

Ani Gurashvili: The soft breeze of mortality

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Ani Gurashvili's paintings crackle with precision. Working primarily in small and mid-size canvases, she presents a fully codified visual glossary, aimed at a set of daunting problematics: the shifting of the picture's subjectivity from human to animal, the confinement of the figure via dubious pictorial expanse, the implication of the viewer via the material facticity of the canvas, finally, the staging of narrative affect free from narrative itself. Her paintings are exquisite objects: she folds and staples them carefully by hand using a technique that saddles them with delightful lumps. She creates depth by layering oils with a dry brush technique that makes the canvas itself a character, one that is then folded back into a

procession of surfaces within surfaces, windows beyond windows. Her colors are rich and specific, and because light sources play such an outsize role, the room tone is always in question. These paintings implicate their surroundings, altering our sense of what's demonstrably true, and time spent in their presence is fleeting, melancholic, perplexing and profound. Gurashvili's treatment of reflective surfaces, bits of metal and glass, screens and windows is sublime; she teaches us that light is a thing with volume and mass, one that illuminates and obscures in equal measure. There is always a spate of primaries hiding in a dot of white light—the trick is to show us the gleam, not the bouquet.

In *Optical Illusion*, we see a fractured visage, framed by three oddly shaped mirrors. They hover delicately, head to their rich, chalky bodies, but cast back a look of caustic rapture. Are we the woman whose arm protrudes from beyond the frame, sleeve tied shut around fleur-de-lys tattoo? Do we gaze back on her, ourselves, or something else? Gurashvili's whisper thin Turrell portal casts a lugubrious glow, broken by a backlit net whose hovering shadow place it somewhere "over there." These smeary scirms, like James Ensor's knife-edge grounds, unfix us from our vantage point. We understand depth as the byproduct of perceptual tweaks, not an immutable physical fact. This expansion of experience is elaborated further in *Seer's chamber*, a mid-size painting that recalls the seething red interior of Jorge Pardo's legendary "Mountain Bar," in which two hands, outstretched RPG-style, escape the shadow cast by a Kong-like vase—but also, surprisingly, in smaller pictures, like "Treasure Chest." Here, the POV perspective Gurashvili uses to expedite our descent into the picture plane needs no horizon, no dangling limbs, no furtive glance. What appears to be a narrow trompe l'oeil jewelry box is a phenomenological probe; this painting is figurative because its technical pedigree is so arresting, the viewer is "in" the picture by sheer necessity.

In *The portal*, a brilliant blue-green canvas that recalls the fox wedding from Kurosawa's "Dreams," a mediating plane of frosted glass separates humanoid from animal; here Gurashvili challenges the dominance of a human perspective, suggesting that the painting is as much "for" the chipmunk as it is for us. In *Dagger*, one of her latest and most ambitious pictures, a bloody weapon is left beside a body of water that sparkles with bioluminescence. It is unclear whether the crucial event has just happened, or will soon occur, and this uncertainty allows the moment to unfold endlessly. A text supplied by the painter suggests she hangs out in a smoke-filled studio with her cat, Albunia, hazily contemplating her next move. This is a ruse—she has no cat. Ani Gurashvili is nothing if not exacting. Her paintings are full of the stuff of fantasy: jewels, mirrors, charms, veils, lamps. This might be the legacy of the Wiener Werkstätte, but like Karen Kilimnik's nostalgia for the present, or Sue De Beer's collapsing of the "goth" with the Gothic, these precocious trappings linger in the picture long enough to engage the senses, but only that long. They are in service of something far worthier: the staging of narrative affect without narrative itself. It is only through these layers, this jockeying woolgathering and punctiliousness, that we might glimpse our own fleeting condition, aloft, for now, on the soft breeze of mortality.

Ani Gurashvili, b. 1990, is a Georgian painter living in Vienna. She received a Bachelor's degree in Media Arts from the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts in 2012 and a Diploma in Painting from the University of Applied Arts, Vienna in 2021. Group exhibitions include Patara Gallery, and Why Not, Tbilisi; Pilot, Vienna; White Crypt, London (forthcoming).

Artist's Text

Let me wait for the rest of Asheville's Melissa to steep. Ten minutes feel as long as those days. A semi-painted canvas on

I sit and wait for the pot of *Achimillea vulgaris* to steep. Ten minutes feel so long these days. A semi-painted canvas on the wall tries to catch my compound eye and leaves me with a tangle. Should I proceed wet-on-wet today or by tomorrow's tea?!

The light is never good in my studio. There is a constant flying veil of smoke, which makes visibility troubled and hazy. Albutia, my cat, does not seem to like it. She always frowns her eyebrows, leaves the room, and closes the door behind her, ignoring my need for her company. Even her favorite wild mulberry scones would not tempt her to stay.

The door slams again and I am left alone with a sound of icy howling wind. I try to think about the balance. The balance between conscious knowledge and free mind. Then I stare back at the compound eye and weigh the options to approach it. There are numerous ways. However, the wind intensifies and gets louder. To avoid distraction, I close the window, look out and see how the horizon reflects, and wears my studio lights as shiny jewels. I fall under the spell of a landscape anew. There is always something majestic about the way the glass reflection merges with the scenery and playfully distorts the well-acquainted spaces. That is one way to go. The glowing artificial universes are a tool to execute the tricks of creating diverse perspectives. Background can shift to foreground and foreground can become a middle ground that generates another dimension behind the painting. Sometimes landscape can reveal itself only after examining the surface patiently. Other times it only compliments the still life if the still life does not hide in a box. The clock arrows keep on running in circles and their ticking puts me under light pressure. Tiny droplets gather on the teapot as another proof that it's only a few minutes left until the tea is steeped and my thoughts are still tangling in search of a decision. Ten minutes no longer seem so long as I am running out of time.

So what should you be like?

Should you be dreamlike?

Should you be familiar or peculiar?

Should you be wide open or rocked shut as a seashell?

Should you be wrapped in the warmth of butterscotch yellow or deliver the iciness of cold colors?

Picturing cold colors brings back a memory of a scene from a night walk I once took. I moved cautiously but without a fear. It was a full moon and when you have a full moon, you can see things. It is the same landscape that you experience in the sun but everything is transformed. Deep shadows cast solid forms in contrast to liquid sparkling shapes and objects in motion resemble a dance of celestial bodies. You know another lunar cycle has ended.

Strong visual memories sometimes intertwine with scenes from old dreams. I remember finding myself locked in an oval room with walls of stained glass and nothing in it but a musical box. I do not recall the tune it played, but it must have been disturbing as I took off my satin slipper and threw it at the box. Now that I think of it, even if it never actually happened, what an enchanting color explosion the light must look like when the full moon shines through the stained glass walls.

In the meantime, the tea is steeped. I take a sip as a tube of indigo calls out for my attention. It is a wonderful base to carve the silver lights. I run through all scenes I pictured and a final decision forms in my head—You will be familiar and peculiar at the same time and carry the moonlight as a torch for magical thinking.

