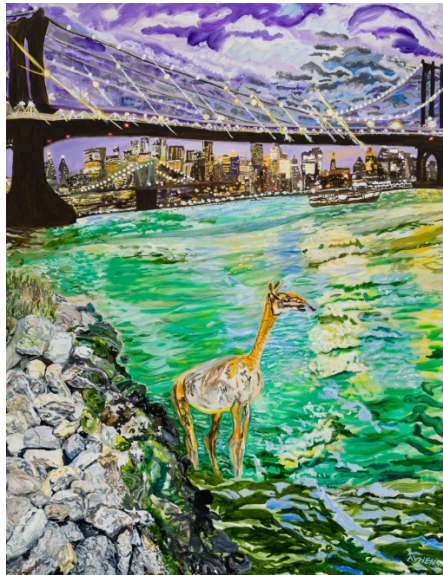


# ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

## Olive Ayhens: Unique Improbabilities

Etty Yaniv | October 21, 2019



Olive Ayhens, *Camelid In the City*, 2019, Oil on linen, 51 x 39 inches

Olive Ayhens paints unexpected landscapes in which roaming animals, lush fauna and zooming cars frequently co-inhabit familiar urban environments. In her world you may encounter by a vivid East river shore a Prehistoric animal, utterly oblivious to a dazzling Gotham vista on the horizon. Olive Ayhens talks with Art Spiel about her process, ideas, and “Urbanities and Ur-Beasts” , her upcoming show at Bookstein Projects opening October 30<sup>th</sup> .

**AS: You were trained at San Francisco Art Institute in the 1970s. Tell me a bit about your background and what brought you to painting, and particularly to landscape painting.**

**Olive Ayhens:** I transferred from a California State University to the San Francisco Art Institute. I had already committed to becoming an artist at age 18. It was not the seventies but the sixties. I received my M.F.A. in 1969 from S.F.A.I. As a student I was doing a lot of innocent erotic painting (I grew up in the middle ages in a religious family in Oakland). My influence was in part Pre-

Columbian sculpture as well as many painters, Picasso, Oskar Kokoschka. Kokoschka inspired my color relationships as his color is full of surprises. I had worked from the model for quite a while and moved over to making up images which I always did but hadn’t committed to. I painted from my imagination, life, and a youthful feeling for including myself in paintings of the city environment. My main teacher Jack Jefferson was an abstract painter, a student of Clifford Still & Rothko. I know the language & aesthetics of abstract painting inside and out, isolating color, playing with scale and it’s there today in my work. Jefferson tried to make me just move the paint but I would not give up my imagery.

**AS: Stephen Maine observed in his review at Hyperallergic, that your work suggests a dreamlike narrative symbolism and at the same time it is superbly abstracted. And you say that your work is much about your “love of the paint itself.” Can you elaborate on the relationship between abstraction and narrative in your work?**

**Olive Ayhens:** My work is grounded in abstraction. All good painting with images has to work abstractly. I am completely a visual person, so I constantly get excited about images around me. When I was commissioned by the MTA to do pieces celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of Grand Central station I completed my work for them and loved the structure. Next I kept picturing cockatiels with the crystals in the station, so came my painting “Cockatiels and Crystals”. The paint itself is sensual and tactile; I love it

like perhaps a writer might love words. I enjoy surprises in my paint handling. Color is a passion and a power – I can make it balanced or abrupt like music – whatever is needed. I do see color and shapes as I hear music.

I work broadly from themes that I am passionate about. They are ideas that I get obsessed with and when completed I transition on to new themes. Currently I am annoyed with the human species. I know there are great humans that have accomplished so much for humanity and continue to do so. I have been researching what was here in North America before humans arrived

about 30,000 years ago. Our ancestors the big mammals were here. They are all extinct now. I included an ancient camelid in a NYC nightscape, mixing up geological time with the present. My show “Urbanities and Ur-Beasts” opening October 30<sup>th</sup> at Bookstein Projects, includes some of this work.

**AS: Jerry Saltz described your work in the exhibition “Interior Wilderness” as “trippy”, and “inside scenes of destruction” (NY Magazine). What is your take on that?**

**Olive Ayhens:** Trippy? I’ve never been into drugs as many in my generation were. I can’t even drink wine and paint. I’ve always been imaginative and inventive, so I didn’t need altered consciousness as I was already there. Yes, scenes of destruction! I am very concerned about the fragility of our planet and the possibility that humans have brought the sphere of life to the brink of disaster. So many animals are going extinct and I have been including them in paintings for over thirty years.



Olive Ayhens, *Remembering My Chickens*, 2010, oil on canvas, 62 x 51 inches.



