

VOGUE

"Artist Hayal Pozanti Embraces a Language All Her Own"

By Bodie Kazanjian

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PORTRAIT OF A MAPLE

Hayal Pozanti's *A Vessel For My Heart*, 2023. Photo: Courtesy of Timothy Taylor, New York/London.

As a graduate student at the Yale School of Art, Hayal Pozanti vowed that she would invent nothing less than a new visual language. She had arrived in 2009, directly from Istanbul, where she was born, and had been caught up in post-internet art—art that uses the internet as its medium. "I was feeling overwhelmed and bombarded by images and information online," she tells me. "I made a radical decision to not get the internet installed at my house. I needed to wean myself off the computer so that I could go back to the hand and make something new."

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The visual language that she developed over the next decade, called "Instant Paradise," came from 31 invented, hieroglyphic-like characters, which correspond to numbers and letters in the English alphabet. Her mastery of this language has recently matured from a rigid system of abstract shapes into a joyous world of color and movement. "I started imagining the shapes not as things that are floating around on an empty canvas," she explains, "but as plants or trees or fictional creatures that exist within a landscape. That's when it all came alive." The new paintings are [on view this month](#) at the gallery that London dealer Timothy Taylor has just opened in downtown Manhattan.

A striking young woman whose long black hair reaches almost to her waist, Pozanti manages to look both exotic and mischievous. She's open, confident, and endlessly inquisitive. Two and a half years ago, she and her husband, Nelson Harmon, moved from Los Angeles to Manchester, Vermont, and this prompted another shift in her work. "All of a sudden, I was taking hikes in a forest every day," she says, when I visit her spacious studio in Vermont for the first time. Three finished 10-foot-long canvases for her upcoming show lean against the wall. "My interaction with nature—my feelings and perceptions—intensified after moving here, and I had this compulsion to just paint what I'm looking at. I've always really wanted to paint *en plein air*."

Pozanti and Harmon make an odd couple. She's five foot two, he's six foot five. She's Turkish, he's American—he grew up in Manchester, she was a big-city girl. They both turn 40 this year, Harmon in April, Pozanti in October. She's an artist and he's a private art dealer. (He cofounded Los Angeles's cool Château Shatto gallery.) "I never thought I'd move back to Manchester," Harmon tells me. "During the pandemic, we started looking in the Hudson Valley and, over our second bottle of wine one night, we decided to try Vermont." They love having friends for dinner—Harmon is the cook—and they thoroughly enjoy their life together. "I look forward to every Friday night," Harmon adds, "because we end up having a little two-person dance party in our living room." (She loves dancing alone in her studio every day, and doing a lot of reading—science fiction, Greek and Indian mythology, poetry, and books on ecology.)

They met in 2016 at the Brussels art fair—she was having a gallery show in town, and she went to the fair with a friend. "I saw him, and there was an instant attraction," she says. Harmon calls it "love at first sight." After a year of long-distance commuting between Los Angeles and New York, where she was living at the time, Harmon invited her to come to LA, and they've been together ever since. "He had a beautiful house in Highland Park," she says, "with a garden and palm trees and birds, and coyotes and skunks."

Her focus was shifting toward ecological matters and climate-related effects of technological progress. "Once I moved to LA, I found myself in a city that was in very close proximity to the natural environment," she says. "I was taking road trips up the coast and seeing incredible manifestations of nature—whales off the coast and redwood trees that were hundreds of years old." In 2019, she and Harmon eloped—a nondenominational priestess married them in a circle of redwoods in Big Sur. (Two months later, they had a big Turkish wedding in Istanbul.)

She began thinking about "what it means to be human," and about experiencing the world through her body, through memories and dreams, and forming intuitive responses to the world around her. This is when she stopped using acrylic (plastic) paint and started using oil sticks (pigment mixed with walnut or linseed oil). "I wanted to experience what it feels like to just paint, from my mind to

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my hand," she explains. "The oil stick allows you to do that." Pozanti shows me how she mixes the colors, not on a palette, but directly on the canvas, using her fingers. "There's something very primal about it. I'm like a cave painter. There's nothing between me and my mind and the thing that I'm making."



BLUE MOON

Veil Between Worlds, 2023.

Photo: Courtesy of Timothy Taylor, New York/London

The name Hayal means "Daydream" in Turkish. "Many Turkish names are also names of things," Pozanti says. "I have friends who are called 'Love' and 'The Sea.' " Born in 1983, Pozanti is the only child of Suheyl ("Northern Star"), a medical doctor with a PhD in hospital administration, and Sengul ("Happy Rose"), a career-oriented computer scientist mother. When Pozanti was nine, they moved to Houston, where her father completed his PhD at the Methodist Hospital. He asked if his wife could also have an internship there, and "when they saw on her CV that she could program in seven languages, they said, 'Oh, my God. Can she start tomorrow?'" Pozanti remembers. They stayed for three years, so Pozanti could finish elementary school.

Back in Istanbul, Pozanti was enrolled at Robert College—considered the best private high school in Turkey. (Orhan Pamuk and many other notables went there.) The classes were mostly in English. "From day one, she knew so much about the US and how to behave around American teachers,"

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says her classmate Gökçe Günel, now a professor of anthropology at Rice University. Hayal and Gökçe ("Sky Blue") became best friends at Robert, and they still speak to each other every day. (Günel officiated at Pozanti and Harmon's Istanbul wedding, and Pozanti did the same at Günel's wedding the year before.) "She's a very imaginative and playful and curious person, who could make herself cry whenever she wanted to by keeping her eyes open as long as possible," Günel says. Pozanti was a day student, but she stayed late after school so that she and Günel, who was a boarder, could hang out.

