

Rosy

Artists are often asked: *What is this about?* And a corollary to that: *What does it mean?* A valid response, when it comes to Anna Kunz's work, is that you may be asking the wrong questions. *How does it feel?* That's getting closer. *What is this feeling doing?* On the right track.

With Kunz's paintings, the expression itself *is* the thing, is intrinsic to both making the art and experiencing it. Experience and sensory perception – and therefore presence – are key. Which is not to say that intention and interpretation aren't important or necessary, or that there's no point in talking to an artist about their work. Talking with Anna Kunz about hers is a great pleasure. It's just to say that the expression – the way that Kunz puts color to surfaces and the way we receive it – conveys so much in and of itself.

There is a truth to emotional terrain, to our subjective interiors – our feelings can have concrete social consequences and manifestations. So, while I won't tell you what Anna Kunz's paintings are *about* or what they *mean*, I can't help but focus on what it is that draws me to them and the feelings – powerful and deep – they stir, the concerns and the preoccupations you can find there.

Rosy is the third in a series of related exhibitions, including *Yellow Pinto* (2017) and *The Blue Magnitude* (2020). Like the primary colors these names reference, allude to, or embody, something foundational is happening here. Kunz is interested in the sources from which we spring and that we keep returning to, over time and space, in different ways. The work itself is not exactly haunted or haunting but Kunz is deeply concerned with presence and absence and the various ways we understand those concepts. Presence as in being present and paying attention but also, as Light and Space artist Robert Irwin once put it, presence as an “energy build-up,” an atmospheric phenomenon that charges and changes the space around you.¹ Absence as in what's missing but also absence as “negative space” – the blank white wall between, above, and below the striking colors of these works – which isn't so negative, after all. Presence and absence continually define each other in a kind of dance, which Kunz channels largely through the medium of paint – its opacity, density, and in some cases, its transparency. And, of course, through color: those sunny yellows, thrumming blues, sanguine reds and pinks, botanical greens, highly pigmented oranges. Even (or maybe especially) the muddied grays, which, in their absence of intensity become an ambiguous presence. They bring out the brightness of their counterparts.

Flip these canvasses over and you can see where the color has seeped through. It's not entirely intentional – there's an element of chance – yet the mark is there. It brings to mind notions of

¹ Lawrence Weschler. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. University of California Press. 1982.

lineage and influence. Art historical, yes – Helen Frankenthaler, Agnes Martin, and Sam Gilliam are guideposts. You can detect distinct traces of the phenomenal output of the Gee's Bend quilters like Loretta Pettway, Mary Lee Bendolph, and Lucy Mingo, and the abstracted forms of the anonymous Tantric paintings that date back to the 17th century. But there's also a perhaps more intimate lineage at work here, that of parents and children, or more broadly, of families: what they put forward, what they keep hidden, and what they reveal when you look closely – the ways in which family shapes us and how we are forever puzzling that out.

Kunz works this puzzle on surfaces that, paradoxically, have a depth. The linen canvases and silk curtains that she paints or dyes are porous, allowing for transformation. Light itself becomes a material that Kunz is working with, at times emitting an almost rosy glow (if that's not too on the nose). When we talk about light, we're often talking about reflection and absorption. The canvas absorbs the color; the painting absorbs the viewer. If they're not literally reflective, these paintings nevertheless bounce your gaze back, encouraging interaction and leading you to reflect and wonder. Your perception is heightened, space recedes and advances, solidity is called into question.

The gauzy scrimms of light-filtering color as you enter the gallery, visible through the window to those outside, create a boundary, but it's a flowing one, a loose demarcation of space that is welcoming, letting in rather than keeping out. In a sense, it's like a veil between worlds. Without getting too mystical – though there is mysticism in Kunz's work – it greets you as the first in series of thresholds or portals, drawing you in and transporting you as you step inside the gallery space.

There's a temptation to say Kunz's work elicits a visceral rather than an intellectual response but that binary set-up almost immediately seems off, placing the head in false opposition not only to the heart but to the rest of the body. Better to say, maybe, that it's immersive, sensory, bodily: addressing feelings, in both the emotional and physical sense. The dimensions of the 30 small canvases in *Rosy* correspond to the size of Kunz's head: we're literally accessing her headspace. Her larger paintings scale up to her wingspan. They are an exploration of what it is to be a body in time and space. Again, dance and choreography come into play here – and to some degree, it's as if Kunz is translating one art form into another. As viewers move around the gallery, they enact their own temporal and spatial relations with the paintings – as well as with the diaphanous curtains and works on paper – and with each other. It's easy enough to register presence in space, but presence also is temporal, playing with time, perhaps slowing it down, inviting contemplation. It has to do with your experience as an individual but how that experience is also social, shared by anyone who might walk into the gallery.

Just as there is a relation between the paintings on the wall (and off the wall, for that matter) and the viewers, the paintings relate to each other and the colors within each canvas derive their potency and impact from their relation to one another, from the collective. From their

proximity and adjacency – like the patchwork textiles by the women of Gee’s Bend. The approach is methodical and rhythmic but allows for inspiration and interruption. Through her painting, Kunz generates and pieces together a multiplicity of perspectives that echoes other art forms, not only dance but music and literature.

It resembles experimental soundscapes in a way, the layers and collisions, the dissonance, distortion, and at times, harmony and melody. Maybe it’s not surprising to learn that Kunz often has sound artists Maryanne Amacher, Marina Rosenfeld, and Suzanne Ciani on repeat in her studio – what they do sonically comes through visually in Kunz’s work. The relationality in these paintings also recalls the voices in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, a novel of repetition and reverberation, of sensation and memory, loss, growth, and time. And like the movement of ocean waves, the colors and gestures in Kunz’s paintings overlap and interact, forming an ongoing, expansive, and open-ended atmosphere, even as they exist within the dimensions of a stretched canvas or a wash of fabric. There are edges and definite shapes but they’re not sharp or justified, just as the horizon line where sea meets sky is never exactly straight, despite how it may appear at a distance to the eye. Her work is oceanic, too, to the extent that it doesn’t call for an attempt to analyze it – we don’t ask what the ocean means.

The significance lies in your sensory experience, your perceptions. Not unlike a wonderful meal. And if comparing Kunz’s work to a meal seems like a bit of a stretch, consider that for the smaller paintings, her method consists of applying oil paints from above, leaning over the linen canvas, the position one often takes when performing domestic (traditionally feminine-coded) acts such as preparing and cooking food. Under certain circumstances, those acts can be pure drudgery, but shift the conditions and they can equally be imbued with a spirit of caretaking, warmth, and generosity.

Rosy extends this generosity to the viewer. A rosy outlook, as this show’s title suggests, is an optimistic one. Kunz’s optimism, though, is neither easy nor naïve but hard won. It’s optimism that acknowledges challenges and disappointments but ultimately embraces possibility. If these paintings summon joy, they also, almost necessarily, evoke temporality and grief – a reminder that we have our bodies, our gift and ability to perceive, for only a limited time. But what a time it can be. *You’re here*, these paintings say, like someone opening the door, comforted to see you and eager to engage. You’re here.

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