

Color Moves: Anna Kunz “The Blue Magnitude”

“Only one thing is certain for the painter, whether she be quick as Picasso or painstaking as Rembrandt, it is that she pays for the work at the cost of what she is, of her soul and of her body as they appear and as they reveal themselves, given and identifiable, to each other. She must allow herself to come to the threshold of what exceeds her....

The painter is not the one who sees best, but the one who can no longer make sense of the visible, and wants to see and make visible this nothing. It is the same with thinking which, according to Wittgenstein, begins with ‘I no longer know what to make of it all.’”

—Jean-Francois Lyotard *Anamnesis of the Visible*

A surface — that seems to be what a painter needs to begin with.

One can say this for the sake of argument, though it risks being a gross generalization, or at least, patently obvious. A variety of surfaces play a part in making art—though obviously not all art is made on surfaces.

Or, paint— this at least is required for the painter to begin, but that brings us back to the surface where the paint will land.

So a canvas is stretched, a panel primed, a piece of paper taped up. Paints, brushes, rollers are at hand.

Now, suppose that what the painter has done at this stage of making a painting is to prepare an instrument of detection, a recording surface. It’s a recorder not just in the sense that the surface will ultimately accumulate material traces of actions, decisions, accidents; the application of paint. It exposes something else.

Thinking of a painting as an instrument that detects underlines its kinship with other instruments. In the 1670s, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek devised the single-lens microscope, revealing a world previously unseen. The painter makes a device that also reveals the world; it too can bring to the eye things not seen before. For much of the history of this device that we call a painting, it served mainly to bring to light things that were already visible, things that were either familiar or imaginable, making absent things present in conventional ways.

Kunz gives us a clue about what she aims to bring to light in the title of her show, *The Blue Magnitude*; something chromatic and something with dimension, or in other words, big and colorful. That suffices for the most part to describe the suite of paintings on display at Thomas McCormick Gallery. But a series of smaller works, oil on linen, make it clear that magnitude doesn’t equate with size.

These canvases are like test strips, the early stages of the bringing to light. Complete in themselves, they also make evident the preliminary phases of Kunz’s color moves. Being preliminary means that they are before a threshold, a threshold that lies between these canvases and the larger ones in the show. The larger canvases have the same proportions (their ratio of width to height) as the smaller ones, and motifs that appear in the smaller paintings recur, refashioned in the larger ones.

It’s as if the artist had a psychic pantograph enabling her to transfer forms and motifs while scaling them up, transcribing them from smaller surface to larger and moving the color across the

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threshold. The paint on the smaller works lies on top of the linen as if it were ready to peel off and be carried away; potential mobility. Traditionally these might be labeled sketches, but they aren't: they are first detectors. They trace rhythms, pulses, flashes.

These form/motifs (traces) alter when they jump to the larger format works. It is not a matter of straight transcription, nor even of translation exactly. It's as if, because the instrument of detection has a higher resolution, more that was previously unseen comes into being and now meets the eye. As Gustave Flaubert wrote, “The better the telescopes, the more numerous the stars.”

Kunz has moved color before. In her 2018 installation at the Hyde Park Art Center and elsewhere, she has activated space, and viewers, with room-filling painting/scrims. In these works, her paintings become animated, dynamic objects encountered by mobilized spectators.

Kunz's color moves again come into view in the large works in the show at Thomas McCormick Gallery. They are moves in several senses. First, they are like the strategic decisions made in a game, think chess; second, these decision make color become dynamic. The color moves.

It moves in large part because the paintings perform loops and joints, with bands hugging islands, switchbacking paths and colliding contrasts. The actions that show up first in the smaller works turn into a full-blown choreography in the larger ones: blocks of glaze stutter, swaying veils stretch between bold pillars. Color also moves between the canvases, which call back and forth to one another, to put in play another, larger composition.