There were dark spots in her young adulthood, however. The internet was making its way into daily life, and a lot of what she saw on it—wounded war veterans, natural disasters—was very disturbing. "I had access to all kinds of things I'd never seen before and maybe shouldn't have been seeing," she says. "The horror of human experience—I was very drawn to that for whatever reason." While she was in high school, Pozanti lived through the 7.4 magnitude 1999 earthquake, which took more than 17,000 lives. The Twin Towers fell the year after she graduated from Robert. She and her parents were lying on a beach in Torba, a seaside village on what is known as the Turkish Riviera, when "somebody came running toward us, shouting, 'They attacked America!' In Turkey, you're always in the middle of everything. That's why this country can't really be stable. Forces are pushing and pulling you."

Throughout her time at Robert, Pozanti had taken art classes, and after she graduated, she enrolled in Sabancı University, Turkey's first liberal arts college, where she majored in visual arts and communication design. The school was an hour from Istanbul, and every weekend, she and her boyfriend (a jazz drummer) and their pals would travel to the city and go clubbing, dancing to techno music. "At the clubs, there'd be cigarette girls handing out cigarettes and condoms. I smoked two packs a day."

After graduation, Pozanti spent five years in Istanbul. For much of that time, she designed and produced store windows for a high-end department store. After work, she made art—figurative, mostly black-and-white images taken from the internet, collaged, and then silkscreened or painted onto paper. "I was very fluent in making things on the computer," she says. They had a magical, cartoony quality, a sense of odd things happening in dark places. Her work started to appear in group shows in Istanbul and Stockholm. In 2009, at the age of 26, she entered Yale with a full scholarship.

There she dove into research about how different civilizations had come up with their written communication—all the way back to runes and ancient Sanskrit. "I came across a system where you put a circle inside a square and start making indentations, fill in the indent, and you get a new shape from the negative." Eventually she winnowed hundreds of shapes down to 31 glyphs, creating a visual alphabet that she used, in different combinations, to make her paintings.

On her last day at Yale, a collector knocked on her studio door. He bought three of her paintings on the spot, and called Jessica Silverman, a San Francisco gallerist, who became her primary dealer. Pozanti moved to New York a few weeks later and got a job working as a studio assistant for the artist Glenn Ligon. (Ligon ranks her a four out of five on the assistant scale: "The fours have

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sense enough to reserve something for their own work," he says.) She had her first solo show with Jessica Silverman in 2012, and sold enough to quit her day job and eventually rent a tiny apartment of her own in Chinatown.

Riding her bicycle to and from her Bushwick studio, she continued to develop her system. "I didn't think of it as an alphabet in the beginning," she says. "I thought of them more as numbers." An encryption system made its way into her paintings—data that often revealed the painting's title: For example, *18* (number of variations in smiles that human beings possess) or *1/10* (proportion of people who check their phones during sex).

In 2015, she had her first museum show, "Deep Learning," at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, for which she made a video of her glyphs in motion. Two years later, this led to an invitation from the Public Art Fund to make an animation for the just-opened World Trade Center's Transportation Hub. She titled it "Relentless Tenderness," in homage to the Twin Towers tragedy. Pozanti became an American citizen last year. "I'm very proud that I did it by myself, not through my marriage," she says.



Pozanti in her Vermont studio. Photo: Didem Civginoglu

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The largest and most spectacular use of Pozanti's 31 glyphs can now be seen on the 85-foot-long ceiling of the New York Public Library's largest circulating branch. The independent curator Nancy Rosen, who had seen Pozanti's show at the Aldrich Museum, felt that "her meta language and personal alphabet all reinforced my hunch that she could be a serious candidate," and she was chosen over two other artists. This permanent work at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library commemorates 12 crucial innovations in the history of the written word, from Mesopotamian clay tablets and papyrus edicts to electronic screens. "This is a work about the global history of writing," says Pozanti. "One of the things that unites us as a species." Her title for it is the same one she gave to her invented language a dozen years ago—*Instant Paradise*. The work is a culmination and also a farewell. As Pozanti says, "It's the big bow before the curtain closes on a chapter."

The 10-foot-long, "body-scale-size" paintings that Pozanti has been working on for her New York show are the largest she has ever done. "I want the viewer to have a feeling of being able to walk into the world that I'm creating," she says. The world here is her lush garden, the greenness she sees on her daily hikes, and the river that rushes by her studio door. Everything has become smoother, less abstract, and more free-flowing—less drawing-like and more painterly. One of the smaller paintings (80 by 60 inches), *A Vessel For My Heart*, is based on the ancient maple tree in her front yard—one of the oldest trees in Manchester. Pozanti has imagined it as a vibrant, looping dark blue shape, surrounded by pink, yellow, lavender, orange, and white flowerlike forms, a combination of colors that you don't normally see. It's a portrait of a maple dreaming of itself as a young tree.

Pozanti uses painting as a way to express her fantasy of what she'd like the world to be. "When I'm in my studio, I'm creating a new world for myself," she says. "I really do believe in celebrating what unites us as a species. I always liked daydreaming, making up fairy tales, reading science fiction." She adds, "I'm still daydreaming."

["Hayal Pozanti: The World For A Mirror"](#) is on view from April 20 to May 27 at Timothy Taylor in New York.

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