

RESURRECTING COLOR: CHRISTIAN AWE'S PAINTINGS BY DONALD KUSPIT

“The strife of colors... make up our harmony,” Kandinsky wrote in 1911, and “the simultaneity of colors... is the only reality one can construct through painting,” Apollinaire wrote in 1912. For both what Hans Hofmann, writing in 1948, called “the color complex” was the fundament of “pure painting,” as all three called it. For Hofmann, color, “in a scientific sense, is a particular state of light,” and “in an artistic sense, the perception of plastic and psychological differences in the quality of light. These differences are conceived as color intervals which are similar to tensions.” Pure painting was only convincing, aesthetically as well as psychologically, as long as the tension between the colors was maintained. However simultaneous, making them all the more charismatically immediate, it was what Kandinsky famously called the “dynamic equilibrium” between the colors—“dynamic” implying that the “equilibrium” was unstable, precarious, tentative, inherently uncertain, and as such emblematic of “the sense of balance we have lost” in modernity. Thus Kandinsky spoke of what he called the “dissonance” of colors, particularly the primary colors red and blue, for him extreme opposites however reconciled they may seem to be when they are “played together” like musical notes.

This excitement about the “multitude of color vibrations” possible in pure painting, the ambition to “synthesize... a multitude of color vibrations in their gathered intensity,” this sense that colors are as precious as “jewels”—I am using Hofmann’s language—disappears with Ad Reinhardt’s rejection of what he called “bright-colored painting” in favor of “colorless” paintings in 1953. It was the rejection of what he called the “darkened, value-muffling warmth of color in the paintings of Newman, Rothko and Still.” Their so-called color field paintings were the ironical climax of the modernist tradition of simultaneous color contrasts—“ironical” because, as Clement Greenberg noted, the colors were often “at dangerously close intervals” so that the “tensions” between them were leveled, a loss of “dramatic virtue” and “volatility” that brought with it a loss of the libidinal power evident in the “bright, hot” colors of the original pure paintings. Color became purely “positivistic”—the material of a medium, as Greenberg said, losing the psychosymbolic and transcendental implications it had for both Kandinsky and Apollinaire. Color became “local” rather than “cosmic,” and the color complex tended to become simple, losing its intensity. In Newman, Rothko, and Still color is no longer pleasurable, but peculiarly painful.

What is the role and place of Christian Awe’s pure paintings in this history? I suggest they involve the resurrection of color as a libidinous force, overcoming its entropic entrapment in what has been called the “spaceless space” of post-painterly painting. More pointedly, they restore the sensuous and affective complexity of color that the first pure painters struggled to convey. It is this that gives their color its rich evocative presence, not to say its seductiveness. The original modernist ideal of sensuous fullness—of color as a sort of com-

pendium and cornucopia of intense sense experience, a sort of epiphanic container of all sense experience—was made explicit by Hofmann. “Painting should not be based on vision alone, for seeing with the physical eyes borders on blindness. We see, indeed, with all our senses. All our senses are dependent on each other in their action upon the mind where they join and overlap.” Kandinsky was a synaesthete—particular sounds evoked particular colors for him, and vice versa (in synaesthesia “a sensory experience is elicited by a stimulus in a different sensory modality,” as the psychologist Andrew Colman writes)—and so, it seems, was Hofmann, even more completely. Hofmann is claiming that painting engages all the senses—the medium through which the experience of every sense can be given physical presence. Thus Hofmann painted *Fragrance*, 1959 and *The Whisper of the South*, 1962, the former conveying a subtle odor, the latter a subtle sound. Every odor and sound has a feeling associated with it, which is why, in fact, there is no such thing as pure sense experience, nor for that matter pure painting. The best pure painting is insidiously “impure,” and Awe’s paintings are among the abstract best, for they restore emotional drama to abstraction, reduced to expressive inconsequence by Conceptualism and Minimalism. Awe’s paintings are hothouses in which colors flourish like wild orchids.

Awe revives the tradition of synaesthetic painting that is foundational for modernity, as the tongue-tantalizing *Peppermint*, 2012 suggests. But he gives synaesthesia an erotic twist, indeed, brings out the eroticism implicit in it. *Honey, Girls r nothing but Trouble*, 2011—they taste of sweet honey but are troubling because the taste unsettles the ego. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich notes, the “lure of regression to the primitive” motivates modern id art, as he calls it, following Freud’s distinction between the id and the ego—“the most primitive layer of our mental life, identical with the instinctive drives,” and “the forces of control” that resist “the anarchic tendencies of the unconscious”—and there is nothing more primitive than sense experience, unless it is sexual experience, which is sensuously intense, indeed, engages all the senses, namely, sight, sound, smell, hearing, and touch. Again and again Awe offers us ravishing erotic paintings—lavish paintings in which color is recklessly pleasurable, a sort of synaesthetic atmosphere in which every sense experience is possible. The sexual energy of Awe’s paintings opens the gateway of perception, to play on Aldous Huxley’s phrase. One might say they are experiments in ecstatic sensing—adventures in extreme sensing, as it were—like Hofmann’s *Ecstasy*, 1947. The handling is different, in part because the medium is different—oil in Hofmann’s case, acrylic and spray paint in Awe’s case—but there is the same sense of headlong energy and what Greenberg called the “liveliness and knowingness” of color, and, I would add, the voluptuousness of color. In *Secret Thought* and *Sommernachtsflimmern* (*Summer Night Scintillation*), both 2011 globules of dark color—some resembling genitalia—hang in the rosy, luminous atmosphere, while in *Caged Bird Breaking Free* and *Returning From the Moon*, both 2012 a luminous complex of bright colors streaks through the dark sky like a meteoric rocket. All of Awe’s paintings have a manic feel, a sense of sensational discharge of energy, typically associated with orgasm. Awe is moved by color, and his colors move deliriously, in a way we have not seen since Hofmann. But Awe’s paintings are more intense and oceanic than Hofmann’s, and have an erotic elegance not only aesthetic persuasiveness.

Kandinsky’s “dynamic equilibrium” has become Awe’s “delirious complexity”—the delirious color complexes that only pure instinct can give birth to—the refined colors that paradoxical-

cally convey raw instinct. Awe restores instinct to abstraction, rescuing it from decadence, which Nietzsche thought resulted from the loss of instinct. Awe's mobilization of colors—almost always hot and passionate although sometimes sublimely cool, as his blues and greens tend to be (he is at ease with the extremes)—restores vitality to abstraction, making it more seductive than ever. Art should seduce to healthy life, Nietzsche argued, in a last ditch justification of it in a society that he saw as increasingly pathological. Strange as it may seem to say so, it is the erotic good health of Awe's paintings—their “enlightening” colors, blazing an exciting path through our eyes and into our feelings—that suggests their underground affinity with early German Expressionism, whatever their aboveground affinity with Sam Francis's joyous California version of Abstract Expressionism. All one has to do is think of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff's colorful *Bursting Dam*, 1910 to get the German point. It is worth noting that the Brücke artists acknowledged a debt to Nietzsche's idea of health-giving instinct, although when they lived in Berlin they were obsessed with urban pathology. Pathology flourished in Weimar Berlin, as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists show, and was ideologically justified in Nazi Berlin. Awe lives and works in a different Berlin, suggesting that it has become a good place to make good art.