

# C F M H I L L

Kennedy Yanko  
*Moving Weight*

April 29  
— May 20,  
2022



# KENNEDY YANKO





**Hilma Af Klint**, *Fiery Flames*, 1930, Signed and dated 18/7-1930, Watercolour, 47 x 31 cm

### **Kennedy Yanko**

#### *Moving Weight*

We are delighted to present American artist and rising star, Kennedy Yanko, in her first solo exhibition in Scandinavia. Based in Brooklyn, New York, the Missouri native has created a new visual language with her sensual hanging sculptures and wall reliefs. By redefining the traditional concept of painting by delving into the limitless possibilities of sculpting with paint, the artist has added yet another layer into the art historical canon. Yanko approaches the more archetypal forum of metal sculpture, in particular scrap metal, and infuses the material into her practice. By opening her artistic practice to more atypical trains of thought, Yanko has expanded her expression to encompass these new directives.

It is with great pride that CFHILL presents this exhibition, a dialogue between Kennedy Yanko and one of the most important artists, painters, of the 20th Century, Hilma af Klint. Af Klint's work, although revered, never overshadows Yanko's four powerful, bombastic new works created for this exhibition. By allowing for a balanced dance to come to life, both artist's work give new meaning to the concept of poetry created by object and artwork. The physical and metaphysical weight the two artists encounter and challenge via their artistic practices is on display, daring the space and those who enter to engage with complex concepts of self and art making, as well as how we relate to beauty and aesthetics of the work. *Moving Weight*, invites the viewer to participate in an ongoing dialogue between Kennedy Yanko & Hilma af Klint, where spirituality is often left to the side as an afterthought. In defiance of this stance, we invite the observer to allow the artwork to occupy both their body and mind, truly engrossing themselves with the materiality and weight of the work.

Michael Storåkers  
Michael Elmenbeck  
Anna-Karin Pusic



*Blue + Yellow = Green*  
2022  
Paint skin, metal  
132 x 81 x 63,5 cm





*The Circular in Her*  
2022  
Paint skin, metal  
224 x 112 x 58 cm







## The Dance and the Wrestle

By Debra Singer

Though the Brooklyn-based artist Kennedy Yanko (b. Oct. 21, 1988) is usually described as a *sculptor*, she often prefers to think of herself as a painter. Consequently, this unusual exhibition, presenting her three-dimensional work alongside abstract paintings by the late Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (Oct. 26, 1862 – Oct. 21, 1944) offers an evocative point of departure to consider Yanko’s art and process.

Yanko’s predilection stems from her use of *form* to serve her primary purposes of *color* and *gesture*. It is also a nod to her early career, when she actually *was* a painter, in the conventional sense, creating works in a gestural style reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionists she first admired. Today, her works are a hybrid of both disciplines, made up equally of salvaged metal and expanses of dried latex paint that have solidified into self-supporting forms — surfaces Yanko calls “paint skins”. The metal assemblages typically serve as an armature around which these skins are then draped, as Yanko nestles them in, around, and through the hollows and crevices of the supports. The dramatic results either protrude from walls, are suspended from ceilings, or exist as free-standing objects.

Just as a painter starts by mixing their palette, Yanko begins at the scrap yard, where she searches the heaps of junk for readymade color. Certain hues are rarer than others. Tarnished yellows, dusty whites, and weathered reds are prized finds, while stony beiges and lichen greens are often easier to locate. Yanko’s improvisational and collaborative creative process then immediately commences, as she seeks assistance from the salvage yard employees, who are the gatekeepers to the only machines that can manipulate especially thick or large pieces of steel. Like a theater director guiding actors on a stage, Yanko gives the workers instructions via walkie-talkies and hand-signals (outsiders are not permitted to enter the yards), requesting, for example, that the machine operators drop a piece of metal from a particular height or crush and flatten another in a specific way.

