

Matvey Levenstein

SELECTED PRESS

Matvey Levenstein

ANDREW L. SHEA
OCTOBER 2021



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

In 18th-century England, fashionable sightseers carried in their pockets a small, slightly convex mirror called the Claude glass. Named after the classicist landscapes of Claude Lorrain, the device was tinted to produce a picturesque panoramic, neatly framed, in which the violent contrasts of life's lights and colors are tamed and boxed into a narrow range of harmonious tones. Like modern-day tourists who take in museums and mountaintops through the lenses and screens of their iPhones, these earlier travelers preferred to turn their back on the scene in question and look instead into their mirrors, experiencing reality according to the pictorial tastes of their time.

Matvey Levenstein's paintings, 14 of which are on view at Kasmin through October 9, embrace the pictorial framing of both these handheld devices. Depicting everyday scenes in and around Levenstein's home on the North Fork of Long Island, the paintings are said to have originated with casual photographs that the artist took on his phone. Yet through their lapidary construction in an audaciously compressed palette, they communicate a serene and separate world of stillness and clarity, much like what one might see through a tinted mirror or glass.

To achieve this effect, Levenstein makes evocative use of toned grounds (usually some variation of muted pink) that unify the pictures and undergird their forms, like the keynote of a musical composition. From this tonal center,

Levenstein departs only minimally, in successive layers of thin, meticulously applied paint—sometimes darker, mostly lighter—to build out his pictures.



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

The compressed range of value frees Levenstein to perform pianissimo acrobatics of tone and hue. An introductory essay by Jason Rosenfeld reports that, for this show, Levenstein has excised blue from his palette. This is hard to fathom in front of, for instance, the glowing bits of sky peeking through dusky clouds in the upper registers of *Sunflowers* (2021), a large painting of four flowers in a vase on a shelf against a Long Island landscape. Only by isolating these patches from their carefully modulated neighbors—billowing mists of mauve, peach, and ochre—can one see that the presumed ceruleans are actually rather brownish-grays.

Glasses and mirrors appear and reappear as subjects themselves, mediating views, opening the door for visual stagecraft and even humor. The mirrored surface of a living room table occupies the lower halves of several paintings, doubling the scenes in perplexing asymmetries. One such work is *Mirror* (2021), a large canvas that faces the gallery's entrance. The painting includes, in the foreground, a glass vase holding a yellow rose and water; in the mid-distance, a female figure that reaches for a lamp; and on a background wall is yet another mirror, also reflected by the table, that itself reflects a small, silhouetted, head-like form.

Is this latter form the artist himself? Which is the mirror named in the title? At a certain point, such questions of optical and ontological trickery begin to feel trivial against the quiet light that suffuses the room, emanating from several sources—natural and artificial, seen and unseen—activating drab gray into an entrancing array of warms and cools.



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

Yet, despite the elevated banality of his subject-matter, Levenstein isn't interested in showing us that ordinary experience is extraordinary, in the tradition of, say, Jane Freilicher or Fairfield Porter, two other Long Island painters who probed the expressive possibilities of a muted palette. Levenstein detaches himself from that responsibility through his use of photography, which gives the images an all-over sobriety and pictorial distance. In the larger works on linen, such as *Autumn* (2020), which shows the artist's wife, Lisa Yuskavage, sitting beachside on a pile of driftwood, the horizontal and vertical weave of the fabric acts almost like a window screen through which the scene is viewed—or, perhaps, under which the image sits.

Unlike both doctrinaire and inadvertent photorealists, however, Levenstein works beyond the remit of the photograph, treating it as a means, not an end. The paintings' surfaces are methodical, not mechanical. They communicate a slowness that transcends the click of a camera's shutter.

The paintings do so by engaging with filmic seriality, but also by compelling the viewer to look over an extended period. A trio of nocturne skiescapes, all 7 by 5 inch panels, are instructive. Nearly identical views of a full moon that hangs above and behind a group of leafless hillside trees, the paintings are darker and more pared down than anything else in the show. Indeed, they're nearly invisible. Were they seen on the same cold night? One feels they must have been, given the evanescent wisp of cloud that recurs but subtly differs in each, just below the pale-yellow orb. Discerning these differences in form, light, and atmosphere requires time, focus, and attention. But it's an attention worth giving.

Matvey Levenstein

CHRISTIAN KLEINBUB
SEPTEMBER 2021



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.

THE NEW YORKER

Matvey Levenstein

PETER SCHJIELDAHL
FEBRUARY 25, 2019



Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery

Can loveliness shock? Yes, as witness the fantastically skilled and sensitive neo- or para- or faux-Romantic (you decide) work of Matvey Levenstein, a fifty-eight-year-old Russian-American artist. The subjects of his paintings and ink drawings (at the Kasmin gallery through March 2), some on copper or wood, are forthrightly generic: landscapes from around Levenstein's home, on the North Fork of Long Island, floral still-lives, and a portrait of his wife, the painter Lisa Yuskavage, in a white bathrobe. Layered grays, orange-flavored sepia, and the odd palely simmering pink or blue constitute—or conjure, or exhale—spectral woods, clouds, a snow-covered ancient graveyard, and a storm at sea. Caspar David Friedrich comes to mind as an ancestral spirit, but the work recalls no specific precedent. Its tenor is coolly confident, assuming a viewer's empathy. That jolts. You would expect a wink or a nudge, or a smack of naïveté or perversity in so atavistic a style. But no soap. Levenstein's temerity fascinates.

Matvey Levenstein

JASON ROSENFELD
FEBRUARY 5, 2019

There are fifteen oils on wood, canvas, or copper, and six large Sumi ink drawings on paper in Matvey Levenstein's first solo show in New York since his exhibition at the now-closed Larissa Goldston Gallery in 2009. Dating from 2015 to 2018, the works address traditional genres of landscape, still life, and portraiture, but Levenstein has developed a process that combines art historicism, casual photography, and technical rigor via a realistic perfectionism that both guides you into the artist's own world and lends magnitude to the quotidian. The pictures do not resemble those of Vermeer, but these explorations of settings of subtle historical significance on Long Island's North Fork around Orient, New York, elicit a similar level of truth.

