



Hilma's wing, 2025, paint skin and metal,
25 x 31 x 23 in., (63.5 x 78.7 x 58.4 cm).

48 WALKER ST | APR 5 - MAY 10, 2025

Kennedy Yanko

Epithets

James Cohan is pleased to present *Epithets*, an exhibition of new work by Kennedy Yanko, on view from April 5 - May 10, 2025, at 48 Walker Street. This is Yanko's first exhibition with the gallery. James Cohan will host a conversation between Kennedy Yanko and Dario Calmese at 5pm on April 5th. This will be directly followed by an opening reception from 6 - 8 PM. *Epithets* is presented in collaboration with Salon 94, where a concurrent major presentation of work by the artist is accompanied by an exhibition curated by Yanko.

Steeped in modernist visual languages from Abstract Expressionism to Arte Povera, Yanko's works occupy the generative space between abstraction and figuration, the surreal and the earthbound. Precisely calibrated interplays between soft and hard elements, between found materials and constructed components, establish a unique visual syntax that speaks to both sculptural traditions and painterly concerns. Yanko's sculptures embody expressive gestures—their folds and curves perform as brushstrokes or voluminous pours made solid, transforming the ephemeral movement of the painter's hand into permanent spatial configurations. In pieces such as *Lost lagoon*, 2024 and *Church hat*, 2024, color becomes form itself—a actualization of chromatic ideas through deftly manipulated skins of paint. The vibrating hues on contorted, folded steel and painted surfaces reference both contemporary industrial products and the luminous colors employed by 20th-century masters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Sam Gilliam, and Anne Truitt.

For nearly a decade, Yanko has focused on how color, form, and substance coalesce to create both physical and psychological presence. With a view towards the latter, *Epithets* represents the next chapter in Yanko's unflinching exploration of the mind's hidden landscapes. According to Yanko: *for the first time in a long time, the work is guttural. I dropped down into the dark place within me and dared to look under the hood, at what I knew was seething there but couldn't bear to confront for fear of what might ooze out and stick. I can't separate myself from my shadow, and the metal and paint skin can't seem to escape each other.* Like artifacts unearthed from the psyche, these works stand as raw testimonies to untamed elements—not seeking resolution, but standing as witnesses.

Through this investigation of the Jungian shadow—those repressed aspects of self—Yanko's latest body of work employs a spectrum of obsidian and ebony tones paired with gleaming chrome and duskily patinated metals. Yanko's assertive use of black functions not merely as absence but also as material presence—a gravitational force that both absorbs light and defines spatial relationships. Accented with strategic flashes of vibrant color, the sculptures on view function simultaneously as three-dimensional paintings and extrasensorily activated objects appearing weightless—as if they were on the verge of taking flight or drawing breath.

Wall-mounted sculptures such as *Cowboy, gangster, politician*, 2024 and *Trembling down*, 2024 playfully defy the established geometric rigor typically prescribed to sculptural practice, giving the illusion of folding and drooping in response to gravity. The matte finishes render the steel seemingly malleable, and the folds operate in tension with their perceived lightness, confounding the limits of perception. In Yanko's sculptures, the performative aspects of both making and viewing come together as the viewer's movement around the works completes the circuit begun by the artist's physical manipulation of her materials, creating an immersive experience defined by energetic color and flourishing forms.

