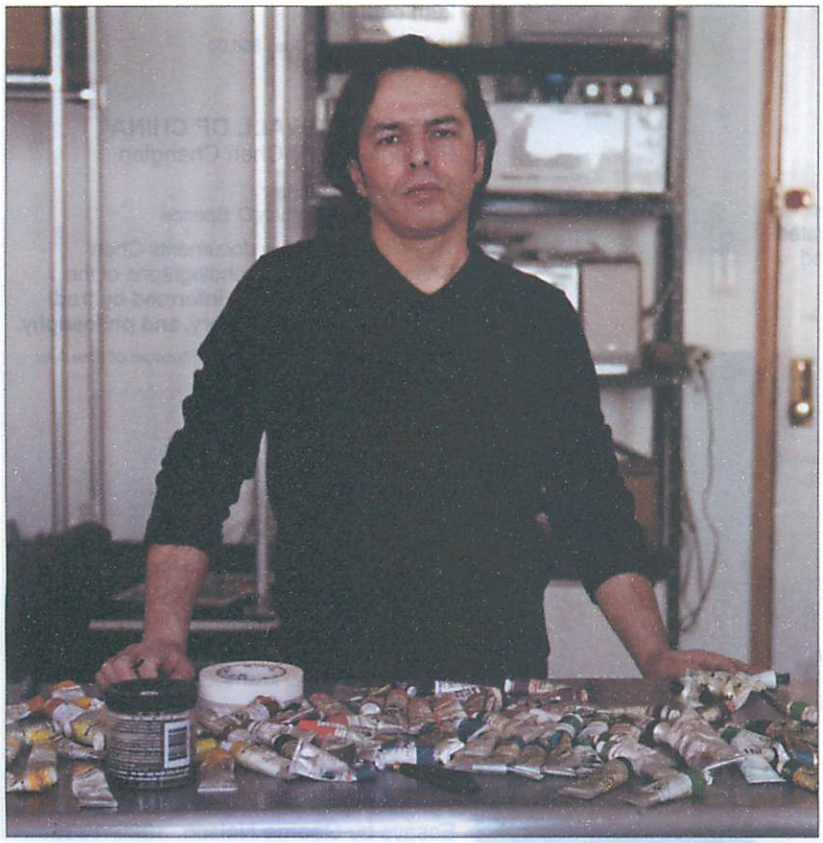
Not-So-Still Lifes

Painter Matvey Levenstein finds drama in his own living-room furniture

BY RACHEL SOMERSTEIN

Eleven paintings from Matvey Levenstein's latest series of small works hang on one wall of his sunny studio in Manhattan's Chinatown. The artist has already sent two to Rome, where they will be shown at Galleria Lorcan O'Neill in the fall. Levenstein, 47, approaches *Sleeping*, a painting that shows his wife, the painter Lisa Yuskavage, in bed. A gray sheet is pulled over her shoulders, her hair cascades over a pink pillow, and a small dog sits obediently beside her. Levenstein removes the work from the wall and then stands back to take a look. Then he replaces it. Remove. Replace. Yes, he acknowledges, the series, consisting mostly of still lifes of flowers and church interiors, seems to need the Yuskavage portrait. Not, he says, because the grouping is supposed to offer a straightforward narrative—with the other images functioning as her dream, for example. Rather, he says, "I'm interested in what happens between the paintings," the way in which emotions in these "ritualistic environments" activate one another.



Matvey Levenstein in his Chinatown studio. He describes his paintings as "interiors that are 'interior.'"

AMY STEIN

Levenstein has been painting images based on photographs for more than ten years. His last series, which he refers to as the "apartment series," was shown at Larissa Goldston Gallery in New York in 2005. Among these large, slick paintings are portrayals of the interior of his East Village apartment, portraits of Yuskavage, and still lifes of clementines and flowers. Dramatic shadows akin to those of Caravaggio or Velázquez lend a cinematic effect to the black lacquered furniture and the almost eerily perfect fruit and petals. Levenstein's glossy finish makes the paintings seem airtight. "I didn't want to be expressionist," he says. "I wanted to deny the painterliness of the brushstroke. I have a love-hate relationship with narrative."