Starting with iPhone photos, some dating back to 2009, Levenstein employs a conceptual process of selecting and expanding or shrinking images without the aid of a projector. It is a manual translation of the intimacy of the phone screen, first to drawings and then to oils.

In some cases, such as the large scale and monochromatic *Snow 2* (2016), with its dense blacks, the drawings end up being more vivid than the slightly chromatic smaller paintings such as *Snow* (2018), which bear the silvery and shimmering qualities of delicate daguerreotypes or early Gustave Le Gray albumen prints. There is a symbolist seductiveness to Levenstein's landscapes and still lifes, a psychological freight conveyed via weather and mood constructed of legible but irresolute forms, accomplished without facture. They bear a lingering trace of the Sumi ink grisaille works and Hammershøi-like interiors he did on paper in the mid-1990s after spending a few years working as a sculptor. Those were a distillation of the softened modern sfumato of Seurat and Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer made with a technical rigor and control that recalled the art of one of his professors at Yale, Vija Celmins. This method was followed by a period of works that were more dependent on color as tone, but in the new material he has whittled it



Matvey Levenstein, *Snow 2*, 2018. Sumi ink on paper, 44 3/4 x 34 1/2 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

all down to gently modulated hues in an increasingly limited range on surfaces near absent of visible brushwork. The muted colors in the oils give them the quality of faded images in mid-century magazines, such as *LIFE* or *Look*, seemingly grafting onto them an inherent nostalgia, one that dovetails with the title of works such as *Pilgrims* (2018), a reference to early settlers' graves in Orient and human passage.

But Levenstein's figurative and landscape work, as he noted in an interview in 2009, is not about the past. It fulfills his dictum that "by moving backward you in fact can step ahead." This is a critical notion in the newly expanded idea of the post-French avant-garde, from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Symbolists and through to 20th century artists such as Stanley Spencer, Salvador Dalí, Christian Schad, Dorothea Tanning, Jared French, Peter Blume, Leonora Carrington, or Laura Wheeler Waring—an alternative history of art still in evolution. As the rethinking of criteria of value in modern and contemporary art has finally come to embrace the persistent figurative and realist traditions, committed work such as Levenstein's demands critical attention, and rewards close looking.¹

The range of pop, cinematic, and art historical references are impressive and effectively calibrated to be oblique. *Pink Moon* (2018) calls to mind musician Nick Drake and the similarly dulcet harmonies in Caspar David Friedrich's work, absent an intrusive Rückenfigur.

But such figures of identification from German Romanticism do appear in Levenstein's still lifes, in the forms of cut flowers arranged in drinking glasses, sunflowers in an unassuming vase, an effusive bouquet in a reflective earthenware jug worthy of Luis Meléndez or Velázquez as stand-ins for figures or, when rendered monumental, as bust-length portraits. Such pictures fulfill what Levenstein calls a "condition of possibility." The use of casual photography to distance his conceptions from reality, to organize artificially a setting as a template for action in what he has referred to as a "theatrical situation," involves autonomous subjects, such as nosegays, or even the natural setting itself, awaiting a story. Levenstein's compact oils are also in a surprising dialogue with those of his wife, and fellow Yale alum, Lisa Yuskavage, seen here in two portraits, and whose six small pure and atmospheric landscapes were among the great and pleasant surprises in her "Barbie Brood: Small Paintings 1985-2018" show at David Zwirner in late 2018. Levenstein's seamless surfaces are in contradistinction to her marked facture, but both approaches advance the landscape genre.



Matvey Levenstein, *Pink Moon*, 2018. Oil on copper, 12 x 9 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

A frustrated John Constable famously wrote of J.M.W. Turner's art that "he seems to paint with tinted steam, so evanescent and so airy." Levenstein similarly presents himself as a master of atmospherics, though they be demure in mood, as in works such as *Gardiners Bay* (2018), *Sunflowers* (2018), and *Storm* (2017), where sublime and sensate skies belie the pictures' small size (one foot high or wide). It is remarkable that by comparison the huge *On the Beach* (2018), at just over three feet high, bears the same visual punch as its smaller cousin *Gardiners Bay*, hanging catty-corner. The artist works with more subtlety than his other more Turnerian teacher at Yale, Jake Berthot, but there is a similar attempt to capture a motive quality of light and indeed air, though in a more painstaking form. At the same time, Levenstein's East End environs that date back to the mid-17th century when Vermeer was painting, have occasioned images that offer hard-won, often moving, feelings of permanence tinged with vanitas. Snowy images of Brown's Hill Burying Ground in Orient² have become a mini obsession—he has employed the composition at least five times in his work since 2012, sometimes with slight tweaks of the deteriorating barn in the background. An historical marker at the site reads that it is a place where "the present meets up closely with the distant past," a fitting description of Levenstein's compelling, enduring, and quietly momentous concretization of perception.



Matvey Levenstein, *On the Beach*, 2018. Oil on linen, 38 1/8 x 29 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

