

The New Criterion

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Levenstein's long exposures

by Robert Becker

Matvey Levenstein is notoriously slow with the brush, finishing only a dozen or so paintings or sumi ink drawings each year. It's time well spent, and, partly as a result, his work is an anti-expressionistic respite from this insane cultural moment. The finely wrought paintings in his current exhibition at Kasmin Gallery in New York—landscapes and interior still lifes—whisper their purpose rather than shout, in the way that Dana Schutz's wildly aggressive figurations just down Tenth Avenue do. The only living soul represented in Levenstein's entire exhibition—disregarding one tiny seagull—is his wife and artistic counterweight, Lisa Yuskavage. In *LY* (2018), a sort of family snapshot, she's positioned in profile studying a wintry vista from their porch on Long Island, gazing over a pasture to the frozen estuary beyond. Though her face takes up a full third of the frame, Yuskavage, a force of nature both as an artist and in real life, is gently subsumed—like the fiery storm clouds in another of his paintings—into Levenstein's quietly deliberate way of making art.



Matvey Levenstein, LY, 2018, Oil on linen, Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

A kind of high drama does pulse through the work nevertheless. But the drama here is intellectual, symbolic (in his use of stormy weather, for example), even literary, like the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich to which Levenstein refers, rather than something histrionic or, God forbid, confessional. A Russian Jewish refugee whose family fled the Soviet Union in 1980 after generations of persecution, which included the death of Levenstein's grandfather (for whom he is named) in a labor camp, he is stoic and restrained in his work, almost to a fault. But death is everywhere in these paintings, either directly or by proxy. Four of the landscapes are of a Colonial-era cemetery near his house in Orient, New York, the gravestones scattered this way and that, leaning over after two centuries of heavy snow. In *Terry Hill in Summer* (2017), we see these same grave markers of early Puritan Christians through an opening in the trees and bushes, a moody chiaroscuro oculus, as though we're trespassing on a sacred site. Real as the subject is—Terry Hill actually exists—there's a conceptual remove, almost as though Levenstein is painting a picture of a painting. Levenstein has always acknowledged that he paints from photographs, finding the camera's framing too good a tool to ignore, and the magic of the image it captures a gift from the Muse. The other landscapes, with their sumptuous, grand flourishes of parting clouds, ecstatic sun rays, soupy whitecaps, and spidery trees, all tight and exact in their execution, suggest that same remove.



Matvey Levenstein, Terry Hill in Summer, 2017, Sumi ink on paper, Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Levenstein's paintings have for years investigated the trappings and details of space, both exterior and interior, particularly the comfortable, predictable rooms of the middle class and the gaudy sanctuaries of Orthodox cathedrals, imbuing each with an ominous, crypt-like stasis. In this

exhibition—in recent paintings and ink drawings called *Peonies*, *Sunflowers*, and *Orient*—Levenstein lets us peer outside but keeps us in, like children staying home sick from school. Flowers placed in drinking glasses on windowsills act as a bridge between the room and the world, a world seen only through a window; or through the drinking glass *and* the window; or the water, the drinking glass, and the window together; in other words, the image is three times removed from reality, not counting that these are paintings of photographs. (The art critic and curator David Sylvester thought still life painting a control freak’s ideal genre.) Symbolism aside—the vessels are brimming, after all, with cut flowers that will soon shrivel and die—these luscious renderings of everyday bouquets that you might find at a corner deli are the most aesthetically seductive works in the exhibition. They demand tremendous virtuosity and patience.



Matvey Levenstein, Orient, 2018, Oil on linen, Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery

Switching easily back and forth among oil on linen, oil on wood, and oil on copper, Levenstein has also found with sumi ink on paper the exacting reaction between surface and medium he requires. Drawing from the same compositions, there’s an even colder calculation to these paintings: the black and powdery nature of sumi emphasizes the forms of his subjects, shorn of a mood. Judging from the dates of these meditations, all made the year before the oils, he worked out the kinks on a larger scale before reducing the images to these gem-like paintings, many of which are only nine by twelve inches.



Matvey Levenstein, Sunflowers, 2018, Oil on wood panel, Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

There's an all-over radiance coming from somewhere beneath the surfaces of Levenstein's paintings, dispersing light evenly like a fine mist on a still morning. It's an artist's trick, and heaven knows how he mastered it. In one landscape, *Pink Moon* (2018), in which the moon floats lifeless in mid-canvas, this aura, like that of a stage-light color filter, is of a searing, orange-pink hue redolent of the recent fires in California and Greece. In another, a richly painted vase of flowers placed at the center of a

classic composition called *Interior* (2018), a sepia tone creates the same sense of nostalgia as a fading vernacular photograph. The effect is not from a varnish or wash; it drifts up from within, an honest, subtle light. This is how Levenstein stops you in your tracks in this exhibition of radically disciplined work, on view in Chelsea through March 2. Only by looking carefully through this translucent film between the image and the eye can you take in each petal and exquisite snowdrift.



Matvey Levenstein, Interior, 2018, Oil on wood panel, Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Robert Becker was the arts editor and a writer for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine in the mid-1980s and is the author of *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* (Knopf).