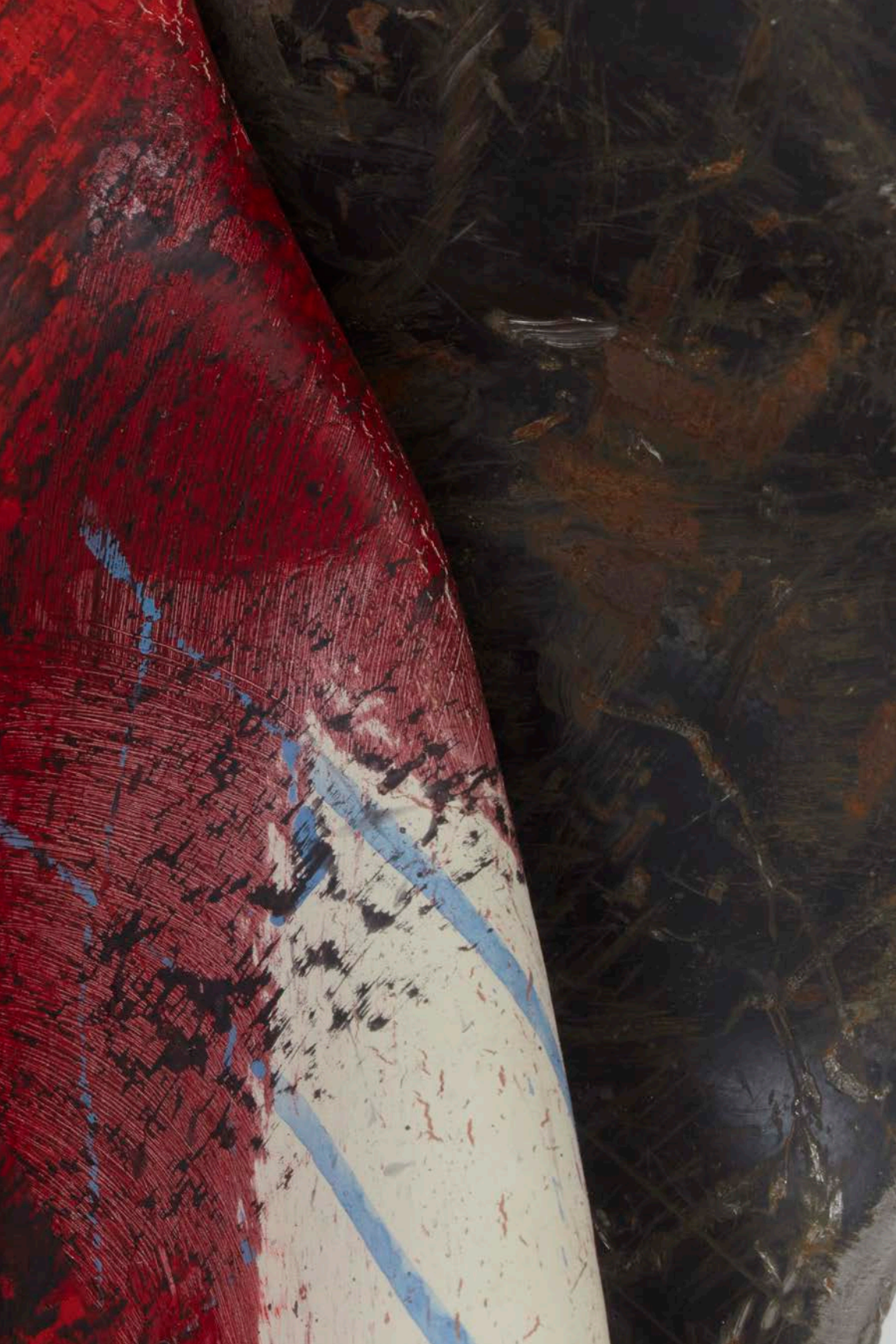
Kennedy Yanko (b. 1988, St. Louis, MO) has been included in significant exhibitions at the Albertina Modern (2024); Brooklyn Museum (2022; 2024); CF Hill (2022); Parrish Art Museum (2022); Rubell Museum (2021), where she was the 2021-2022 Artist in Residence and first sculptor to hold the residency; and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2019). Yanko's work is held in major private and institutional collections such as Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Bunker Artspace, West Palm Beach, FL; Espacio Tacuari, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Firestorm Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL; Perez Art Museum Miami, FL; Rubell Museum, Miami, FL; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC; St. Hill Collection, Norrköping, Sweden; and Stora Vaby Sculpture Park, Upplands Väsby, Sweden.

For inquiries regarding Kennedy Yanko, please contact Hannah Chinn at hchinn@jamescohan.com or 212.714.9500.

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KENNEDY YANKO
EPITHETS





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James Cohan

April 5 - May 10, 2025

James
Cohan

Kennedy Yanko: Epithets

By Dario Calmese

I.

You have people who don't think, and as soon as people give up their capacity for inquiry you have the basis for totalitarianism.

-Penny Arcade, performance artist and playwright

II.

Language is the most fundamental designed system—one that shapes cognition, constrains expression, and determines how we conceive of ourselves in relation to power. For marginalized bodies, especially queer bodies, this linguistic architecture often functions as a carceral space—designed explicitly for containment and control.

What happens when we approach language as a design problem? When we recognize that struggles with self-articulation reflect not personal failure but systemic design flaws?

III.