Olive Ayhens, *Dumbo Dreams*, 2018, Oil on linen, 60 x72 inches

**AS: You work in series. What would you like to share about your process?**

**Olive Ayhens:** I make up imagery, draw and paint with watercolor on site, work from memory, do research, and collect photographs that strike my fancy. I may include only part of a photograph in a piece, perhaps in working out a transition in a painting like an ocean that merges into fire etc.. When I had a residency in the former World Trade Center, through LMCC, that is when I began my aerial watercolors of NYC. It was like looking under a microscope. When I do those pieces, I am completely in the now. I

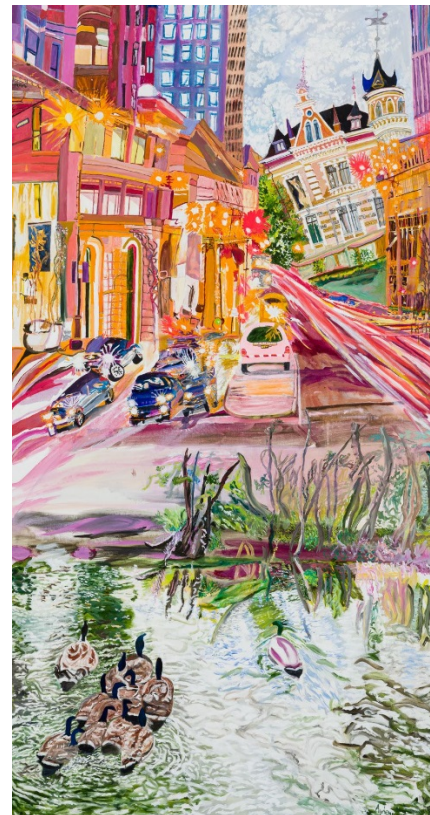


continue to do them from people’s views when they allow me. They are a different process than my oil paintings.

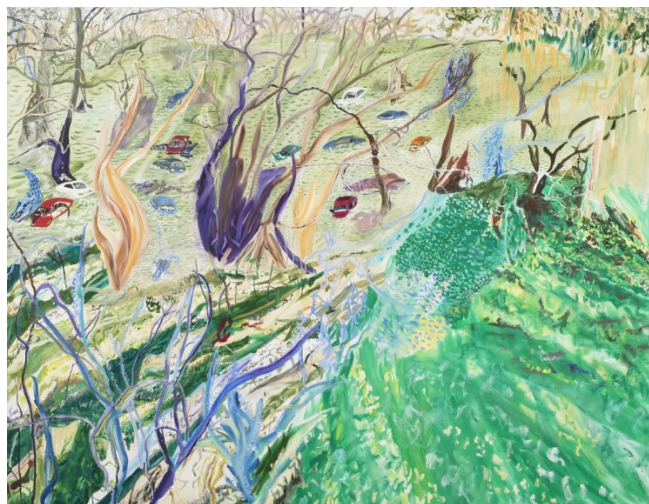
To give examples of a transition from one series to another: I had to be influenced by NYC when I moved here from S.F. The skyscrapers made me think of the American West and the West coast in their monumental scale. At a certain point I needed to move on from painting NYC influences. The series “Extreme Interiors” was painted after I visited a scientist friend’s lab. With all the wires and complexities, it seemed like a living organism, like the city. Currently I am fanaticizing about animals that might evolve after humans have gone extinct. I may work from this but not sure because it’s fun but upsetting.

**AS: Tell me about “The Aesthetics of Pollution.”**

**Olive Ayhens:** The Aesthetics of Pollution was the first oil painting I completed after my move from S.F. to NYC for the Marie Sharpe Space program. I was talking to a dear friend and I said there is an aesthetics to pollution such as purple & green skies. He said, why don’t you title the painting the “Aesthetics of Pollution”. I was around Cannel St. all the time and the pollution was bad. A series developed, nature/urban: my painting “Rapid Commute” with cars going down the streets of NYC, with the return of the creeks draining to the Hudson, and with skyscrapers instead of cliffs on the sides. When I hit NYC I could tell once there had been streams that ran to and emptied in the river. They are piped now.



Olive Ayhens, *Flyway Intersection*, 2019, oil on linen, 75 x 40 inches



Olive Ayhens, *Polluted Swamp*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48 x 64 inches

**AS: You went to an artist residency in Spain, where you were influenced by Moorish architecture and Gaudi’s work. Can you elaborate on that experience?**

**Olive Ayhens:** My paintings influenced by Moorish Architecture and Gaudi are included under the category in my web site “Extreme Interiors”. Spanish Interior, Admiration for the Alhambra and Moorish Architecture are the titles of those pieces. I was deeply moved by the magnificent, vast and varied geometry of these architectural spaces. My painting “Memories of Beasts Past” is influenced by both Moorish Architecture and Siena, Italy.