Back in the studio, piles of steel, copper, aluminum, and zinc linger in the corners of Yanko’s studio like a reservoir of inspiration, ideas waiting to be activated. Pieces are chosen and combined, and later rearranged, as if elements in a collage. Further bending, contorting, and tack welding are generally required to connect them. Raw and rusted surfaces are sometimes highly worked through sand blasting, scratching, or scraping, while others may be left more or less as-is. Such choices accentuate the complexities of the distressed surfaces that read compellingly like drawn or painted marks on a canvas. In contrast to Yanko’s painterly way with metal is her sculptural handling of paint.

To produce her smooth, continuous layers of sumptuous color, Yanko pours customized latex paint directly from its cans onto plastic sheets laid out on the studio floor. Once the “skins” have dried to a certain degree, Yanko can then peel up the thick membranes of paint and carefully manipulate them, as one might fabric, wrapping the material around metal structures into mobius folds. In time, perhaps over a year, the paint skins finish hardening into place.

With these new sculptures, Yanko intends her biomorphic curves and specific hues to be in dialogue with the organic geometries and distinctive color schemes of af Klint’s paintings. In one of Yanko’s wall-works, for instance, a vibrant orange paint skin twists through a mossy green assemblage, its pinwheeling shapes rhyming with af Klint’s favored spiral forms. In another, a terracotta paint skin envelopes a chunk of barley brown metal with a lemony yellow pop at its center; the piece, whose contours resemble the petals of a gargantuan flower, loosely resonates with af Klint’s “Tree of Knowledge” series. Color similarly ricochets across two and three dimensions in other equally muscular works, as in a piece in which a pea-soup green bowtie snakes through a metal-knot of marine blue, or in another in which a sky-blue paint skin cascades from on high, spilling out from a sage green, diamond-shaped, steel skeleton.

The partnering of these two distinct materials—metal and latex paint—reflects what Yanko describes as “a call-and-response” relay in which one “comments” on the other. Working with, and sometimes against gravity, Yanko engineers each element separately before integrating one into the other. In this way, she establishes a yin-yang balance between a handful of contrasting qualities—hard and soft, rough and smooth, polished and matte—that the metal and the paint alternately possess. At times, intricate maneuvers are required to grapple with, in her words, “the dance and the wrestle” of her materials. Indeed, her works’ creation has an almost performative element, as she calibrates the scale of her sculptures to the viewing body.

Yanko and her work follow in the wake of many historical American artists who similarly started out as abstract painters and shifted to making sculpture. For many, Yanko’s sculptures may at first appear to be a sort of love child between the work of the late John Chamberlain and that of Lynda Benglis. Chamberlain and Benglis are each in their own fashion, twentieth-century renegades who embraced Abstract Expressionism in their youth, only later to turn those ideas inside out. Chamberlain, with his scrap metal sculptures of the late 1950s, is credited with putting “action” painting into spatial form, and, even more irreverently for the time, with introducing vibrant color into sculpture.

Benglis, for her part, also abandoned the canvas early on, pouring pigmented, liquid rubber latex or polyurethane foam directly onto the floor in acid-colored horizontal splays or accumulative mounds to record the flow of a substance in action.

Yanko in certain respects can be seen to extend Benglis’ idea one notch further, lifting the paint off the floor, as it were, and making it perform seemingly impossible aerial feats. Moreover, as a bi-racial woman who works with large-scale metal, Yanko assumes a position that in the past was seen to be primarily the domain of male artists, especially white men, such as Chamberlain. Despite certain morphological similarities, however, these two art historical precursors are not particularly relevant to Yanko. As she herself points out, her work is not so much about a challenge to past art histories, but rather is focused on forging her own path in the present moment.

A more meaningful historical precedent to Yanko and her work can be found in the towering example of Barbara Chase-Riboud (b.1939), a Black, female, American artist, who has exhibited her abstract sculptures and drawings at museums internationally since the mid-1950s and has spent much of her six-decade career dividing time between the United States and Europe. An award-winning novelist and accomplished poet as well, Chase-Riboud is best known for her own hybrid sculptures combining cast bronze or aluminum with fiber components, such as knotted and coiled skeins of silk or wool. She creates these works using her own invented technique, a variation on the centuries’ old lost-wax process. The results are imbued with unexpected complementary characteristics, analogous to some of Yanko’s qualitative dichotomies, and embedded with references to personal, cultural, and political histories.