From a God who is a loving father, who is actually Love itself, one would expect understanding and forgiveness. So it comes as a nasty shock when this supremely good God only allows the purchase of such an act of grace through a human sacrifice, and, what is worse, through the killing of his own son.

-Carl Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* (1951)

I'm done crying.

You know, they called me names in elementary school. I was a midwestern public school sissy, and no amount of sanctified, prayed-over olive oil had yet derailed my trajectory into the lubed up world of lust, fantasy, and brazen homosexuality in the face of unbeatable odds. Few can imagine the sheer will-to-exist required to withstand the stares of an entire congregation—swaying with arms outstretched— as they cast devils out of your six-year-old vessel for sin and calamity.

However, being the romantic that I am, I began offering pieces of myself as living sacrifices to the mouths of those so afraid of their shadows that it blinded their ability to see me. I cut off the tip of my tongue to remove the lisp, and even gave myself a hip replacement (the previous pair was a bit too loose). I poured myself into those with wells too shallow to receive me, and I was afraid to ooze. I stitched epithets onto skin too tender, their insults hanging off me; ill-fitted for my frame.

But a hit dog will holler.

“Faggot.”

Could they see something that I couldn't see? Perhaps they knew that when Terry stayed over to babysit, she would lay on top of me after my sister went to sleep. Perhaps someone told them that my teenage cousins put their “things” in my mouth when we were in the basement of my grandmother's house “playing” during summer months. They must've known I was filthy.

Damaged.

Rehab has been brutal.

IV.

Submerged in reality, the oppressed cannot perceive clearly the “order” which serves the interests of the oppressors whose image they have internalized. Chafing under the restrictions of this order, they often manifest a type of horizontal violence, striking out at their own comrades for the pettiest reasons.

-Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)

It's a strange phenomenon that phrases like “words have power” are not taken more seriously. How could the logos, the premanifested will of god, become so... unquestioned?

Uninterrogated? Etymologically, the Latin *logos* translates into “word/reason”; a coupling which suggests that to speak, to write, to utter anything at all, is to engage with a predetermined, codified, and systematic methodology for articulating existence. Order. Word as code. Word as technology. Word as the architectural facade of intention.

The ever-increasing speed with which the world presents itself is not without purpose; a cacophony of words and images hemorrhage from every screen, short-circuiting human cognition and discernment. That there is no solid ground on which to construct oneself is a design feature, not a bug.

In *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek challenges designers to recognize that all design decisions have moral implications. When Buckminster Fuller writes in the foreword that “the toolmakers are the invisible, almost magical, ‘seven dwarfs’ of industrial mass production,” he highlights how design operates most effectively when its mechanisms remain hidden from users. So too with language—its power derives precisely from its invisibility, from our failure to recognize it as a designed system rather than a natural phenomenon.

A sign is always less than the thing it points to, and a symbol is always more than we can understand at first sight. Therefore we never stop at the sign but go on to the goal it indicates; but we remain with the symbol because it promises more than it reveals.

-Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (1964)

What stands between the truth of who you are and the concept of who you think you are is language; one’s dialogue with oneself alone is the illusory semipermeable membrane between the truth and the law. Language is the vibrational blood/brain barrier through which information is converted to spacetime, yet rarely do we question what is lost in the translation, what essential information is stripped away when consciousness desires to understand itself.

We feel it—the ineffable dissonance between wholeness and fragmentation—yet until that feeling is concretized into words, it is trapped in the purgatory between ether and matter... what Toni Morrison would call a “hunch.”

V.

The avant-garde is never anything but the progressive, emancipated form of past culture

-Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973)

It is exhausting to exist within a culture completely incapable of suffering. As trans activist Elle Moxley states on the Institute of Black Imagination podcast, “I had always experienced pain, but I didn’t know how to be IN it.” In “Epithets,” Kennedy Yanko provides a window into what becomes possible when we reorient our relationship to suffering from active avoidance into surrender.

Industry requires order, order requires violence, and violence begets death. From this transitive order of equalities, industry ontologically is a necrophilic pursuit; blinded by the lust to control, manipulate, and predict, it foolishly confuses death with stasis.

But the world is alive.

What does it mean to embrace your trauma as scaffolding, as an adaptive reuse industrial design intervention? For Yanko, death is foundational. Darkness is fundamental to the process. Her work articulates itself:

“I will take your industry, I will take your scientific methods, I will take your mastery of the law, and with the sheer brute force of spirit, I will fashion a cocoon for my softness, my shadow, and my completeness—using the very tools designed to control/kill.