Born in Moscow in 1960, Levenstein began drawing at a young age—he describes it as the "kind of thing that you keep coming back to"—but as an adolescent he struggled to gain admission to mathematics school. A friend of the family encouraged him to pursue art. "By 14 I never looked back," says Levenstein, who wears a zip-up sweater, jeans, and a shadow of dark stubble. In 1977 he entered the Moscow Architectural Institute. He studied there for two years and learned to sketch. An interest in architecture continues to pervade his work, and is particularly evident in his renderings of Roman arches, a recurring subject in his paintings.

Growing up in the Soviet Union in the late '70s was tough, he says, with Jews barred from entering many professions. Members of his family were imprisoned for their political activities. Even finding materials for his art classes was complicated by politics, he notes: "The teachers would say, 'I don't care how you get it, but just get some sumi ink.'" At the time, Russia did not trade with China, so Levenstein and his fellow students purchased blocks of the ink on the black market. Eventually he made his way to the United States with his fam-

Rachel Somerstein is a writer who lives in New York.

ily, and by the age of 19, he was enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

There Levenstein was introduced to all manner of artworks, many of which he had never been exposed to before. When professors showed slides of Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures, he says, "I literally didn't know what the Flavins were made of." He received his B.F.A. in 1983 and then enrolled in the M.F.A. program at Yale, where he temporarily abandoned painting. "It was in the air," he explains, "this sort of 'death of painting.' It was the epoch of Neo-Expressionism. I was doing constructions of cement walls." In grad school he met Yuskavage, and after he earned his master's in painting and printmaking in 1987, the two married and moved to New York.

***Still Life*, 2002, shows the interior of Levenstein's apartment.**

Living on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side, Levenstein continued making sculpture, often sexually provocative work. To support himself he held a number of odd jobs, including building custom closets. "I was a terrible carpenter," he says, smiling at the recollection. Levenstein returned to painting in the early '90s, because, he says, "after looking at a lot of stuff, I didn't see anybody doing what I wanted to do."

Around this time a friend gave him a photo album rescued from a Brooklyn trash can. The album's black-and-white pictures of a bourgeois-looking European family proved inspiring. "For so long I painted from models or from my imagination," says Levenstein. Painting from photos "was like breaking a taboo." He embarked on a series based on the found images; he showed the first works, made with sumi ink, at Jack Tilton Gallery in New York in 1995. A show of oil paintings followed two years later.

With both series, Levenstein noticed that viewers tended to focus on the paintings' narrative potential—the stories behind the photos—and he realized that the works were overwhelmed by their subject matter. "I don't believe in interpretation," he says, explaining that he is interested in "paintings as objects." So he decided to paint from his own snapshots, moving away from subjects that lend themselves to storytelling and toward what he describes as "less nameable situations."

In the late '90s Levenstein began painting church interiors. Some works, like the dark and motionless *Church* (1998), seem like film stills. The discomfiting sense of drama persists in more brightly colored paintings like *Yellow Wall* (1999) and *Yellow Room* (2000), in which shadowy figures are set against a striking yellow wall in his apartment. Both settings—church and home—are "social spaces that turn into internal space," he says, "interiors that are 'interior.'" Indeed, portraits of his apartment, his wife, and an altar share what the writer Susanna Moore has described as a sense of the "devotional."

In 2003 Levenstein won the American Academy's Rome Prize and spent a year there. He lived first in Trastevere and later on Via Giulia, where he continued working on the apartment series, producing paintings like *Flowers* (2004)—a vase set on a black table that reflects the apartment—and *Bedroom 1* (2003), a rumpled bed dressed with striped sheets. "It was the first time since grad school that I wasn't painting in New York, and it sounds cheesy, but—the light," he says, gesturing with his hands, beyond words. His newest series, painted entirely in New York, incorporates the influence of Roman light in pieces like a still life colored by gold afternoon sunshine and a landscape at dawn.

These and other new works will be included in the show at Lorcan O'Neill, and will be on view in New York next spring at Larissa Goldston, where his work sells for between $5,000 and $20,000. In contrast to the works based on his apartment, "maybe this new series is less sealed off," says Levenstein, turning away from the wall of paintings. Nevertheless, he continues to resist any suggestion of a story in his pictures, determined to work against cliché. "Being a realist painter, you're in dialogue with all sorts of images," he says. "You have to liberate yourself from your context." ■

***Sleeping*, 2007, a portrait of Levenstein's wife, the painter Lisa Yuskavage.**

TOP: PRIVATE COLLECTION; ALL IMAGES COURTESY LARISSA GOLDSTON GALLERY, NEW YORK