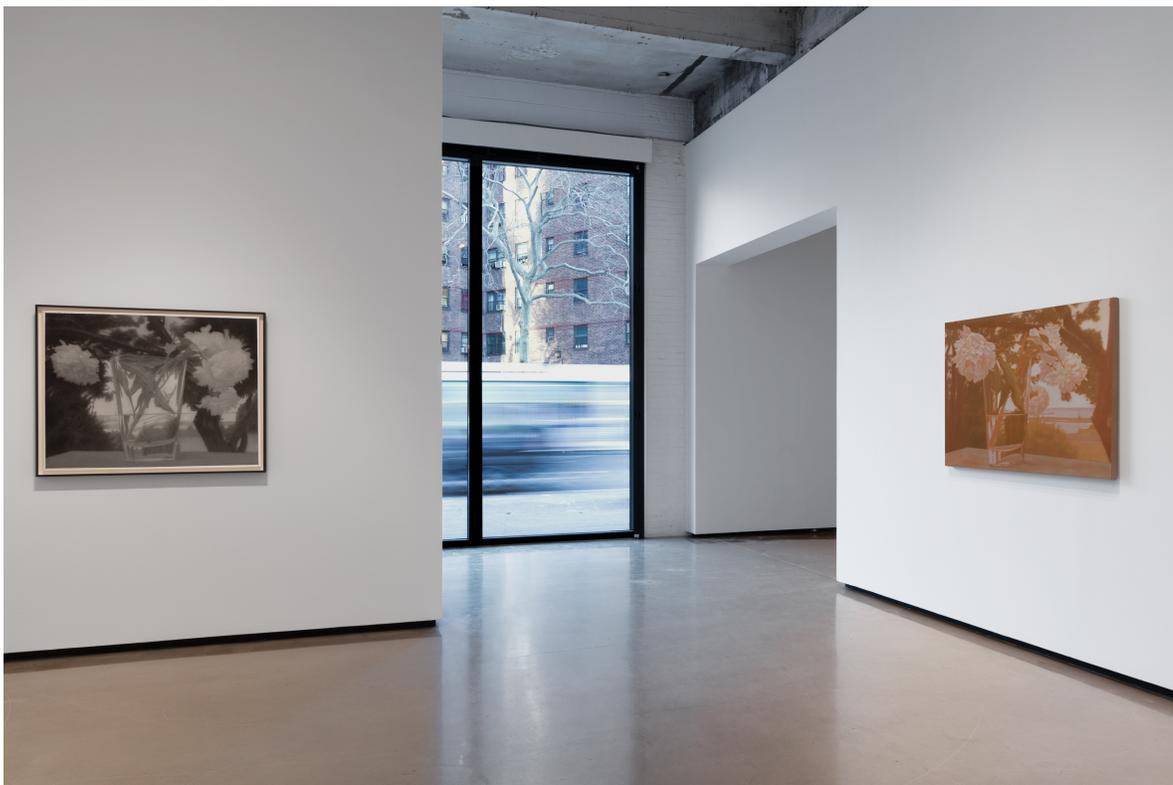
The New Criterion

Levenstein's Long Exposures

On "Matvey Levenstein" at Kasmin Gallery in New York.

ROBERT BECKER

FEBRUARY 21, 2019



Installation view of "Matvey Levenstein" at Kasmin Gallery in New York. Photo: Kasmin Gallery.

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.

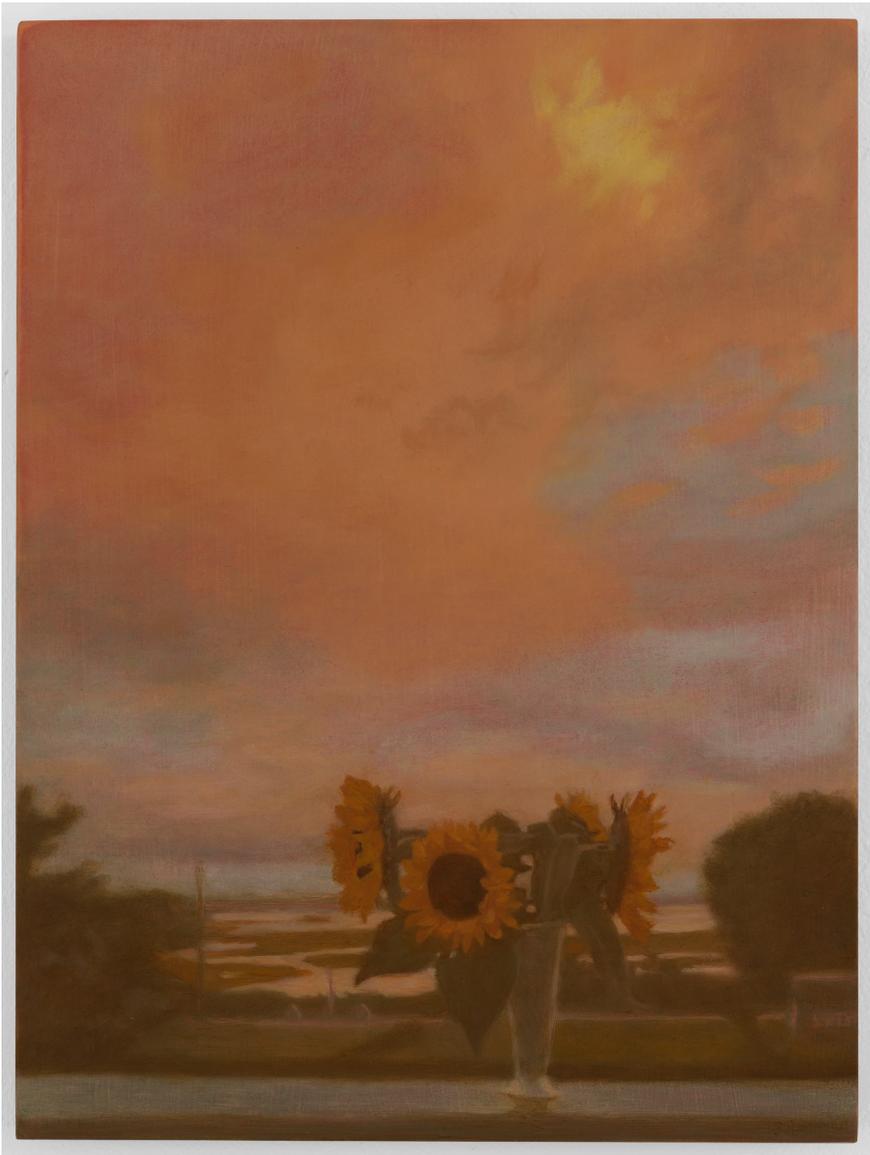
Levenstein's paintings have for years investigated the trappings and details of space, both exterior and interior, particularly the comfortable, predictable rooms of the middle class and the gaudy sanctuaries of Orthodox cathedrals, imbuing each with an ominous, crypt-like stasis. In this exhibition—in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

THE NEW YORKER

Matvey Levenstein

APRIL 16, 2009

For centuries, painting adhered to a strict hierarchy—eventually flattened by modernism—with religious (and, later, historical) subjects reigning supreme, followed by portraiture and landscape, with still-life on the bottom rung. Levenstein revives the system, only to subvert it once again. Soft-focus paintings of church interiors, based on photographs he took in Italy, double as still-lives: they all feature floral arrangements. The show's only landscape isn't really one at all: trees are relegated to the background of a scene dominated by a vase of peonies on a table. Amid all the churches, the most numinous image is a portrait of the artist's sleeping wife, guarded by a vigilant Chihuahua the same Titian hue as her hair. Through May 9.