Yanko’s focus on concerns of materiality and form may also be purposefully aligned to several of her peers with whom Yanko is in close dialogue and whose highly individualized practices are also process-based, such as Angel Otero, Hugo McCloud, and Leonardo Drew. Otero, for example, invented his own oil-based “paint skin” technique to create his multi-layered paintings. McCloud, by contrast, early in his career, produced large-scale “metal” paintings that combined blow-torched and oxidized industrial materials with traditional woodblock printing techniques. And, Drew, the most senior of the group and an important mentor to Yanko, is known for his at-times massive, assemblage-based sculptures and installations made by burning, oxidizing, or splintering natural materials such as wood, metal, and cotton. From differing vantages, each of these contemporary figures taps into abstraction’s potential to address indirectly notions of memory, identity, social justice, and art history.

At the same time, these three artists also gesture toward themes of transformation — how order unfolds into entropy or decay may lead to regeneration.

Yanko investigates similar themes to all of these artists. Her choice and handling of her recycled materials allude to the rugged splendor of the urban landscape and to the cyclical nature of life, as manifested in the continuous flow of one form of matter to another. A long-time student of Taoism and a teacher of Qi Gong, Yanko is interested, too, in the idea of a cosmic force that courses through all beings and things, and in related philosophies about aligning the body, breath, and mind. For Yanko, these views apply uniformly across both her artistic practice and her life. Such integrative beliefs have corollaries, too, in af Klint’s practices, linking the two artists across space and time.

At the turn of the last century, af Klint, like many pioneers of Modernist abstraction, was influenced by a range of then new spiritual and philosophical movements popular in European creative circles at the time. She was especially engaged with a combination of spiritualism, theosophy, and anthroposophy— all of which, to one degree or another, involved belief in the existence of a spirit world that could be understood by, and in communication with, living human beings. To this end, af Klint observed a set of often strict personal routines to prepare her body to serve as a medium in seances and receive messages from the spirit world that directed her artistic production. Much of her art is intended to describe this unseen astral realm, as she illustrated metaphysical concepts through her personal system of color-coded symbols and forms.

Beyond af Klint’s extraordinary palette and alluring compositions, though, it is her holistic relationship between her life and artwork that Yanko most admires in af Klint’s innovative and rebellious precedent. On the special occasion of this show’s bringing together of these two figures, we can also take a moment to flip this vantage. With a generous leap of faith, we could imagine what af Klint’s wondrous response to Yanko’s sculptures might be. One hopes she might recognize a kindred soul.

**Debra Singer** is an independent curator, writer, and art advisor based in New York City.





*Words for Creation*  
2022  
Paint skin, metal  
150 x 135 x 79 cm





*Sound Rays*  
2022  
Paint skin, metal  
180 x 145 x 91 cm





## Kennedy Yanko

*in conversation with* Saskia Neuman

Kennedy Yanko’s voice is clear and energetic, transmitting an incredibly focused, and at the same time, inquisitive impression. Based in Amsterdam for the upcoming months, the artist is preparing for and producing a large sculptural installation for Art Basel Unlimited, to be exhibited this coming June. Originally from St. Louis, Kennedy has been based in Brooklyn, New York for the past 15 years. I tentatively introduce myself via phone, whereas the artist confidently asks me a myriad of questions. Smiling to myself, I answer and answer. I think of the advice a friend gave me ages ago, when discussing how to create bonds quickly and convey confidence... “always ask questions, lots of them”. It works. Not unlike her work, Kennedy is impressive. Recently she held the prestigious position of Artist-in-Residence at the Rubell Foundation in Miami. She easily meanders between an array of topics of conversation, from Hilma af Klint, (more on the Swedish pioneering painter later), to her general acceptance of a certain few desirable aspects of the art world.

