****

**Robert Yasuda**

**Elizabeth Harris Gallery September 7–October 7, 2006**

OCT 2006

By [Michael Brennan](https://brooklynrail.org/contributor/michael-brennan)

Robert Yasuda’s work stands well in a corner. His current exhibition includes three narrow corner paintings (“Half Full,” “Simple Truth,” and “Bonjour”) that work like studs or posts, rising vertically with a strenuous elegance, adding a sense of rigor to his otherwise atmospheric abstractions. Yasuda has favored the corner for some time, and his work, even in group shows, always seems to shine from that unlikely spot. Formally, they recall Barnett Newman’s fieldless and tightly packed “zips,” such as “The Wild” from 1950, but the thrust of the work is entirely different. A more recent connection could be drawn to the corner light sculptures of Dan Flavin, since Yasuda’s paintings, which are iridescent, cast a reflected glow of colored light onto the surrounding walls.

The artist’s paintings of the past five years are defined by their radical luminosity and eccentrically shaped supports. The fourteen paintings included here continue along that line, but the color is much more radiant, reflective, and silvery than before. Yasuda uses interference paints that shift in color depending upon the positions of the viewer and source of light. The plank-like length of the corner piece, “Artesian,” shifts in temperature from warm to cool depending upon where you stand—a simple tilt of the head can cause a sharp color change.

Not only do Yasuda’s paintings physically interact with the viewer, but, like true chameleons, they’re capable of multiple color states. Most of the new paintings have an extreme pearlescence that’s reminiscent of the polished surface on the interior of an abalone shell. At times pink is dominant, which gives way to periwinkle, and so on. Only “Pluto,” with its denser color, and “Elusive Metaphor,” with its effaced gesture, both from 2005, seem like

 Robert Yasuda, “Simple Truth” (2005). 96”× 4”. Courtesy Elizabeth Harris Gallery.

holdovers from the artist’s previous series. Although technically impossible, it almost seems as if Yasuda is attempting to extend his color into the invisible poles of infrared and ultraviolet. In any case, his extreme antipodal push has yielded some intense and uncommon color combinations—the rare iridescence of butterflies and exotic fish comes to mind. Other minimal painters like David Novros, David Simpson, and more recently, John Millei, have worked with iridescent and/or interference paints but none has ever approached this specialized medium with quite the same airy delicacy.

Yasuda works on wooden panels that he has shaped by hand. The shapes are subtle, a slight cleft here, a softly rounded contour there. It’s worth noting that Yasuda, who was born in Hawaii, has some experience shaping surfboards. One can imagine him approaching a panel in the same manner he once approached a surfboard blank, with an eye towards shaping an edge to discretely personalize the wood. The artist also adds a layer of nearly sheer fabric that softens the panel’s surface and suspends the color/paint to such an atmospheric effect. Yasuda’s considerable hands-on craftsmanship is essential to his works’ poetic aura. Their manufacture makes them special from the start.

Yasuda’s painting is forceful, but gentle; confrontational, but oddly non-threatening. It strikes me as very non-New York (perhaps non-Western too) in that regard, where every personal encounter is typically marked by a kind of casual abrasiveness. Yasuda’s paintings seem to dwell on the ephemeral aspects of nature—deeply and profoundly, but not heroically. A painting such as “Beach Day” offers all the aqueous escape of the mistiest Olitski but without the weighty ego brio. In that sense, Yasuda’s painting comes as a welcome and necessary relief. He offers us an immediate and cultivated experience of nature, elemental meditations on water, light, and air (Monet minus the weeds). And in terms of available nature, they are far less mannered than, say, the city parks of Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux, but just as critical as a necessary relief from the relentless onslaughts of urban life. A Yasuda painting welcomes the viewer into an endlessly shifting space of total opalescence—something akin to customized twilight.