This is the dao, the equalizing force, the dance of transformation: your need for control is merely the sturdy foil against which my becoming is defined, refined, and restored. Thank you, actually, for being so fucking rigid. So stiff. So cold—an impenetrable shell that now provides shelter and structure to the ineffability of my existence.”

Like Kennedy Yanko’s sculptural practice that transforms industrial scrap metal into fluid forms that seem to defy their origins, we might reimagine the architectural blueprints of language itself—technical specifications dissolving into poetic expression, designed systems becoming platforms for authentic articulation.

VI.

The manifestations of the spirit are truly wondrous, and as varied as Creation itself. The living spirit grows and even outgrows its earlier forms of expression; it freely chooses the men who proclaim it and in whom it lives. This living spirit is eternally renewed and pursues its goal in manifold and inconceivable ways throughout the history of mankind. Measured against it, the names and forms which men have given it mean very little; they are only the changing leaves and blossoms on the stem of the eternal tree.

-Carl Jung, *Collected Works* (1973)

I’ve spent decades transmuted the projections of others. Their language constructed me as deviant, damaged, disordered. But what if I approach those very linguistic constructions as raw material for a new architecture?

Weeping may have only endured for a night, not because the pain has ceased, but because I’ve begun the work of transforming the abandoned factories of religious trauma, sexual violation, and linguistic violence into structures capable of housing my complete, beautiful self. The most insidious aspect of trauma is how it coopts our design faculties—we internalize hostile architectures and unconsciously reproduce them.

Reality *is* a dialogue, after all.

The rehabilitation process has meant learning to see the world as a designed environment rather than a fixed, immutable reality—what appears solid is due more to insistence than truth. What Kennedy's work offers is the possibility of expanding beyond the confines of lawful containers, and by doing so, one reshapes the containers themselves.

The redesign process has just begun.

Cowboy, gangster, politician, 2024

Paint skin, metal

73 x 15 x 34 in.





Detail, *Cowboy, gangster, politician*, 2024

Psychically Milked, 2025

Paint skin, metal

38 x 35 x 11in.





Will of its own, 2025
Paint skin and metal
59 x 53 x 16 in









Lost lagoon, 2024

Paint skin, metal

16 x 11 x 11 in.

Previous detail, *Will of its own*, 2025





Catch me while I care, 2024

Paint skin, metal

19 x 13 x 8 in.





B!D!F!W!, 2025
Paint skin, metal
30 x 34 x 11 in.







Remembering the future, 2025

Paint skin, metal

40 x 24 x 15 in.

Previous detail, *B!D!F!W!*, 2024





Church hat, 2023
Paint skin and metal
85 x 34 x 18 in



KENNEDY YANKO:

Working with paint skins and found metal, Kennedy Yanko constructs sublime sculptures and architecturally scaled installations that defy the limits of their own materiality. Steeped in the visual language of Abstract Expressionism, Action, and Color Field Painting, Yanko's works cast off the boundaries of their medium, occupying the generative spaces between painting and sculpture, abstraction and figuration, surreal and earthbound.

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DARIO CALMESE:

Dario Calmese is an artist, creative director, and design theorist whose work interrogates how identity and history are constructed through image, design, and cultural systems. His multidisciplinary practice spans photography, fashion, performance, and critical theory, with a focus on reclaiming narratives and reimagining the lived experience. In 2020, Dario made history as the first Black photographer to shoot a cover for Vanity Fair, capturing the iconic Viola Davis.

He is the founder of The Institute of Black Imagination (IBI), a global platform amplifying the voices of innovators across art, design and technology. The IBI's portfolio includes a podcast, an interactive digital archive, and Space 001, a concept store at the Oculus World Trade Center. A 2023 Loeb Fellow at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, Dario also teaches at Parsons School of Design and served on the global advisory board for Estée Lauder Companies. His creative direction spans partnerships with Alvin Ailey, Adobe Lightroom, Esquire, Rolling Stone, Vogue Mexico, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

His most recent essay, "Beyond Flesh" can be found in *Amy Sherald: American Sublime* by Yale University Press.

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James Cohan, 48 Walker Street
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Catch me while I care & Lost lagoon photographed by Oirol Taridas, all photographs by Dan Bradica





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