*‘I’m working on all the logistics relating to the piece for Unlimited this week, getting the shipping container and other things ready’,* Kennedy tells me. *‘With the Rubell residency I learned so much about how it is to work on such a large scale, it was the first time I had all the various elements, machines etc. at my disposal. So now, with this new project, I know what to do. I’m looking forward to seeing what happens with this piece.’* Kennedy has been a painter and an artist during her entire adult life. *‘I never had to wonder what I was going to do, I never questioned that I was going to be an artist, only how I was going to do it’,* she shares. *Kennedy’s father is a painter, ‘we spent a lot of time talking about ‘making’ together, and we still do’,* citing him as one of her main influences, along with famed actor and Living Theater founder Judith Malina. *‘I spent four years working with The Living Theater, that time for me was where I found myself as an artist, where I understood what practice and dedication meant, it had a huge impact on me... I’ve been lucky to have stellar mentorship over the years in New York, from other visual artists as well.’*

Her sculptures are amalgamations of metal and rubber intertwined, the two materials challenge one another, often poetically installed on the walls or hanging from the ceiling. Yanko deploys these materials in ways that expand the limitations of perception, underlining the opportunities we miss when attempting to ‘just look’. Kennedy’s approach reflects an abstract expressionist-surrealist stance that centers the obvious and less obvious factors that effect and temper the human condition. Although the Kennedy’s influences include seminal American artists such as Lynda Benglis and John Chamberlain.

As if the flow and poetry from a Benglis work has been met head on with the bombastic physicality of a Chamberlain. Her configurations and the weightless perception are a counterpoint to the materials her work is constructed from. There is a myriad of other artistic influences embedded in her practice as well. With accidental roots in performance, *‘I sort of fell into it’,* the artist’s ability to imbue a certain theatricality in her work is evident. Kennedy’s capacity to connect to the substantiality of the material she employs in her sculptural paintings is extremely evident throughout the work. *‘I started pouring in 2009’,* she explains, *‘I saw how paint moves, and saw so many possibilities. I immediately wanted to take paint off the canvas.’* She creates ‘second skins’, pouring customized latex paint, which dries, becoming malleable, shapable. These fluid abstract paintings allow the artist to mold her paintings into sculpture, penetrating the bridge between the two materials. I imagine there is a certain amount of theatricality in the process, a small performance of its own... *‘Yes, absolutely’,* she tells me.

Kennedy enthusiastically explains paint skins from a less scientific standpoint, explaining how this unique material informs her practice. *‘When I started making paint skins something clicked. I had a new material that had a structural element to it, and it took me the next eight years to understand what I could do with the paint skins.’* Later Kennedy started incorporating scrap metal into her practice, *‘everything happened at that moment, I found the perfect dialogue of materiality. I make a couple of different kinds of paint skins, a soft skin, which is paint by itself, has a porous, visceral quality to it. It has an acrylic base, so over time all the air comes out of it, it slumps, and adheres to the metal, making this beautiful lock and moment, emulating harmony, and inception’.*

Sometimes the skins are overlooked. *‘People think they’re leather or fabric, and to me it’s frustrating, because they are so central to my practice’.... ‘People like to talk about the metal work’.* I deduce that there’s a fascination with a young woman working with metal, which completely goes against the antiquated idea of the male artist – sculpture, older, forceful, white, and male, think Anthony Caro, or John Chamberlain. *‘Yeah, they [people] love it. The metalwork... It’s sexy, it’s wow...’,* she tells me, laughingly. *‘I understand it. I’m often asking a lot of my viewers.’* Kennedy is incredibly refreshing, with a possessing palpable self-distance, *‘I just think people have short attention spans, they want to click on things, and be wowed by what they see, I’m the same at times.’* The artist Nancy Rubens, and her phenomenal sculptures created from scrap metal, such as discarded airplane parts, is just such an artist that comes to mind when I look at Kennedy Yanko’s work, where, as Kennedy states, one underestimates the enormous stature of the art when talking about a woman artist.

