



TWO COATS OF PAINT

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Sylvia Naimark: The enigmatic realm of the imperceptible

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Sylvia Naimark, *Breathturn*, 2019–2020. Oil on canvas, 41.3 x 41.3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York

Contributed by Paul Laster / A painter of poetic pictures, [Sylvia Naimark](#) explores the enigmatic realm of the imperceptible in her otherworldly works on canvas and wood at Nancy Margolis Gallery. Working in a mutable manner, which she aptly calls “intuitive yet controlled,” the Swedish artist makes shadowy paintings that are both figurative and abstract, free and structured, light and dark.



Sylvia Naimark, *Transfigured Night*, 2019. Oil on MDF board, 39.4 x 39.4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York

Pieces from a body of work that the artist considers continuous, with no end in sight, the paintings are eerily diaristic—with elements of the past appearing through faint memory, moments from the present seeming somewhat concealed, and thoughts of the future being nearly intangible. Examining both the known and the unknown, Naimark deliberately lets the paintings determine their direction. Painting without a preconceived plan, she wittingly functions like a medium, while becoming a willful witness to the making of her own work.



Sylvia Naimark, *The Other Side*, 2019–2020. Oil on MDF board, 39.4 x 39.4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York



Sylvia Naimark, *Stair*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 19.7 x 19.7 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York



Sylvia Naimark, *Untitled*, 2019–2020. Oil on canvas, 39.4 x 38.6 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York

Trained as an artist in Stockholm and Jerusalem and influenced by residencies and stays in Capri, Paris, and Washington, D.C., Naimark pays little attention to the art of her time as a point of departure for her work. Instead, she finds inspiration for her painting in literature (the title for her work *Breathturn* comes from a volume of poems by [Paul Celan](#)), music (the title of the exhibition is *Night Transfigured* and one of the paintings in the show is *Transfigured Night*, which reference an eponymous string sextet by Arnold Schoenberg), and her own existence, which has forever been shaped by Sweden's long dark winters and contrastingly bright summers.

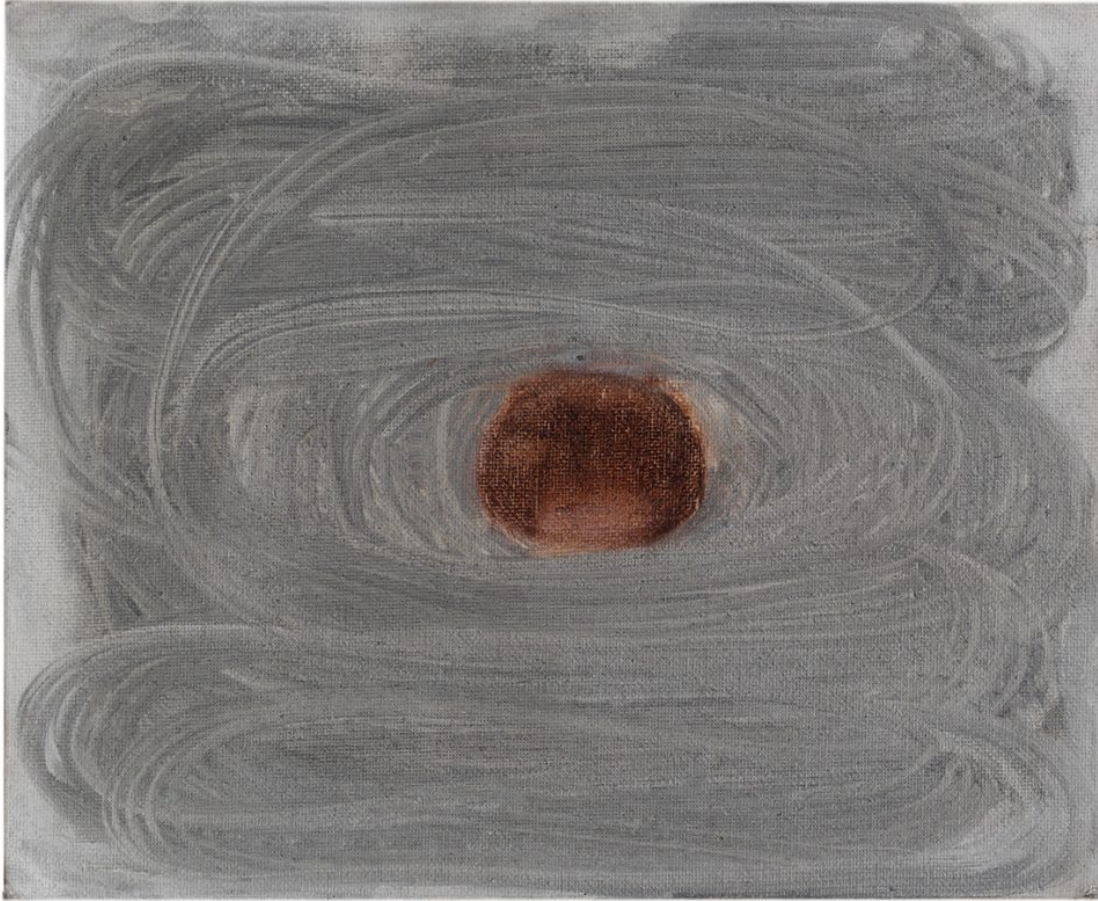
The oil on MDF board of *Night Transfigured* is an abstraction in a haunting realm. Somewhat reminiscent of an earlier painting, *Seven Nights* (from 2016), it shows a darkened domain—within a lighter one—traversed by a series of solid and transparent circles. Perhaps related to the Jewish mourning tradition of sitting shiva, the paintings somber tones convey a joyless mood. *Breathturn*, on the other hand, suggests pure light in a hazy landscape. The runny layers of paint on the canvas almost construct words in the sky

