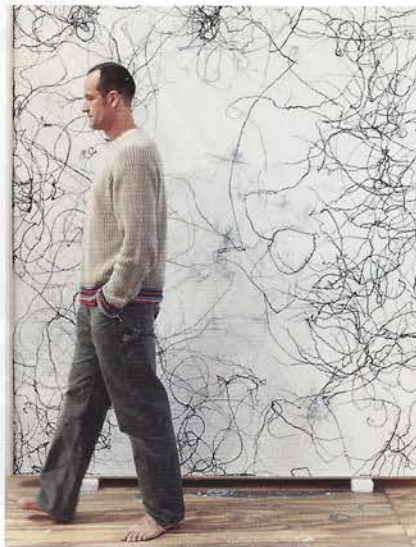


EMIL LUKAS

Using unexpected materials, such as silk and insects, this artist evokes the mysteries of nature. BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: The artist in front of one of his larvae paintings at his studio in Stockertown, Pennsylvania. The interior of the 19th-century barn that serves as Lukas's studio. *Liquid Silk Light*, 2012.



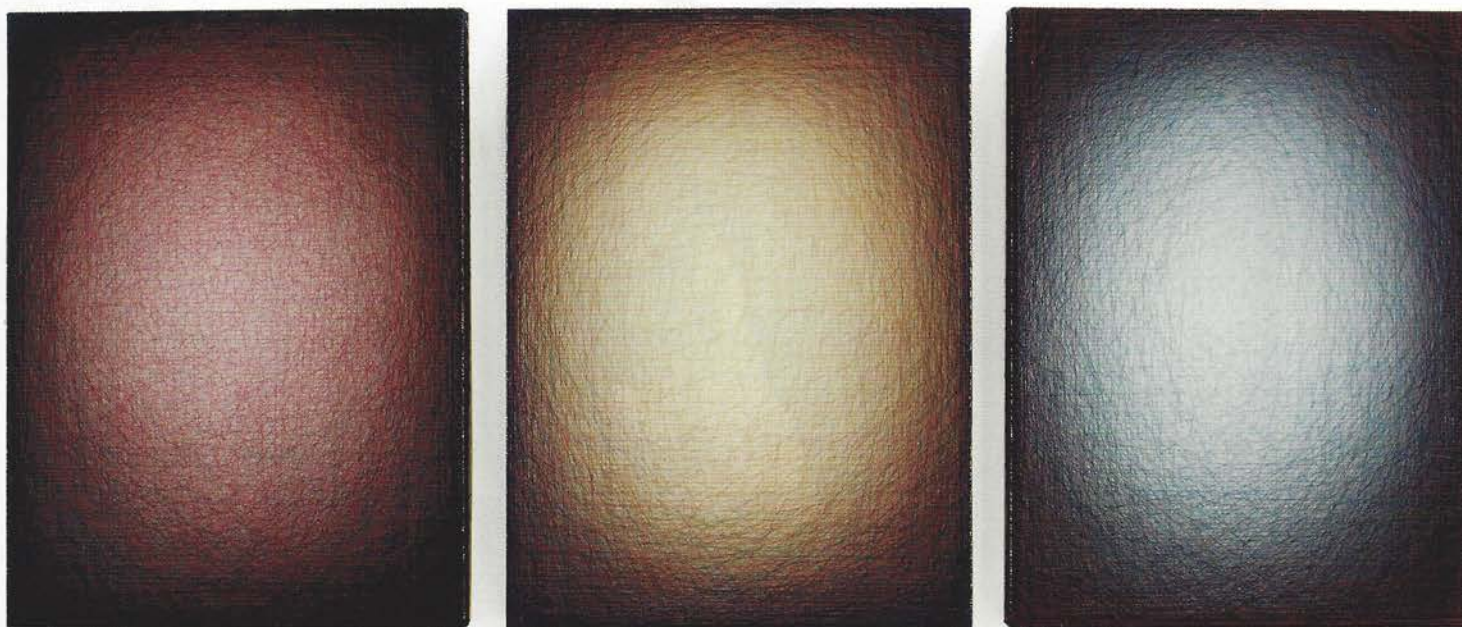
In the agricultural town of Stockertown, Pennsylvania, where Emil Lukas lives and works out of a 19th-century barn, people like to stop by bearing such leftover oddities as a dead turtle, the insides of an old piano, a box of tangled threads on cones.

The gift of unruly thread was a catalyst for a body of work, which Lukas calls "thread paintings," that has evolved over the last three years. He's also collaborated with the menswear designer Ermenegildo Zegna, using a palette of 52 Zegna silk threads for these pieces. From a distance, they seem to glow ethereally from orb-like centers that can look alternately concave and convex. Up close, the "painting" is actually a shallow wood box with nails along the four edges; lines of thread are looped under the nailheads and stretched across the face in all directions. Lukas paints the inside of the box white and achieves the optical effects of luminescence and volume by making a more dense web of threads toward the edges and a sparser scrim toward the middle, where the white panel shows through.

"It revolves around basic color theory and opacity, like laying down one glaze of watercolor on top of another," says Lukas, who estimates he may use up to a mile of thread—and some 100,000 individual lines—in a single work. "To work with the silk is like having liquid in your hands," continues Lukas, who paces around the boxes, unspooling the thread from edge to edge.

While the process isn't complicated, the works completely fool the eye. "From afar they could be glass or paintings," says Harry Philbrick, the former director of the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, which exhibited Lukas's >





FROM TOP: The triptych *Zegna Silk Hum*, 2012. A detail of the middle panel. *Untitled*, 2011.

work in 2005. “Then there’s this moment where they snap into focus and you realize it’s just a bunch of threads. That experience is magical.”

Lukas grew up in Pittsburgh and inherited a love of materials from his mother, who did crafts projects with him. He studied painting and sculpture at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, then assisted the sculptor Not Vital in Italy before striking out on his own. Lukas has always gravitated toward humble, accessible materials. “The work is about understanding what’s already in your shop, what’s right next to you, and experimenting with its nature,” says Lukas, who in his first exhibition last year with the Sperone Westwater gallery in New York showed paintings made with thread, Bubble Wrap, and, most unexpectedly, larvae.

The chance meeting of a fly with a pool of pigment on a wet painting yielded his discovery of what larvae could do. The following day he was mystified to find lines radiating from the puddle of paint. He realized that pupating worms must have crawled out of the mother fly embalmed in the pigment, all of which he found fascinating.

Through a process of trial and error not for the squeamish, Lukas devised a method of breeding eggs in his studio and introducing clumps of mature larvae to wet, primed canvases covered with a clear plastic membrane to keep the surface moist. Using medical syringes, he deposits dark ink near the creatures and casts light and shadow on the surface to help steer the movements of the larvae, which inch away from direct light, dragging the ink with them. After he releases the worms outside, he applies a beautiful milky wash over the black, spin-

dly lines, repeating the cycle several times. “At the end, it’s a painting that was not made by the human hand but was directed by my intentions,” he says.

Philbrick finds that Lukas’s keen observation of small actions links his disparate bodies of work. “In the thread pieces, it’s an accumulation of motions, the same way those squiggle marks in the larvae paintings are the leftovers of their movement,” he says. “It’s this record of simple motions that become something much more.” ■