Large powerful metal sculpture has that affect, but it’s the artist’s robust, although delicate paint skins that define her work, taking the viewer into a new realm of artmaking.

We move on, talking about what we look at on Instagram, *‘lots of cats, and what my friends are doing’,* Kennedy shares, *‘but I’m trying not to be on social media so much, it can become very distracting.’* From there we meander into film, *‘I used to watch so much more Film Noir, Francois Truffaut, essentially anything from the Criterion Collection... but right now, when I’m giving something real attention it has to do with my work, in the studio, otherwise it’s respite, from inspiration.’* She recently started reading essays by theologian and Estonian philosopher and historian Linnart Mäll, and spoke at a symposium focusing on sustainability, drawing from the saint, writer, composer, and philosopher Hildegard von Bingen. *‘I’m fascinated by her, she had amazing ideas on photosynthesis and spirituality. The symposium brought in people from the UN, as well as the science, architecture, and art communities.’* Hildegard von Bingen neatly ties into Hilma af Klint, who was a great admirer of the saint. *‘When I decided to do the exhibition at CFHILL, and include Hilma af Klint’s work, to take on such a task and responsibility I had to view it as a sisterhood of sorts, rather than just me being an observer of her practice.’* Kennedy admiringly tells me, *‘After she [Hilma af Klint] met Rudolf Steiner, who told her to look into herself, and stop all the woowoo stuff, she did, and made even better, more insightful work. That is what I want to explore’.* There is a great deal of kinship between the two artists. *‘For me, to be able to relate to people, to open up dialogue, has to come from a place of reciprocity’,* Kennedy shares. I imagine Hilma was similar in her approach to sharing not only her work, but also her person. Kennedy’s starting point is often from a place further afar than many artists, *‘Yes, my work is conceptual, but I’m doing this, making art, as a process-based artist. Making things, relating to materials is incredibly important to me.’*

*‘I would love to read Hilma’s journals. I would love to use her voice, her experience. I mean that’s what I’m trying to do in my practice. I’m using my experience, speaking biographically, using my very particular experience within the lens of art history. We often hear other artists voices, through somebody else’s writing, their observation.’* Kennedy explains, *‘I want to talk about consciousness and inception.’*

The immediacy that Kennedy employs as she dives into Hilma’s work and how the artist responds to it is fascinating. She tells me about how all these aspects of life she wants to talk about, *‘the history of the world, and how we relate to that. People want to bring to a conversation about gender, race, and equality.’*

Kennedy divulges that perhaps that is where we, society, choose to maintain a conversation at a certain frequency. *‘Of course, all those things are baked in any conversation. There are a lot of dots I’m looking to connect, and as my language and milieu develops hopefully the subject will, as well. I still feel that spiritualism in art is kind of just starting again, since Hilma af Klint’s recent exhibition tour. This show ignited an opportunity for us to reopen this conversation by adding an immense amount of information on quantum physics, science, and language when we talk about the occult.’*

Using her artistic prowess and years of schooling, Hilma af Klint’s practice progressed as the artist embarked on a life-long journey depicting her inner world, decorated with spirituality and esoteric images. Despite the difference in visual expression the further parallels between Kennedy Yanko and Hilma af Klint are revealed. Their use of materials has a definite reflection upon the times each woman lived/lives in, and the impression they are willing to offer to their audience. The delving into a sensibility of spirituality and having it manifest itself as a concrete vision that can be shared and interpreted in a variety of ways, appears to be the ultimate intention of the two groundbreaking artists.



Publisher:  
CFHILL

Graphic identity:  
M/M Paris

Editor:  
Sofia Johansson

Art Direction & Layout:  
Lisa Borg

Texts:  
Debra Singer  
Saskia Neuman

Photos:  
Sofia Johansson

Translator:  
Jan Salomonsson

Styling:  
Jan Martin Tordby

Clothes:  
@easyarmpies  
Minna Palmqvist  
L'Enchanteur

CFHILL  
Västra Trädgårdsgatan 9  
111 53 Stockholm  
*cfhill.com*

Published April 2022