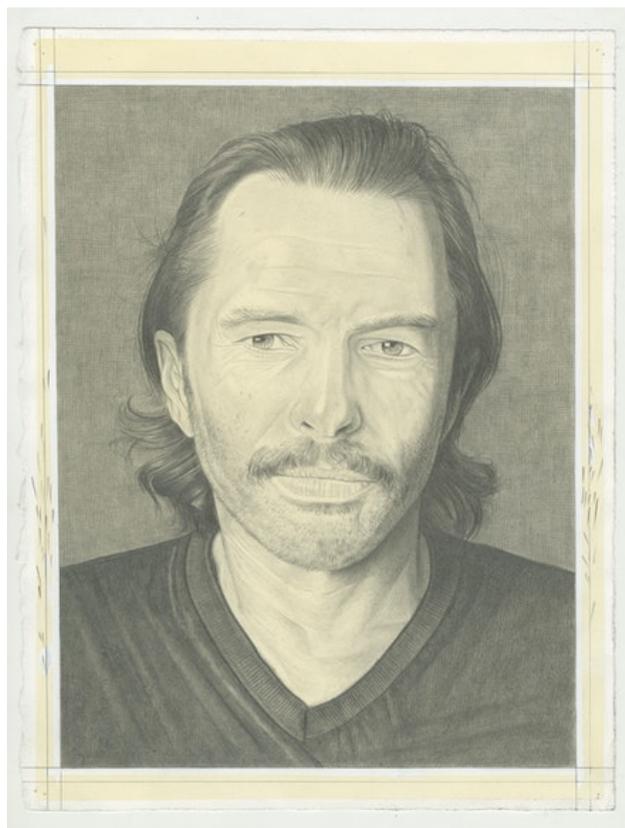
Matvey Levenstein with Phong Bui

APRIL 2009

While preparing for his forthcoming one-person exhibition at Larissa Goldston Gallery, on view from April 2nd to May 9th, the painter Matvey Levenstein stopped by the Rail's Headquarters to talk to Publisher Phong Bui about his life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): You were born in 1960 in Moscow and grew up under the Brezhnev Regime, which was considered by many Russians preferable to the regimes of Khrushchev or Gorbachev. Was that true for you and your family?

Matvey Levenstein: Khrushchev was ousted when I was four, so I don't have much of a memory of his regime, but I remember my parents saying there was a post-Stalinist sense of emancipation and liberation. One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was getting published—people were talking about the Stalinist repression quite openly. Things were opening up to the rest of the world. When I was growing up, during Brezhnev's period, it was relatively liberal, but very hypocritical and still potentially very treacherous and violent. We left the USSR in January of 1980 and I learned about the invasion of Afghanistan while window-shopping in Vienna. I realized how lucky I was to have gotten out just in time because I was exactly at that age when I would have been drafted into the army.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: Did being Jewish make things more difficult for you and your family?

Levenstein: There was a fairly specific anti-Semitic policy in place, where I pretty much knew that I shouldn't bother to, for example, apply to Moscow University for most departments there, because I would just not be accepted. I should not try to be a lawyer or a doctor, or any other stereotypical Jewish professions, because they would not take any Jews. Being an artist was a little easier; they didn't care about Jews becoming artists.

Rail: What did your parents do?

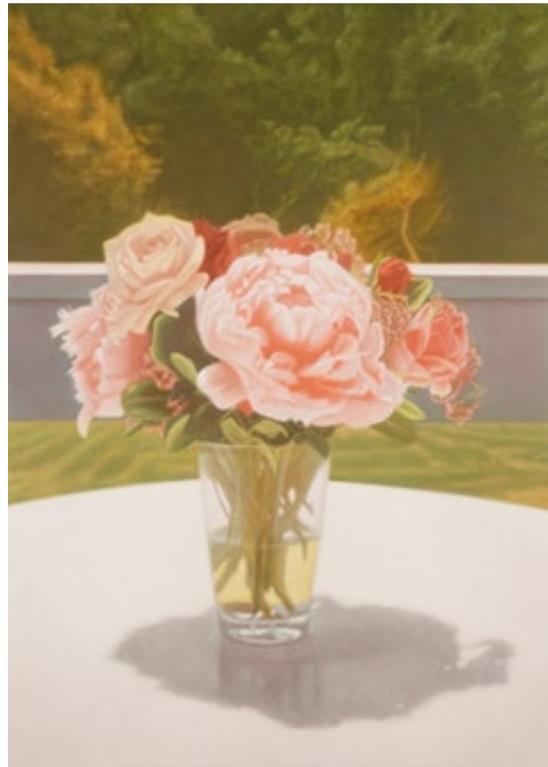
Levenstein: My father was, until recently, an engineer. He just retired and became a published writer, all of a sudden—they actually just published his autobiography in Russia—and my mother was and still is a musician and a piano teacher. Actually when I was growing up I thought I would become, like my parents, either an engineer or a musician. In fact I did study music, but I had always been drawing and painting and would show it to my uncle, who was an architect. One day a musician friend of my parents came to our house and saw my paintings on the walls, and he said, “Why don’t you just do this instead of something you’re not interested in?” So all of a sudden it dawned on me, “Well, why not?” But then the trouble was I couldn’t get into any art schools, because I was not a son of an artist, and my parents didn’t know anybody, so they couldn’t bribe anybody. Besides, I knew that being in art school then meant being indoctrinated into socialist realism and for political reasons I wanted nothing to do with it, so that was the other drawback. So I went into architecture school instead.