Of course saying that the color moves in these pieces is to speak figuratively. Nothing really moves, the paint penetrates the canvas and becomes the surface, endowing it with chromatic depth. Nonetheless, the paintings resolutely refuse to be still; it's hard to stop their rhythmic spins and sways, turning leaps, and embraces. If anything moves, it's the painter herself, the paintings an analogue of her presence. One imagines Kunz's physical performance making these larger works—anyone who has every used a roller to paint a wall can easily identify. But that is again to speak the language of surface and applied substance. And the painter's movements are not solely bodily movements.

Which brings us back to the claim that Kunz's works are detectors. So what do these color moves display, what do they bring into focus that we can observe? If “the retina is painted with the colored rays of visible things” (Johannes Kepler) where do invisible things paint their rays, whether defined by color or other attributes?

There is some danger here of falling into a trap of describing the works as figurative, to slip into a way of thinking of them as representational. To this way of thinking, the paintings are a coded message, which we could read if we only had the key. But, they are not descriptions of some prior thing that exists elsewhere. There is also the risk of falling into the trap of naturalizing the paintings, removing the agency of the artist, turning her into a medium, as if purely channeling outside stimuli, and depriving her of her identity as a subject engaging a medium, grappling with both external and internal forces, coming to terms with desire, history, social reality. The layers of paint that build up on the detector are not merely traces of this struggle. They constitute it. They are “the cost of what she is, of her soul and of her body.” We can see this if we look at what Kunz's paintings do.

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They move, and as they move in multiple planes, we witness a play of forces, a contest of colors, with an internal dynamism and an external impact: the active painting, activating the viewer and eliciting a response that encompasses thought and feeling. Whatever the elicited response, it is not like an emoticon, reducible to a single term. Nor can it be summed up by an apt phrase. It is more like a field, a cloud, an atmosphere, a mood, a cascade of questions. Though these labels are still reductive, they evoke the dynamism that Kunz creates. Indeed, it might be better to think of her work less in terms of object, and instead think of it in terms of event, and specifically a chromatic event.

Sometimes (there is no necessity in this) the work of art has the peculiar virtue of evoking, or even of irradiating, by itself what one could call, inadequately, a chromatic world. I am trying to say that the pictorial thing is not just a painted object, but a coloured event.ⁱ

Kunz’s paintings take on the challenge, identified by Jean-Francois Lyotard as a crucial one for modern art, “to make perceptible the ineffable.”

“Modern painters’ discovered that they had to represent the existence of that which was not demonstrable.... They set about to revolutionize the supposed visual givens in order to reveal that the field of vision simultaneously conceals and needs the invisible, that it relates therefore not only to the eye, but to the spirit as well.”ⁱⁱ

Lyotard detailed how the modern painter, in pursuing the question “what is painting” through the act of painting, would inevitably confront the imperative to demonstrate “the existence of the invisible in the visual.” Explaining the attendant challenge of this demonstration, Lyotard makes it clear that it is not a question of representation, or rather, that it concerns the failure of representation.

That which is not demonstrable is that which stems from Ideas and for which one cannot cite (represent) any example, case in point, or even symbol. The universe is not demonstrable; neither is humanity, the end of history, the moment, the species, the good, the just, etc.—or according to Kant, absolutes in general because to represent is to make relative, to place in context within conditions of representation. Therefore one cannot represent the absolute, but one can demonstrate that the absolute exists—through ‘negative representation,’ which Kant called the ‘abstract.’ The momentum of abstract painting since 1910 stems from the rigors of indirect, visually ungraspable allusions to the invisible within the visual.ⁱⁱⁱ

There’s another way to say this. Creating detectors out of surface and paint, ones that catch the colored rays of invisible things, Anna Kunz does not represent the blue magnitude, but she demonstrates that it exists.

— Jonathan Miller

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ⁱJean-Francois Lyotard, “Anamnesis of the Visible” *Theory Culture Society* 2004; 21; 107

ⁱⁱJean-Francois Lyotard, “Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime” *Artforum* (20) 8, April 1982, pp. 64 - 69

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.