



## PARING DOWN THE NOISE

Fabienne Levy Gallery will bring the minimalist-inspired work of Ben Arpea, a French-Italian artist born in Paris, to the Dallas Art Fair.

INTERVIEW BY FABIENNE LEVY

Lausanne, Switzerland-based, Fabienne Levy Gallery will participate in Dallas Art Fair for the first time, bringing young emerging artists in dialogue with Norbert Bisky.

Here, Fabienne Levy converses with Ben Arpea, a French-Italian artist born in Paris and inspired by the minimalism movement. Arpea brings a unique view to our times. In a world that is often chaotic and overstimulating, minimalism offers clarity and simplicity that is powerful and calming. Arpea's works provide respite, offering a space for contemplation and reflection. By stripping away unnecessary elements, it allows us to appreciate the beauty in the everyday.

**Fabienne Levy (FL):** *You were born into a family of art lovers. In what way did growing up in a rich artistic environment influence your work?*

**Ben Arpea (BA):** I grew up admiring the great modern masters such as Monet, Cézanne, van Gogh, and Matisse—a great source of inspiration today. Matisse wanted to simplify painting, as Moreau said about him, and I was particularly attracted to this aesthetic and philosophic quest of minimalism.

**FL:** *How did you find your own unique form of expression?*

**BA:** In the quest for minimalism, I started painting abstract shapes within compositions that were vaguely evoking a landscape, an interior. And, as I was attached to the figurative scenes of the modern painters, these shapes became more defined to create semifigurative imageries, reuniting my quest for minimalism and attraction to figurative painting. I think working on burlap played a big role in finding this semifigurative minimalist style, as its rough surface allows less details and paint needs to be applied thickly to adhere to it. I started painting on burlap during the confinement—it was the

only medium I had available—and I loved its raw surface and the overall paint rendering. It really became an important feature of my work and style. For each element that I paint I try to think of it in the simplest way possible—so a circle for the sun, an oval for a lemon—to remain in balance between figurative and abstract.

**FL:** *Your paintings are extremely vibrant and colorful. You have a very particular mode. Can you share how you make those canvases with different layers?*

**BA:** The most important characteristics when starting a painting are the composition; the balance between the raw canvas and the thick impastos, where paint will be textured and where it will be flat; and the color combinations. I start by doing sketches either with pastels on paper or digitally on an iPad so I can test the colors together and work on a balanced composition. Then I can start applying the first layers and create textures. The different layers are made successively, with long drying time in between.

**FL:** *There is no human presence in your paintings, and yet it is constantly suggested by the presence of man-made objects and interiors. What draws you to these subjects?*

**BA:** Landscape and still-life paintings are a bit out of fashion, and contemporary figurative paintings mostly include human figures. I enjoy simplifying these forgotten subjects. I'm interested in the beauty of the world itself, but also in how humans live in it. I like to suggest human presence without it being the main subject of the painting; this brings mystery to the work. It also places the viewer as an actor rather than just a passive spectator. The viewer is immediately plunged into the scene as if he/she was at the table, in the kitchen, in the landscape. The painting acts as a frozen frame of a specific moment, intending to make the viewer enter a kind of meditation and appeasement.

I started painting these imageries while in confinement, and they were a therapeutic way to escape, to dream. I'm also drawn to inanimate objects such as a glass of wine, a book, as it says a lot about an environment, a certain ambiance, and leads the viewer into creating their own narrative. Finally, these elements like the lemons, the sunsets, the pine trees are linked with the places that inspired me, such as South of France and Italy.

FL: *The colors in your works are striking, but so are the varied textures achieved by layering thick layers of paint. Would you say that there is also a tactile approach to your works?*

BA: I like to think of my paintings as 3D artworks, where the viewer could almost grab a lemon out of the canvas. I think about the material I will use, such as sand, acrylic, oil. I like to work each element of the painting as a sculpture. I like to stimulate sight through vivid colors, but also touch with these thick impastos. Visually, the different textures offer more depth to the painting.

I have a blind relative who came to the exhibition I had in Paris last October. I offered him to touch my works. He was very moved to be able to discover the paintings under another dimension, a dimension which is his own.

FL: *The warm atmosphere achieved by the red, yellow, and orange hues in your paintings, combined with the representation of suns and desert landscapes, echo the natural scenery of Texas. What does showcasing your works in Dallas evoke for you?*

BA: I love when my work is shown within an environment that makes sense, as they're celebrating nature itself. I'm definitely drawn to a warm environment rather than cold; it's a big part of my inspiration, and having my paintings within a matching scenery definitely brings more harmony to it.

FL: *You have started to create sculpture. Few painters do both. What made you turn towards tridimensional works?*

BA: As discussed before, I love to think about my paintings as having three-dimensional elements created through the application of thick paint layers. These thick impastos naturally made me turn towards sculpture, as I love to shape material. It has been very satisfying so far to turn the elements of my paintings into sculptures, to use paint differently, to experience different mediums. **P**



Ben Arpéa, *La Sunrise*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 59.12 x 43.25 x 1.12 in. Courtesy of Fabienne Levy Gallery.

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