Rail: The Moscow Architectural Institute.

Levenstein: Yeah, and in order to even get in you had to pass some pretty strenuous exams in drawing and sciences, but once you got in you were relatively left alone there, which I thought was a good compromise, and many other artists I knew did the same thing. Lev Manovich, now a New Media artist and critic who wrote a book, *The Language of New Media*, was there with me. He is in California now and we are still very good friends. I was there from 76 to 79; I think it was three semesters, and then my family left Russia.

Rail: What was the reason?

Levenstein: Political, of course. I came from a family of jailbirds. Essentially, every single member of my family, with the exception of my mother and one of my grandmothers, was arrested. My grandfather died in the camps. The other grandfather was there twice but survived. My father was arrested when he was twenty-two.



Matvey Levenstein, *CT (Peonies)*, (2009). Oil on linen. 60 by 43 inches. Courtesy of Larissa Goldston Gallery.

After Stalin died and my father returned to Moscow from the exile, he met my mother and they had me. Though I grew up with underground literature in the house, my parents did not want to be active dissidents. They just wanted a quiet life. But it had always been my father’s dream to leave Russia, to start a new life somewhere else. And then I found out there was an informant among my college friends and the KGB was watching me. It seemed like family history was repeating itself, so we left Russia.

Rail: So your family came directly to Chicago after that!

Levenstein: Well, we spent a bit of time in Europe, while our papers were being processed. We were in Vienna, then Rome for a few months before coming to Chicago.

Rail: Where you went to school at the Art Institute. So by then you really knew that you were going to be an artist!

Levenstein: Well, it seemed almost too self-important to call myself an artist at that time. In addition, being an immigrant, the pressure of making a living was a bit intense, so I really thought I would be a designer of sorts. But one of the reasons I wanted to come to America was to study art. The Chicago Art Institute at that point was still a 70s-type school—it was very loose, you could just study whatever you wanted—so for me it was great. They had an interior architecture department, where I put in most of my hours, but then I studied performance, film, and painted all the time—I just floated around taking in all that I could with pleasure, because it was a new country. Prior to coming to America, my art education sort of stopped with Chagall and the post-Impressionists. A bit of Picasso, because he was a communist, so I was just like a wild and groovy Czechoslovak brother in the promised land. I just did everything.



Matvey Levenstein, "White Altar" (2008).
Oil on linen. 54 by 36 inches Courtesy of Larissa Goldston Gallery.

Rail: What sort of work were you doing while you were in school?

Levenstein: I painted the most awful painting, called "Russian in Chicago," referring to the Cubo-Futurist Malevich painting "An Englishman in Moscow." [*Laughs.*] Thinking about it now, I should be embarrassed for liking Chagall, who I still don't think is as bad as they say. In any case, I started doing shaped canvases with collage elements, sometimes spilling into an installation. I was influenced by Rauschenberg. His Combines just blew my mind. Anyway, I was only in school for three years, because according to them, in Russia I studied so much within those three semesters that I was supposed to be immediately a senior, and I said, "I don't want to get out just yet." And since my parents had absolutely no money, I was on scholarships, and life in Chicago was so cheap and my apartment was costing almost nothing; I could paint there. So I decided just to stick around school as long as I possibly could.

Rail: What was your subject matter?

Levenstein: At that point who knew about subject matter? It was so intuitive; if something reminded me of a white dragon, I would call it the "White Dragon." Because I stopped writing letters to my girlfriend and my

other friends, worrying that I could cause them trouble—this was during the Andropov/Reagan time when the U.S.-Soviet relationship really soured—letters became the subject matter for my paintings. It was very sentimental, but that’s what you did when you were in school.

Rail: And then you applied to graduate school at Yale?

Levenstein: Well, first I took a couple years off, including a good four or five months when I was traveling to Europe on a traveling grant. That experience was hugely transformative but it made me realize that I really needed some more schooling, which was when I applied to Yale.

Rail: In addition to visiting artists and critics who come and go, there was always the presence of three main staples at Yale: the intellectual brilliance and generosity of Andrew Forge, the immense knowledge of figurative painting in Bill [William] Bailey, and the conceptual rigor in Mel Bochner.

Levenstein: There was also Jake Berthot, who was equally important to all of us. Vija Celmins was particularly maternal towards my work and me. When I got there I began to think that I was avoiding something by not facing painting, what I later termed “autonomous painting.” I tried to make these really just straight-on figurative paintings—I was dimly beginning to perceive a split between trajectories of avant-garde art-making and painting, and of course I wanted to be an avant-garde artist. Who doesn’t, right?

Rail: Especially after the Rauschenberg Combines.

Levenstein: Exactly. The only thing I could think of was to go back to the roots of painting, to the stories that created painting in the first place. I remember I painted Adam and Eve, the return of the prodigal son—they were the most awful paintings. But they were at least honest. I thought that if I just hit my head against the brick wall, perhaps something would emerge—something would emerge as a form of painting.

Rail: So you really have faith in that process.

Levenstein: Oh, yeah. They were really awful paintings [*laughs*]. Mel actually really liked this one painting, which he called “The Farting Madonna.” Mel was probably the one who immediately had the most effect on me, and he talked to me quite a bit.

