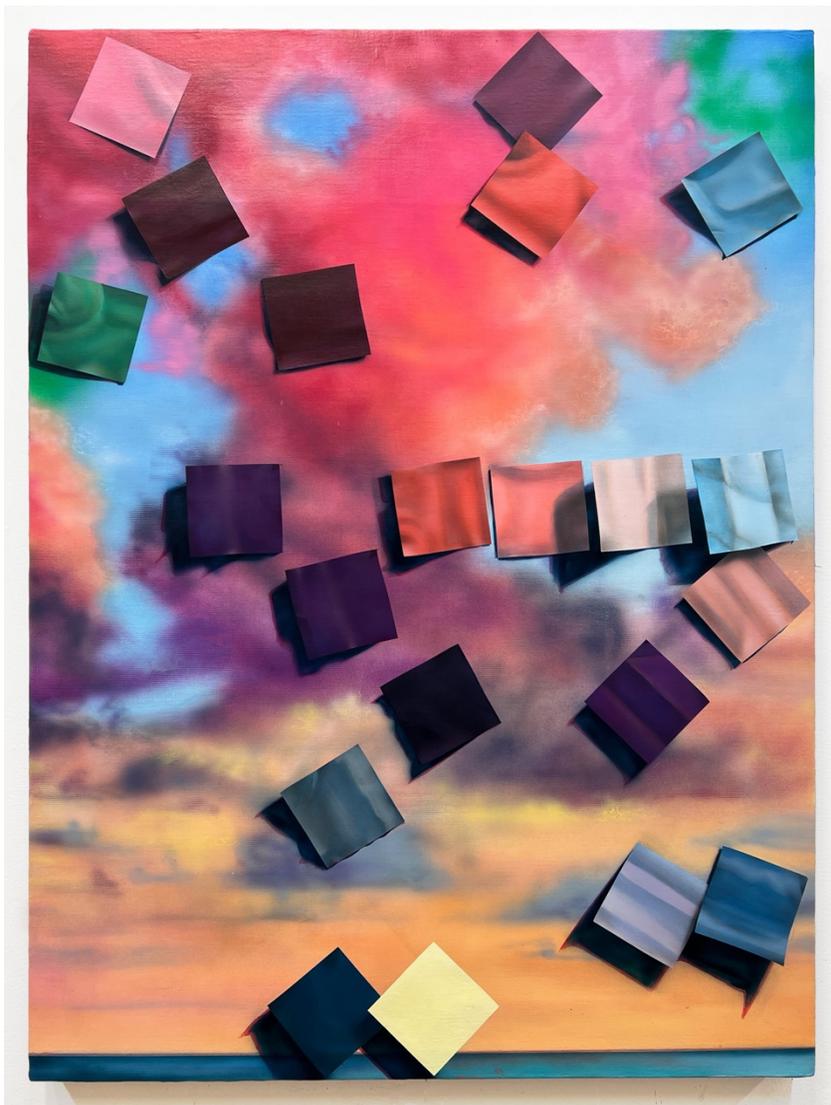
Tourism is a generations-old pattern of travel predicated on colonial concepts of pristine land—a vision of natural beauty of God's creation—to be surrounded for the excitement and interest of rejuvenating one's sense of fulfillment. Hittmeier turns his lens towards the 100 square miles of the Cayman Islands in the Caribbean, as a site of complex multi-layered economic exploitation. Consisting of three individual land masses, collectively known as the Cayman Islands; its lush tropical plants were

a draw of British magistrates in the Early Modern Period's aegis of exploration to increase trade. This initial establishment of British colonies abroad and the robust transatlantic trade that flourished as a result, created systems of economic inequality due to this colonial past.

In recent history, particularly the US bull markets and "golden-age" in the 1980s urban financial systems identified the locations abroad that were struggling due to these deep-seeded historical circumstances (whether they knew it or not). Schemes for revitalization, or diversification of a nation's economic drivers. Hence, an additional layer of significance of the Cayman Islands for the artist's investigations, having become an institutionally condoned off-shore banking locale friendly towards measures that shelter funds from domestic taxes in the United States. Since the 1980s this process of offshore banking has masked the origins of income inequality between locals and international account holders, fostering mechanisms for international account holders to increase this wealth disparity, and creating an additional allure to the Cayman Islands as a prime tourist location. This seemingly unique geography at the nexus of escapism, of private wealth, global economic hegemony, as unseen or coded layers of the islands' historical identity, make this a prime source of imagery to visually map.

