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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A Y. Z. Kami painting is something to behold. When we visited Kami's studio in New York late last year, it was our first time viewing his portraits in person. We had seen them online and in print, but it is something entirely different to stand in front of one. First, they are engulfing, measuring to dimensions like eight feet in height and six feet wide. Second, the highly skilled painter (recognized by friends like Shirin Neshat as one of the best) manages to capture light in such a way that it appears to emit from the subject, whether it be a seated figure or hands in prayer. But mostly the paintings are just lovely and quietly powerful to look at.

We found the artist preparing for his upcoming show at Gagosian Gallery in London at their Britannia Street location, on view from April 9 to May 30, 2015. His studio is also his home, and we entered his lofty painting space through a sitting room library full of books on art, philosophy, and poetry. While befriendng a shy, fluffy cat, we spoke about his January 2014 show at Gagosian in New York, where of note was his new penchant for painting sitters a bit blurry and with eyes downcast, which creates a more meditative viewing experience.

Kami walked us through a model of the London show and shared with us how he paints for "the other."

WHITEWALL: *We see you're preparing for your show next spring in London. Do you see it as a continuation of your show last January in New York?*

Y. Z. KAMI: Yes, more or less. It's a combination of portraits, which is what I basically do—I'm a portrait painter, and then a couple of paintings of hands. And then in one room I'm showing only white paintings that are called "White Domes." So it will be all white around you, to give a feeling of that experience of light and light coming toward you from the center.

WW: And we read that as a portrait painter you started at the age of five.

YZK: I was painting with my mother. She always had a studio; she was a painter.

WW: *What did she paint?*

YZK: Portraits [*laughs*], but she also did still lifes and landscapes, things I haven't done. And, you know, my interest in painting from the beginning, really from childhood, was to paint human faces.



Previous spread: The artist standing in front of *Paul* (2014) in his studio.

This page: Behind Y.Z. Kami is *Daya's Hands* (2014).

Opposite page: Y.Z. Kami's studio.

WW: *Why do you think that is?*

YZK: I don't know. I just find it the most fascinating subject matter to paint.

WW: *And your mother encouraged your painting?*

YZK: My mother was my teacher, in a way. Ever since I've been doing it, portraits have been the main focus of my work, although I do other things.

WW: *Who were you doing portraits of at such a young age?*

YZK: The first were imaginary portraits, and then gradually I began to have a sitter in front of me that I would draw and then paint. The subjects were whoever was around.

I didn't go to art school, so for several years I was a student in France studying philosophy. When I went back to painting, again portraits were something I returned to. I moved to America in the mid-eighties to New York. Gradually, the size of my portraits became much larger. And then I started to use photographs and snapshots as models for my painting. So instead of looking at a sitter, I take a picture and paint after the photographs, because I couldn't do this large format with the sitter.

WW: *What prompted you to return to painting after going to school for philosophy?*

YZK: Well, even during that time that I was in school as a student of philosophy I was painting at home. After that, I don't know, that was my call so I just couldn't escape it.

WW: *Saying that painting is your "call" reminds us of an interview we read where you said that you paint for "the other," that you're not painting for yourself. Do you think that's always been the case in your work, or was there a moment when it switched from painting for yourself to painting for the viewer?*

YZK: Good question. I haven't thought about it. I know for the past many years it has always been for the other; it's an experience to share with the viewer. But was it like that when I was a teenager? Yes, I think it was always like that, yes.

The paintings by themselves became gradually more and more blurry. They were very focused in the nineties, but for the past ten years they have become a little gradually blurrier and blurrier, and now this is the way I like to paint.

WW: Especially for a portrait, it evokes a much different feeling for the viewer.

YZK: Absolutely, it's a different feeling. I really don't remember how it happened initially. It felt right for what I wanted to convey, the feeling I wanted to convey, which is a visual experience. I cannot describe it with words. I don't want to lose the human face, because you can push it and it becomes totally abstract.