He told me I knew nothing about women, for example, and that my paintings were all about masturbation, because it’s all about nothing but knowing yourself. Stuff like that; he was quite funny. Of course a lot of that had to do with my own insecurities about how I was fitting myself into a larger context. I was a very insecure object, therefore my painting was, to me, a very insecure object. So then I decided, since I couldn’t define its



Matvey Levenstein, "Pink Couch" (2009). Oil on linen. 34 by 45 inches. Courtesy of Larissa Goldston Gallery.

social context, I could at least define its immediate physical context. I quit painting and started building these concrete walls whose existence would be so undeniable that you couldn't dismiss it. To give you an example of the kind of decadence of what I was doing until then, I was painting this giant neo-expressionist inspired painting of a woman, then I stuck a broken bottle in the middle of her chest until I actually cut myself and started bleeding into the paint. I couldn't believe in the reality of what expressionism was all about. Anyway, I taught myself some fundamental skills of carpentry and started building these concrete walls—I would mix concrete as if it was paint, and I said to myself, "Okay this is a wall that I just built, and I'm going to now paint something on it," but I didn't know what. A friend of mine in the sculpture department came over and she looked at what I was doing and she said, "Well, why do you need to paint? That would be redundant. Your wall is already so figurative. Look at the presence of your hand marks, why do you need to add anything more to it?" And all of a sudden I realized she was absolutely right. The surface of the wall, which started as the wetness of the concrete being paint-like, became the image. Then the surface became a wall, then a form, then I built a dome, a wheel, a bed, a winged staircase, then all of a sudden I was making these concrete objects very raw, very rough, kind of almost medieval-looking.

Rail: And then you became a sculptor.

Levenstein: Mostly by default. I remember Tom Butter came over and said, "Oh, the sculpture students should come over to your studio because you know so little about carpentry that it forces you to invent things." I was in the painting department, but not painting. And in some ways it was my way of hiding out. But I was always listening and there were these great arguments that would break out in the final crit. Listening to Mel argue with Bailey and Andrew Forge was fantastic. Andrew Forge said this one thing that really influenced me quite strongly: he was talking about Degas, whom he wrote a book about, and how Degas really wanted to be a reactionary, a traditionalist, but he saw no way back, so he became an avant-gardist almost by default. That kind of thinking became really important in moving to my mature works. In other words, by moving backward you in fact can step ahead. Another thing Andrew was talking about was postmodernism, which at that point was still sort of a relatively new notion, and I remember he said, "With the exception of you, Matvey, who actually did experience a revolution first hand, most of us have not. Modernism is the dust blown up into the air by the French Revolution, and postmodernism is perhaps the dust finally settling down into some form of order that we can't quite comprehend the pattern of."

Rail: That's certainly truer now than it was when it took the New York art world by storm.

Levenstein: Overall I was lucky to have been there when there was a very significant group of teachers and students: Richard Phillips, John Currin, Sean Landers, and my wife Lisa Yuskavage of course. All of whom I am still in touch with.

Rail: In reference to Degas going back to the history of painting, in his case it was his obsession with Ingres and Raphael, yet moving forward for him meant his use of photography—cropping and other compositional devices. Similarly, by your own necessity, having made drawings of portrait work with such a heightened sense of contrast, it made sense that you would move toward three-dimensional objects. Plus, it promises to infuse both realism and abstraction.

Levenstein: That's exactly what happened after I moved to New York: my work became these vulgar combinations of animal forms with male beer bellies sitting on top of them or breasts hanging on the walls. In

order to build them with concrete I actually had to make fairly elaborate drawings that were kind of becoming drawings in their own right. While I was making the drawings, which required some aspects of rendering, a process that I had neglected and avoided for a long time, I realized I really enjoy this refined, quiet activity. While I was trying to throw the shit around with the sculpture, which was all very physical and very masculine, secretly I would sit in the corner with a pencil and render a perfect form with light, shadow, the reflected light, and so on.

Rail: You don't know how sensitive you are until you allow yourself to be.

Levenstein: [*Laughs.*] Right. The truth was I was trying too hard to assimilate. It's weird because the whole point was about liberation. Another thing was that I was beginning to really suspect that avant-gardism, especially in its progressivist form, was not the pure moral and political force that everybody thought it was. I realized that the only reason why the avant-gardists became such heroes was that Hitler and Stalin didn't like what they were making. They got rejected by totalitarian power first. When they were not rejected by Mussolini, for example, they flocked to that power more often than not. As a matter of fact, seeking moral safety, to be on the winning good side, is just an act of conformity.

Rail: That's what happened to [Kasimir] Malevich and [Mario] Sironi, for example. Their late works became the demonstrations of their indoctrinated ideologies.

Levenstein: You know what? At least I'm not going to delude myself that I'm morally safe. The first thing I did was a series of self-portraits where I drew myself from observation, making myself as if I was made out of a plaster cast. These weren't done from photographs, they were actually done looking in a mirror—I don't know how many hours they took, but I rendered every personality or identity I could possibly think of. One was bald with a goatee. Of course that was Lenin. One with a goatee and long hair was called "Bohemian." In one I drew myself with a much greater hooked nose and all these anti-Semitic tropes, so that was "The Jew." I thought some aspects of it were too ironic, too layered, too postmodernist, but I really liked the way they looked and their presence, and somebody aptly called them "Neo-Stalin-esque." So I just progressed from there and became more interested in the idea of autonomy and making autonomous paintings. That was when I adopted the use of photography.

Rail: I read Susanna Moore's essay in your catalogue at your first show at Larrisa Goldston a few years ago, and she mentioned that you admired Ingres, and that you don't trust any expressionistic impulses. Actually, one of the first books I bought was the Dover Edition of Ingres with a small text by Vincent Price, the actor, in which he wrote, "Ingres, in correct pronunciation, should be like the word 'angry' without the 'y.'" Isn't that perfect? [*Laughter.*] It stuck in my mind forever. In any case, a lot of credit has been given to Ingres because of what Robert Rosenblum described as his coolly disciplined and warmly sensual style. Picasso recognized in his paintings the acute visual perception that accommodates the abstract order. But David, his teacher, was just as radical: by adopting classical relief, he reduced the use of perspectival recession while maintaining the atmospheric effects and making the linear contours more pronounced—like figures across the picture plain.

Levenstein: Yeah, David can be thought of as kind of a punk reaction to the sophistication of Baroque and specifically Rococo painting. In any case, with the exception of "The Death of Marat," I don't like David and have always preferred Ingres. Ingres, I think, was both more complex and perverse as an artist when he combined Baroque sensuality with abstracted forms. Ingres is still fascinating to me.

