



A Family of Artists: Yektai Father and Sons Share Gallery Space at Guild Hall

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by Dakota Arkin Cafourek

In the Moran Gallery of [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton, NY are the works of three men in the Yektai family, a father and his two sons, in “Yektai: [Manoucher Yektai](#), [Nico Yektai](#), [Darius Yektai](#).” The exhibition, on view until December 31, 2017, is a dynamic showcase of Manoucher Yektai’s abstract expressionist paintings and the work of his two sons: Nico Yektai’s handmade furniture and Darius Yektai’s large-scale sculpture and mixed media paintings. In an effort to pull back the curtain on the connections between these artists and their forms of creative expression, Museum Director and Chief Curator Christina Mossaides Strassfield, who curated the exhibition, led a panel discussion with Nico and Darius Yektai at Guild Hall on November 11, 2017.



“Yektai: Manoucher Yektai, Nico Yektai, Darius Yektai.” Gallery Talk at Guild Hall. Photo: Joe Brondo.

Manoucher Yektai’s studies in art in his native city of Tehran, Iran, led him to the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and, shortly after his arrival in the U.S. in 1944, the Art Students League of New York in Manhattan. Manoucher Yektai would come to call the Art Students League home and soon became a part of the New York School. The North and South walls of the Moran Gallery are a dialogue between his abstract expressionist compositions and portraits of his family. They include lifesize and lively oil paintings of his son Nico, his daughter Mahan, his son Darius, and his wife, the family matriarch, Niki.

In the panel discussion with Nico and Darius Yektai, Strassfield explored the brothers’ experience growing up in New York City as the children of Manoucher Yektai and their mother Niki Yektai, an author and illustrator of numerous children’s books.



Nico Yektai and Darius Yektai at the opening reception. Photo: Samantha Young.

With Manoucher Yektai's studio at home, their father was available to them but they also were wise to the intensity with which he would pursue his work and knew when to give him space, said Darius Yektai. "My father would engage you on a very deep level," Darius said. "Family trips were to destinations like Arles and Giverny to see where artists come from."

The two brothers' reverence for their father's virtuosity was clear as they recalled growing up in an environment that encouraged art and creativity. While neither of the two sons immediately set out to become an artist, their early education in art and art history eventually propelled them toward finding their own forms of creativity.

At university, Nico received a BA in art history, followed by an MFA in woodworking and design. Darius started out as a math and science student with a will to make art before changing course to complete a degree in art history and then pursue training as an artist. During the discussion, Nico recalled his father's sobering warning: "You're at the mercy not just of what you do, but the marketplace."

"I knew I had something in me that I wanted to express," Nico said about his search to find the right medium. As he set out to establish his own individuality, he found his passion in woodworking and furniture making, working out of his studio in Sag Harbor. For his unique pieces, he uses wood and different techniques for working with concrete, which he has taught himself.

Large and model-scale furniture pieces are on display at Guild Hall. At the nucleus of the gallery, his twisting, curving, elegant benches carved from wood on a concrete base invited panel attendants to sit upon them. The artist explained that in woodworking the objective is typically to make two pieces of wood look like one. In his work, though, he likes to allow conjoined pieces to take on their own identity, seeking asymmetry. Working with concrete requires molding the shape with wood, and forces the artist to think inside out. "I'm in it for the immediacy of that creative process," Nico said, approaching his self-described "functional art furniture" dually as sculpture.

Fittingly, Manoucher Yektai's *Portrait of Nico* incorporates Nico's work, capturing him in a throne-like chair that he built himself. Nico sits relaxed with legs crossed in the large chair that he described as "a sculpture of a chair." Behind him is a blue-green horizon, making it seem as though his chair was placed on the beach. Manoucher's impasto technique brings forward details like Nico's belt, giving it the rich semblance of actual leather.

Manoucher Yektai's *Portrait of Darius* captures his younger son with an open yellow shirt, rust pants and a wavy mane. His family portraits are expressionistic but the characters within are always identifiable. "In his first portrait of a person, he would focus on light," said Nico, adding that in follow-up pieces his father could exercise more freedom and express the figure.

For Manoucher's portrait of Darius, he asked his son to sit on his hands. "You don't get to show your hands. You are a painter and you haven't proven yourself yet," Darius recalled his father telling him. Some 20 plus years later, Darius Yektai's art has been exhibited at numerous galleries. At Guild Hall, the eight and nine-foot-tall mixed media canvases *The Three Graces* and *Figure With Three Roses* welcomes the exhibition's visitors. His sculpture, *The Ascension*, is set upon a

terracotta platform and towers 11 feet tall.

The work was inspired by a trip through Umbria and the idea that the great masters must have created their masterpieces with their own hands, working on every square inch, Darius said. After he returned home to Sag Harbor, he had a desire to create something large scale made completely by his own hand. The sculpture depicts a gallant white figure with a raised elbow and left hand in a fist; the right arm seems to be lifting up others who are dwarfed by its epic size.

“Every religion has an ascension at its core; and we ascend,” said Darius about the sculpted scene. The chiseled divine figure is made from enamel, canvas, wood, gesso, and denim, among other materials. Many of the wood pieces Darius used were leftover scraps from his brother’s furniture pieces.

“We learned from our father, do not waste materials,” Nico said. “There was no paint on the studio floor. Even his tubes made it in the works,” as evidenced in Manoucher Yektai’s *Striped Tablecloth*.

A supportive network was built into the Yektai family, the brothers said during the panel. Nico pointed out that there was no sibling rivalry when it comes to creating art. “I have confidence in individuality,” he said. Darius recounted a lesson from his father, “You succeed alone in your studio and that alone is a finished work of art. Studios only move forward if you’re able to see the value of your own work.”

While Manoucher Yektai could not attend the panel discussion, his message to his sons resonates for any aspiring artist. He taught them the importance of experimenting and failing, Darius said, while reminding them that “attention will come when it comes.”

BASIC FACTS: “Yektai: Manoucher Yektai, Nico Yektai, Darius Yektai” is on view from October 21 to December 31, 2017 in the Moran Gallery at Guild Hall Museum, 158 Main Street, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.guildhall.org

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