WW: *Did that blurriness coincide with asking the sitter to look down or close their eyes?*

YZK: Some of them, yes, I did ask them. I usually take photos of the sitter with their eyes open, looking at you; eyes closed, looking down—and then I select. My portraits for many years had the sitter looking at you. Always. This shifted in the past few years to sometimes the sitter, I paint them with the eyes closed or looking down. I want a sense or state of meditative feeling for the viewer, as if a person is in a meditative state or contemplation. But sometimes I need to have the eyes, the gaze of the sitter.





Y.Z. Kami
Ava
2013–2014
Oil on linen
108 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and Gagosian Gallery

Opposite page:
To the right of Y.Z. Kami
is *Man with Violet Eyes*
(2013–2014).





WW: *Is any of it tied to memory?*

YZK: Yes, when you think of a face, I think the image you have is very blurry. Don't you think so? To try to think of someone, the image is totally blurry.

WW: *Who are your sitters?*

YZK: Some are friends, some are friends of friends, some are strangers that I ask. But I have to take my pictures myself and usually I use the same light that I paint them in, here in the studio. I rarely, very rarely, use found photographs. It's a very short session of just snapshots. Sometimes I take pictures or many snapshots and then realize that none of them work for me.

There is an experience of light in all these paintings around us, and also with the more abstract ones, the "White Domes," and with the figurative work. The experience of light, you can find it in all great religions. I've always been interested in comparative religions.

WW: *Was that part of your philosophy studies?*

YZK: No. You know, as a teenager I grew up in Iran. I was very interested in Sufi poetry and Sufi mystics, even in Christian mystics, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism. I've always been drawn to mystical trends.

WW: Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

YZK: *[Laughs]* I mean, the word, I don't know, it has been used so much.

WW: *Your work has been compared to poetry. What do you think of that?*

YZK: I've been reading poetry all my life, especially growing up in Iran I read a lot of poetry: Sufi poetry, mystic poetry, and also Persian contemporary poetry. I am in love with especially two Persian poets, Rumi, a 13th-century poet, and Hafiz, a 14th-century poet. But also English language, Europeans.

WW: *You've done portraits of artists like Peter Marino and Marina Abramović.*

"IT FELT RIGHT FOR WHAT I WANTED TO CONVEY, THE FEELING I WANTED TO CONVEY, WHICH IS A VISUAL EXPERIENCE"

What does it mean any more? There are periods where I'm disciplined to sit and meditate, but there are periods where I am less disciplined. But the act of painting is a meditative activity.

WW: *But the "White Dome" paintings are more rooted in spirituality, aren't they?*

YZK: My series "Endless Prayers" was about making mandalas by cutting different texts, but they refer to architecture. The origin of it is the ceilings in sacred architecture. Then with what I call "White Domes," that I first showed last year, they refer to that experience of white light that mystics talk about, a white light that is whiter than white.

They are different [from my portraits] but in terms of feeling, I think there are some similarities. For myself, and I hope for the viewer, there are similarities in terms of an experience of light.

Is it difficult to do portraits of people that are so well known?

YZK: Marina is a friend that I admire—she's wonderful. I did the portrait before she became a superstar. I don't do celebrities. I do get requests, and I refuse. Most probably I wouldn't do Marina now *[laughs]*, but that was ten years ago. Even Peter, I started it in 2003 and then I finished it a couple of years ago. Peter was not a superstar as he is today, again. But Peter is wonderful. I'm very fond of him.

WW: *Do you have any paintings here by your mother?*

YZK: Yes, I have her self-portrait here of when she was in her thirties. It was a painting with hair and all that, I framed it [to crop closer to her face], with her permission, of course. I showed her how it would look much better. *[Laughs]* I'm painting a portrait of my mother for the show in London.

WW: *Behind you is a portrait in profile, which I believe is rare for you to do. Can you tell me about it?*

YZK: This is the first time I've done a profile, and it was very difficult. I've been working on it since last March. It's finished, I think. I can't do anymore—that's it. *[Laughs]* It's the first time I'm doing a profile. It's very different because in profile, the ear becomes very prominent. It's a challenge to make it not too prominent, because it's the center of the image. It's a portrait of my partner. The first time I met him I saw him in profile, and that stayed in my head, that image of his profile. So when I wanted to paint him, I wanted to paint him in profile.