Rail: I agree. We identify with his terrific and expressive distortions of form and space, which opened up another possible language to Cubism, the curvilinear structure that allowed Picasso to break away from his previous analytical and synthetic phases. In some ways I believe this was what de Kooning discovered. We can see that response in his standing and seated figures from 1938 to the greater dismemberment of the body in “Pink Angel” of 1945. Which actually, thinking of de Kooning’s sometimes garish palette, full of harsh contrast, blue, pinkish tones against bright orange and ochre, reminds me that it appears you deliberately heighten certain local colors in such objects, perhaps more with the last group of paintings than this new one. In a painting entitled “Still Life” (2002), there were predominant green and violet pillows set in the middle of the turquoise blue arm chair, against the cadmium yellow wall in the back, or “Couch (Self Portrait)” (2004), with the Buddha’s head in ultramarine blue lit from behind, and the deep cadmium red couch on which your silhouetted figure sat on the far right. Is that a fair reading of those paintings?

Levenstein: I was using color as a way to figure out what is considered flat and what is spatial. To tell you the truth, while looking at de Kooning, I was also looking at a lot of Italian Mannerist paintings. This idea of combining a flat shape of either neutral color or black with a very bright color was crucial for me. How can you get black to be both the shadow and the local color at the same time?

Rail: When did photography come into your process?

Levenstein: It was probably around 92-93. I was making those self-portraits from observation. At the time I didn’t use photography whatsoever because from my earliest training in Moscow, rendering from photography was considered a real taboo. But, since I had already committed to doing everything backwards, the way Degas did it, why not try my hand at it? I remember going to the Met on a Friday night and seeing a small group of young people in their thirties and forties sitting on two or three benches and looking at paintings. And I was thinking, “They’re not artists. They’re not part of the art world. What are they looking at? Literally?” I realized what these paintings represented to them was a reflection and a picture of their own specificity in the world. I also realized, at least in Western culture, that paintings serve this almost biological need of representing back to us that which will never be again. So an autonomous painting represents an autonomous individual, both politically and emotionally, literally uniqueness. It made me rethink what I originally had abandoned: “How do you make a painting on a stretcher?” A painting has a discreet boundary. It does not dissolve itself into the nexus of life. It’s definitely not a piece of plywood leaning against the wall and so on.

All of a sudden all of those questions, however reactionary as concepts they may appear, became utterly interesting to me. It’s almost like people are being told something is wrong and yet there’s a guilty pleasure in knowing what is considered wrong. It’s a dirty secret and yet it’s a vital need. T.S. Eliot once wrote about Virgil, where he’s talking about the existence of a temporal provinciality, and universalizing a particular—not the place you’re from but the period that you’re living in. I think we’re definitely living in these kinds of provincial moments. Though most people think that that kind of autonomous painting was not possible after postmodernism, the least I could do is depict a condition under which it was possible. Through the act of painting I could create a theatrical situation. As long as these paintings were hanging together, you could believe in that condition of possibility. I wanted to avoid the splitting of painting into form and content. All of a sudden there were all these paintings that combined progressive content with reactionary forms and people started talking about technique and subject matter. I thought *that* was really reactionary in all the worst possible ways—like we’re back to 19th Century painting.

Rail: Back to Bouguereau! [*Laughter.*]

Levenstein: As if modernism never happened. This is why Ingres was such a fascinating artist, because he didn't realize what his true subject should be. He was trying to paint everything and anything. When you look at his religious and historical paintings, well, it's still Ingres, it's still something to look at. But it's his odalisques and portraits that we remember, though we all know that he hated doing the portraits. He only did it for the money in order to do something else. So in thinking about all of that, I thought I should limit myself to the depiction of subjects of autonomy. And then a photograph popped into my head because, again, it takes an event out of the stream of time, isolates through a frame, freezes it, and makes it a complete world. And so, I started looking into my own childhood photographs and in particular my father, who still is a very decent amateur photographer. I decided to focus on him as a figure in photographs that either he took or were taken of him. Then I started to draw a bunch of Jews for about a year. I was really dipping, on another level of autobiography, into every single technique that I was taught and did not want to learn when I was in Russia. First Sumi ink washes, then I came back to cross-hatching and pencil drawing where you go from 9H to 9B as this really self-imposed discipline, and then eventually I started thinking about interiors. A friend of mine found this photo album thrown away in the garbage in Brooklyn, which depicted a Czech upper-middle-class family, and their lives in the 30s and 40s. They were really fond of photographing their apartment with no people in it. There were also pictures of their skiing trips in the Alps. It was this perfect bourgeois life until it was interrupted by the German invasion. They actually photographed Eisenhower driving down the streets in Prague. Meanwhile I realized that these bourgeois upper-middle-class interiors were the spaces modernity declared war on, and yet this is the space that paintings come from and return to. So I started making large Sumi ink drawings of these empty interiors. They were almost like theatrical sets, which eventually led me back to painting. I was doing all this on my own. Both John and Lisa helped me here and there. Otherwise I was reading books on materials and techniques. First I discovered the secret of Grisaille, what is the combination of colors required to make a Grisaille. I'd pre-tube and I'd label everything from one to nine, from light to dark, and from warm to cool. It was totally structured. I'd limit everything in one painting from one to four, or from four to eight, so every painting would have this delineated range and I would have to pull everything out of that. It was like playing scales. I was listening a lot to Bach. I was always an admirer of Bach and his use of counterpoint. I wanted to do something akin to that kind of formalism that arises out of rigid but rigorous structure.

Rail: In addition to the way you use color as tone, another thing I notice is that you seem to embrace the color defects of the photography.

Levenstein: Yeah. Although I can't stand digital photography. And the fact that I'm a bad photographer doesn't help. But as a whole, there's a kind of distortion of color that I think of as a form of abstraction.

Rail: That measures the emotional temperature of the painting. Anyway, how do you go about the process of what to include or take out from the photograph?

Levenstein: Of course you can't possibly depict everything, whether you draw from real life or from a photograph. Either way there's always too much information, or not enough. What's important is to understand what are the pictorial needs of the image.

