

Matvey Levenstein

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Matvey Levenstein, *Sunflowers*, 2021. Oil on linen, 55 x 44 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

If you knew nothing about Matvey Levenstein's work, but something about art history, you would find yourself in the pleasurable position of surveying his recent paintings at Kasmin Gallery the way I did, as an introduction to a painter who you really ought to know, and whose works hit you like an encounter with the unknown. With every picture, you grow ever more excited as the artist keeps making things happen, and each work offers new variables to consider as you try to place him in relationship to the longer history of painting. Although you realize these are recent works, the style and techniques deployed are not necessarily common: old master experiments with glazes and supports assert themselves in subtle ways, mainly in the service of representation. Having taken in the show's two rooms, you might even conclude that *this* is how it feels to recover the work of some long-lost artist whose oeuvre has been all but forgotten.

Levenstein's paintings are both uncanny and compelling precisely because they do not emphasize the present tense. Seeing them is like seeing our world with eyes that are not quite our own. You might imagine something like these works emerging from the brush of a strong but obscure nineteenth-century Nordic painter—the names of Johan

Christian Dahl, Peder Balke, and Vilhelm Hammershøi come to mind—transported to our time to paint what he saw in present-day New York City and rural Long Island. After all, these paintings do not dwell on the objects of our time: Levenstein does not, for example, produce still-lives composed of things like laptops and iPhones that scream the contemporary condition. Many of his landscapes avoid the intrusion of non-picturesque sites or postindustrial commercialism. His earlier works (not in the present show) might have included objects like a television, and one of the current paintings pictures what look like telephone poles in the distant background (*Sunflowers*, 2021), but such intrusions are uncommon. Perhaps because clothing a body automatically dates it, the human figure appears only occasionally and usually in mediated form, existing in paintings hung on walls (*Still Life with Flowers and a Painting*, 2021; *Orient Interior*, 2021) or reflected in mirrors and turned away from the viewer in reverie (*Mirror*, 2021). These figures are non-assertive, existing in a quiet zone of dreamy introspection. In the one exception, *Autumn* (2020), a female figure (wearing a dark and understated off-the-shoulder shift dress) guides our gaze elsewhere, out to sea, by way of a pointing hand. In the context of the show, the gesture feels portentous, signaling some meaning beyond the edge of the painting when, in the other works on view, that meaning remains well and deeply buried within the painting's confines.



Matvey Levenstein, *Orient Interior*, 2021. Oil on wood, 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Many of Levenstein's well-known peers who paint in a representational idiom came out of Yale at the same moment (e.g., John Currin, who is his friend, and Lisa Yuskavage, his wife). They may have had an easier time legitimizing their practices because, whatever their interest in painting's craft, their choice of subject matter, which is often outré or pornographic, feels more obviously current for being jarring. Skewering modern bourgeois existence, their pictures can readily be described as avant-garde statements. Yet, nobody looks at a Currin or a Yuskavage merely for its content. That content is only part of the interest or allure of their paintings. Abstract painting made clear what had long been known, that subject matter could sometimes take a back seat to the internal questions of painting, which were often more interesting. One need not go as far as Charles Baudelaire and declare the painter's subject matter irrelevant to understand that form often owns content and heightens the impact of whatever is pictured.

Needless to say, Levenstein does not feature cheeky subjects in his pictures as a cover for carrying on with the craft of painting. He has taken a different path, and it is one that does ultimately point to the present conditions of art-making. It is notable that Levenstein claims to paint not for museums, but for the home. I take this not so much as an attack on museums, but rather as a statement of originality in the present art-institutionalized environment. His subject matter feels contemporary because it conveys an intentional distance from its objects, a sort of mediated sensibility, even a hazy detachment. His flowers, trees, and skies may carry the whiff of nostalgia for earlier moments in painting, and his technique evinces a passion for recovering the secrets of earlier workers in the medium, but Levenstein's pictures often pose these concerns with a lack of emphasis or inflection. This may be because he uses the camera of his phone to capture the scenes he later paints in the studio, or because he borrows the soft-focus effects of film. In any case, his paintings share a sort of overallness, an evenness of facture and surface effect, that contributes to their strangely appealing internal coherence. The result is a sort of irony without irony, a restatement of things from a distanced vantage point. To put it another way, Levenstein's pictures are knowing: he clearly knows that you know that he knows what he is painting.



Matvey Levenstein, *Autumn*, 2020. Oil on linen, 40 x 54 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

You may leave Kasmin's show not yet understanding precisely how to situate Levenstein within the discourses of contemporary art, but you will be forced to ask whether we are all that different from our predecessors. Despite all the time that has passed since other serious painters regularly took up the themes and methods Levenstein favors, you may wonder before these pictures whether all that much has *really* changed. And I suspect that it remains the case that the reality pictured here is not only ours, but one we share with both past and future times. For these pictures propose that certain important continuities of human life are also the continuities of the practice of painting.