Hittmeier presents the unknowability of the elusive Cayman Islands through his ethereal works that are simultaneously unsettling. This tension is brought to bear in each painting by the illusion of physical depth between each realm of the canvas (foreground and background). This rupture of spatial distance is echoed in the temporal distance between the idyllic dreamscape of a future vacation in contradistinction to the flutter of nagging tasks inhabiting the wall panels of the viewer's current deskscape. The ideal of a pristine beach sunset seen in *Natural Le Coultre* (2022), is sourced from actual vacation images of tourists to that location, although ironically accessed from a computer that is the universal furniture for a corporate cubicle. Compressed in our current era's immediate moment in a singular location is accessing and surrounded by the potential of concentrated transformation of Caribbean travel, as well as the yoke of work that delays such a voyage—seen here as a barrage of post-its. Each square is designed to transform that person's potential into concentrated productivity from their continual microbursts of labor within the cubicle environment. This dichotomy and dualism—wellbeing subservient to work, and work fueled by fantasizing about travel (which increased wellbeing)—reveal the psychological entanglements our Western economy exploits, which is built upon colonial legacies of exploitation of foreign lands for economic gain of the exploited Western worker. These systemic frameworks are extant and remain unseen by the majority of the system's own participants.

By drawing out and juxtaposing the aesthetic symbols of the different locations and temporalities at play in this deep history of global economic inequality, Hittmeier's paintings tempt the viewer with familiar icons, luscious tones, and precise execution that fool the eye thereby presenting the inherent instabilities of the patterns of behavior, mentalities, and international trade that the viewer fools themselves into thinking is not part of problematic histories. Each painting therefore is a cerebral escape into a visual investigation that can lead to a greater political sensitivity, functioning then as a maze to connect the dots on one's own or as a mirror to question those societal norms we take for granted.



Kyle Hittmeier, *Natural Le Coultre*, 2022, Acrylic on linen over panel, 30" x 40",  
Photo: AB NY Gallery

The plane of the canvas as a mirror towards the viewer is writ large in the work of Darius Yektai, who employs resin to instantiate such a reflective sheen. Yektai

similarly confronts the dark undercurrent of humanity through drawing illustrative inspiration from the art historical masters ranging from Delacroix to Motherwell. The dark swirling sky of *Waiting For Death Or Slavery: After Delacroix* (2022) is ruminative on devastation present in our current post-pandemic wartorn epoch. Participating in a long lineage of the painterly tradition, the artist completes the same procedures in the creation of a piece as Delacroix himself from handcrafting a stretcher to gessoing the ground all the way through applying varnish—or in this case heaps of resin, distorting the relative scale of these traditional methods. With deep introspection and masterful handling of materials, Yektai builds layer upon layer of paint encased in resin to be painted upon once more. Manipulating thick swathes of oil paint is the artist's signature style, which emphasizes an illegibility in the depth of the piece; stacked in abundant pours of resin giving the work a sculptural presence. Each figure is imbued with an uncanny weight turned gravitas as the slick surface encases the subject—frozen in time—as if “a geological record”.

Yektai invites the play of light (indirect from the environment) to permanently reside as active matter within the scene. The reality of the gruesome yet stylized figures becomes subsumed in the ever changing illusions unfolding across its mirror-like surface. The presence of the viewer is physically manifest, bobbing in amongst the landscape strewn with bodies succumbing to the trance-like sleeping state of death and despair. Inextricable from the scene, due to the artist's expert manipulations of the multifaceted potential of the painting as simultaneous platform and portal, ensnares the viewer to confront the centuries old barbarism of war. Utilizing the nature of materials to maximize the dual face of a canvas's surface, the viewer becomes a physical bridge connecting the juxtaposition of different temporalities: the originating Romanticist painting, the frozen moment of this work's creation, and the future-present of the viewer's individual entanglement with the scene. Needless to say, this painting isn't just easy art as a quotation of the institutional canon. Therefore, the painting remains unrecordable, a guise of performativity activated solely in the presence of a viewer. Photography is hard pressed to capture the complete invocation of the work through the viewer's gaze, insisting personal reflection. The ghoulish specter of death has become acutely pertinent in today's news cycle with outbreak of war in Europe raising the question of where is the differentiations between war and genocide? The production of the painting itself—sharped edged—with battle scars of its own creation.



Darius Yektai, *Waiting For Death Or Slavery: After Delacroix*, 2022, Oil and resin on linen, 89" x 77"

**Showings in Four Dimensions exhibited at AB NY Gallery, 62 Newton Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937 through July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022; Featuring artists Elise Ansel, Kyle Hittmeier and Darius Yektai.**

**About the author:** Carson Woś is a passionate Art Historian she holds her MA from The University of St. Andrews, Scotland and pursued her graduate work at The Bard Graduate Center on Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture. She currently is the Director of Operations at Helwaser Gallery on Madison Avenue. Prior to this she was at ArtNet where she came with experience from The Metropolitan

Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of Art and Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, among other institutions. Carson is an avid researcher bringing her knowledge to her community and profession in NYC. She is an active participant in culture at The Frick and American Ballet Theatre at Lincoln Center.