Rail: The first time we met, we spoke at length about Isaiah Berlin and his advocacy of the tolerance that goes hand in hand with pluralism. And in thinking of his landmark “The Hedgehog and the Fox” essay—

Levenstein: Tolstoy mistook his nature by being a fox, while thinking he should be the hedgehog. I am probably just the opposite. I admire the foxes, but I really am the hedgehog. I have a hard time walking and chewing gum at the same time. I can only just pound and pursue one thing, and if I do a half decent job of that, I call it a good day. But at the same time knowing that—Berlin quoting Kant—“from the crooked timber of humanity, nothing ever came out straight,” why would any one of us even try to make it too straight? I mean you’ve got to have a strong idea to begin something with, and do it with real rigor. But you’ll be an asshole if you pursue it too purely. I’m not trying to be a purist.



Matvey Levenstein

At Larissa Goldston

BRIDGET L. GOODBODY

NOVEMBER 10, 2005

The ceremonies of daily life glow in Matvey Levenstein's ethereal paintings, closely observed still lifes of domestic interiors and floral arrangements that find a transcendental poetry in the everyday effort of transforming shelter into sanctuary. In this show, a series depicting the two-room apartment he shared with his wife when they first moved to New York, the Russian-born artist combines Chardin's attention to detail and Vermeer's sense of light with the airbrushed, luxurious quality of an Elle Decor photograph.

Accordingly, Levenstein's paintings appear more celebratory than documentary. In *Clementines* (2000), unblemished fruit is perfectly arranged in a bowl on a gleaming tabletop. Two paintings, *Still Life* (2002) and *Flowers* (2004), portray identical arrangements of peonies atop the same table, with the same Jean-Michel Frank--like chair in the background. There is no clue that any time has elapsed between the first canvas and the second—life stands still in Levenstein's jewel box.

In *Self-Portrait* (2005), which is sequestered in the gallery's back room, Levenstein inserts an image of himself in the now-familiar rooms of his apartment. His naked back faces the viewer and his right arm is bent, as if holding a cup of coffee. Standing behind him, we gaze with him at windows covered with gauzy white curtains that block the view but radiate a wintry morning light. It's a moment of morning reverie, captured before the action of the day begins and charging the implied departure from private space to public sphere, if only because there is a refuge to return to at night.

Matvey Levenstein

At Jack Tilton Gallery

DONALD KUSPIT

NOVEMBER 10, 1997

Matvey Levenstein's photo-based paintings address the perennial rivalry between painting and photography in contemporary art, which seems on the surface to have been decided in favor of photography. Who needs the hand of the painter when one can have a machine do the job? Yet if we look less for the truth in appearances, which photography supposedly mediates, than for an imaginative, insightful attitude to them, optimally communicated through the medium itself and presumably implicit in the instruments used to bring it to artistic life, the hand, with its built-in, agile insight, is far more supple than the camera. We never forget the "touch" of a consummate painter—it seems inimitably his or hers—but we readily divorce a photographer's "vision" from his lens, for it seems easy to imitate once it has been realized, all the more so because of the folk belief that anyone can learn to use a camera. Thus, the photographer's vision, however ostensibly personal, finally comes to seem machine-made and impersonal, while the painter's vision, no matter how ostensibly impersonal, is discovered to be profoundly personal.

What, then, is gained by integrating these two visions, as Levenstein does, so that each becomes latent in the other? Levenstein seems to turn to painting in order to personalize the photographically given fact, to bring it to emotional life through the use of paint. The photographs he used as his source in this show came largely from an album of an anonymous upper-middle-class Czech family. Atmospheric colors—generally lukewarm, shallow reds—were added to what was presumably black and white in the original photos. In one scene, the family's yellow house looms over a figure, with a magnificent blur of whitish-gray between the two. Intensely brown trees bridge the space between the figure and the structure without connecting them. The trees are essentially repoussoir devices, but they make the atmospheric gray seem sublime, their scale offsetting the latent infinity of the gray background. Elsewhere, in pendant portraits, what appear to be the owners of the house proudly pose in front of a bookcase, the woman in a fancy floor-length fur coat, the man in a meticulous, buttoned-up suit. The artist is, I think, nostalgic for a bygone era; the house has been appropriated by the Communists, the couple is long dead. Levenstein's photo-paintings reek with history, its nightmare ingeniously hidden, both by the choice of images and the delicate, tincturelike coloring. Along with blurring the image, Levinstein's use of paint adds a patinaed look to what seems dully descriptive. (The artist owes something to Gerhard Richter and to a lesser extent Richard Artschwager, but his blur is less aggressive than theirs, somehow restoring rather than canceling out the image.)

But Levenstein's technique of blurring also suggests a kind of uncertainty of intention, as though he weren't sure whether he should put his faith in painting or documentary photography. So what we get is a kind of "compromise formation"—photographs with pseudosensitive surfaces, abstract paintings with quasi-hallucinatory images. Can we say they are studies in the sensuousness of flatness—attempts both to erase and maintain the difference between the flatness of the photograph and the Modernist canvas? Is Levenstein faking a painterly sensibility, a distanced observation, neither, or both? If we pair *Crucifix in the Snow*, 1996, an ink drawing of a snow-covered landscape and

dark wooden shrine put up to protect the crucifix, with *Nude Painting*, 1997, the ruddy photo-painting of a heavyish, big-breasted young woman caught in a moment of ecstasy, we see the horns of Levenstein's dilemma. Both images—landscape and nude portrait—bring to mind qualities associated with painting rather than photography. The problem such images raise has less to do with the different kinds of "knowledge" one gains from photographic and painted flatness than with emotional ambivalence. The emotional tone of Levenstein's images is indecisive: they seem to express mixed feelings toward "good old Europe," and for that matter art. Until Levenstein can capture both the evocative and provocative power of the latter, represented in its abstract lushness by painting, and the seemingly prelapsarian innocence of photography, his work will remain full of possibility but not exactly convincing.