The category “Memories of Beasts Past” on my web site has animals with different themes inspired from place. “Polluted Swamp” for example was influenced by a FL swamp and I included gators in cars that are sinking and polluting. Bitter Lake is inspired by sink holes in NM with birds in migration. “Ancient Fauna”



Olive Ayhens, *Memories of Beasts Past*, 2013, oil on linen, 49 x 32 inches

is from thirty thousand years ago before humans were in North America. “Remembering My Chickens” is a made up environment with chickens I had as a child placed in a fantasy garden, with a pond but the sky is inlaid lights with surveillance cameras. These are examples of how I am not interested in traditional landscape painting but inspired by nature & environments and taking all this to surprising places.

**AS: You say that you paint “landscapes in interiors and landscape as architecture.” Can you elaborate on that?**

**Olive Ayhens:** Mixing up the inside and outside. My work is a play with space, totally abstract elements in juxtaposition to beauty in nature, flying off, with impossible visual realities taking over. Frank Lloyd Wright said the badlands in South Dakota are architecture. I agree my painting “Parallel Strata” (from category on website Urban/Nature) expresses that with a contemporary building merging into the strata of the badlands.

**AS: Looking at your work from the mid 70s thorough the mid 90s, there is an interesting shift between earlier watercolors**

**portraying overall patterns to later oils portraying landscapes with perspective. For instance, “Sacrifice” from 1974 and “Yellowstone” from 1994. How do you see this evolution and what role do you think the media (watercolor / oil) play in it?**

**Olive Ayhens:** After I received my M.F.A. I started painting with watercolor. I came to it as an oil & acrylic painter and learned all the transparency skills from doing it & loving it. It added to my painting with oil using thin and thick paint w/light and transparency in juxtaposition to think cake icing use of paint surface.

My earlier work like Sacrifice for example were from interior feelings & made up images. I sometimes included images in those days from outside influence but much was from my imagination. Gradually I was influenced by my outside environment, the boats for example I viewed out on the bay in S.F. I continued to include figures, lovers roaming about. In 1994 I was teaching in Montana near Yellowstone. The power of that giant volcanic caldron, the color of the dangerous geysers really moved me. Notice there is a female figure to the side.

**AS: Then you have the “Early New York” series. Let’s take “Montana Creeps Into NYC.” I love how the memory of nature fuses into the urban scape. What can you tell me about that painting?**



Olive Ayhens, *Downstairs Deluge*, 2018, Ink and watercolor on paper, 22 X 31 inches



**Olive Ayhens:** “Montana Creeps Into NYC” was the first piece I did when I moved to NYC in 1996 at the Sharp Foundation. I had had a year teaching in Montana after which I returned to S.F. and continued to paint from Montana influence then I moved to NY so I transitioned from Montana to NYC. My work is my life’s JOURNEY in part.

**AS:** And “Oceanic Library” from 2014 – What is the genesis and idea behind this painting?

**Olive Ayhens:** In “Oceanic Library”, an endangered octopus creeps into the lower right corner of the composition. While it could easily pass for another piece of marble statuary in the library’s reading room, closer inspection reveals that perhaps the entire library may be at risk of similar extinction. Water rises from the bottom of the picture plane as damp clouds descend on the stacks threatening to destroy the books and information they hold.



The artist in her studio.

**AS:** Your solo show, “Urbanities and Ur-beasts”, is upcoming at Bookstein Projects, opening Oct. 30th-December 21st. What would you like to share about your body of work for this show?

**Olive Ayhens:** I’ve been working in Dumbo, Brooklyn for two and a half years now. This began when I received the Sharpe/Walentas studio space. A fellow artist in the program said you have to do a Dumbo piece, I thought, sigh, but I did it as it’s so inspiring that humans can engineer those magnificent bridges but deeply sad that they can’t stop killing each other. I placed boats coming out of the anchors, oceans rising. Travel and place are essential to my vision –

last summer for instance, I had a residency in Bavaria, Germany, and the painting inspired from these travels is titled, “Flyway Intersection.” This developed from being on the move in travel and includes the particular place where I was painting in residence.

Also included in my upcoming show are the ancient fauna our mammal ancestors in cityscapes (mixing up geological time very broadly). This is not without humor. The human species has been dangerous and self-destructive. The giant now extinct mammals of course killed each other to eat and survive but there was a natural balance. It wasn’t for greed like humans.

My painting frequently evolves from a special sense of place, and transformation of environments in my own quirky ways. I have fun with personification, as well as improbabilities of scale. I am constantly renewed visually by everything around me, a feeling of the uniqueness of each environment in which I find myself. The very particular elements that arouse a passion within.