and figures in the fields, but it may just be an effect that's similar to the psychological reading of a Rorschach test, when the mind of the viewer perceives what it wants to see.



Sylvia Naimark, *Forest*, 2019–2020. Oil on MDF board, 36.2 x 38.2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York

Naimark's painting *The Other Side* evokes the darkness of death with a boat in a blood-red sea. The vessel is drawn over a ghostly figure on a pedestal, like a statue in a city square, but both scenes are framed in foggy blacks and greys, as though a memory and a premonition have become murkily mixed. Likewise, the canvas *Stair* nightmarishly juxtaposes multiple scenarios with the depiction of a staircase leading to a void filled with pale spheres and a strange gazelle that's caught staring (to complete the artist's aberrant pun) into the eyes of the viewer.



Sylvia Naimark, *Pocket I*, 2019. Oil on MDF board, 8.7 x 10.6 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York

The gazelle makes another appearance in *Untitled*, where the fleeting animal is again stopped in its tracks within a clearing in a field of deep purple, as it metaphorically pauses (like the artist) to consider how to proceed. Related—at least as a realm inhabited by creatures—*Forest* is an abstract mash-up of brown and green brushstrokes, washes, and spills. Like the mythological tale of a woman who gets lost in the woods and is transported to a new reality, the painting depicts a liminal space, where both the creator and the spectator could become spellbound.



Sylvia Naimark, *Glasses*, 2019–2020. Oil on canvas, 14.2 x 18.1 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York

Two other paintings are notable for being the most abstract and the most figurative works in the show. *Pocket I*, which is also the smallest piece, presents a brown dot in a swirling field of grey brushwork. Completely abstract, it's based on a memory of the artist finding pockets full of acorns in her mother's clothing after she passed. In fact, the spirited rounds in all of her paintings owe their origins to that find. *Glasses*, meanwhile, is a meditative still life focused on two pairs of eyeglasses at different scales. Symbolic of a parent/child relationship or even a look back from the present to one's own childhood, the painting is a sublime study of simple objects imbued with multiple meanings and open to poetic readings.

"[Sylvia Naimark: Night Transfigured](#)," Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, an online viewing room exhibition, through January 8, 2021. Note: NMG is now exclusively an online gallery and no longer has a physical space on 523 West 25th Street in Chelsea.

About the author: Paul Laster is a writer, editor, curator, artist, and lecturer. He's a contributing editor at *ArtAsiaPacific* and *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art* and writer for *Art & Object*, *Time Out New York*, *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*, *Galerie*, *Sculpture*, *Cultured*, *Architectural Digest*, *Garage*, *Surface*, *Ocula*, *Observer*, *ArtPulse*, *Conceptual Fine Arts*, and *Glasstire*.

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