Anywhere Out of this World

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Anywhere Out of this World

by

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Anywhere Out of this World

There are days when the jealous beauty of this city seems to unveil itself. On clear days, for example, windy days, when the breeze that announces the arrival of the south-westerly sweeps along the streets slapping like a sail. Then the houses and bell towers take on a brightness that is too real, the outlines too sharp; like a photograph with fierce contrast, light and shade collide together…

--Antonio Tabucchi, *The Edge of the Horizon*

I paint reflections, shadows and distances between buildings that impart a sense of stillness and a feeling of absence. I am interested in how these sites of absence within the built environment can inversely precipitate an experience of presence. In these paintings, color, value and perspective are used to create pictorial tension between the illusion of positive and negative space. This formal play between depth and flatness—illusion versus the reality of the picture plane—becomes a visual metaphor for the inseparable duality of absence and presence, place and placelessness, reality and escape.

Much of this work is rooted in years spent painting en plein air, an experience through which I learned to look in a way that prioritized light and color in space. Painting en plein air demanded a sense of urgency, as the landscape is always under the influence of the shifting sunlight. The aim was never to paint a tree, a hill or any nameable object, but to channel the raw visual sensations that give form to these objects. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes this painterly pursuit and way of looking in his essay “Eye and Mind.” He writes:

What exactly does he ask of it? To unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which
it makes itself a mountain before our eyes. Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, colors, all these objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence. In fact they exist only at the threshold of profane vision; they are not ordinarily seen.\footnote{1 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, 128.}

These ghosts, which exist only at the threshold of profane vision, are the visual sensations that enable objects, such as the hills or the trees, to take form before us. Light, shadow and color are intangible, even invisible, in the sense that they aren’t objects themselves, yet they are fundamental to our ability to perceive space and the objects within it.

While I no longer work en plein air, nor directly from observation, the fundamentals of perception remain central to my work and the way I look at my surroundings. In my day-to-day experience of the city, while walking from one place to another, I observe moments when what I see contradicts what I expect to be true of a space. There are times when the brightness of the sky becomes a solid, impenetrable form enclosed by the shadowy presence of two buildings, or when a receding wall appears to move forward because of the glow of reflected light. These are moments of disconnection and interruption. They are instances when visual sensations allow for a two-fold reality to exist; the tangible alongside the intangible; the visible alongside invisible.

The impetus for my work lies in these moments of perceptual ambiguity. When painting, I am attempting to recall my experience and memory of visual sensation. My aim, however, is not to tell a story or to document these moments. Instead, through the use of color, value, perspective and scale, I want to facilitate a direct perceptual experience between the viewer and the painting.
In my paintings, layers of transparent glazes butt up against solid opaque color, producing vibrating edges that delineate reduced forms, while subtle, sometimes imperceptible gradients both allude to and contradict a source of light. An increase in scale and the use of jarring diagonals yield a kind of visual disorientation and the sensation of looking up at the foot of something much larger than one’s own body. This kind of perspective creates the illusion of a deep space, yet the color and material application of the paint dismantles this illusion and reinforces the flatness of the picture plane.

Through the culmination of these elements—the vibration of color, the tension between transparency and opacity, flatness versus the illusion of deep space—the viewer is confronted with a perceptual dislocation that hinges on the painting’s internal ambivalence between illusion and reality. In his book “Changing Images of Pictorial Space” William V. Dunning describes a similar ambivalence within Cézanne’s paintings:

Cézanne used color to create an integrated spatial and volumetric image that makes it possible for the painting to be read as flat, or spatial and volumetric. This technique allows the possibility of maintaining an awareness of either a sensation of depth or the reality of the flatness of the painting. One reading denies the other...But neither reading can be resolved as final; both continue to assert themselves intermittently.²

Cézanne’s particular use of color to create the visual sensation of depth simultaneously flattens the image. The possibility of wavering between illusion and reality produces a duality that encapsulates a visual disorientation that leaves the viewer in a constant limbo. As Dunning

² Dunning, “Cézanne’s Elaborate Separation of Planes,” 137.
explains, neither read is whole or without inherent contradiction and it is this very contradiction, that which the viewer has no choice but to bump up against, that reveals the inner workings of our perception and produces an actual, phenomenological experience of looking.

Centuries before Cézanne effectively synthesized the illusion of depth with the flat, two-dimensionality of the picture plane, the historical dialectic between disegno and colorito emerged in seventeenth century Italy.\(^3\) The basis of the debate was framed by the struggle between reason and irrationality, order and chaos, truth and deceit. The advent of linear perspective came at the later half of the Renaissance, at a moment when the quest for objective truth and rationality was a primary concern. Linear perspective utilized mathematics and reason to create a pictorial illusion of a unified space, thereby reaffirming Renaissance ideals in that it was consistent, orderly and objective.\(^4\) As a result, the compositional design and drawing of a painting was paramount.

While design and color were both acknowledged as necessary to attempt painting, color was considered to be secondary. Design was thought to be a reflection of the rational mind, whereas color was a lowly tether to our primordial senses. In this way color was not only subordinate, but was in direct opposition to the high-minded rationalism of the Renaissance. If used irresponsibly, color threatened to corrupt the spatial cohesion and the order of the picture and was regarded to be both unscholarly and a sense-driven pursuit that distracted from the true virtue of painting. The hierarchy between form and color was thus inextricably linked to the separation of rational thought from sensate experience.

\(^3\) Lichtenstein, 63.
The split – or rather, the relationship between rational thought and our senses became a focus of discussion during the later half of the eighteenth century. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant argued that knowledge was formed through a composite of sensate experience and the thinking mind.\(^5\) He asserted that while knowledge may begin with sensate experience, the mind shapes and interprets perceptual phenomena through cognition.\(^6\) The notion that knowledge was produced through cooperation between the senses and the mind bridged the two together. It gave reason and validation to the senses as a necessary component and source of rational thought.\(^7\)

The newfound credibility attributed to the senses as a source for knowledge, provided the avenue through which an interest in the subjective experience, instead of a singular objective truth, could emerge. Impressionism exemplified this shift to embrace subjectivity and visual perception, as the movement and its disciples sought to capture the phenomenon of seeing as it coalesced in a particular moment. Emulating light via color was at the forefront of this inquiry, both as a means to document time and as a visual liaison through which to directly affect the viewer’s senses and emotions.\(^8\) Subsequently, color was no longer dismissed as a mere symptom of the senses, but was accepted and pursued because of it.

Returning to Cézanne, the duality of reading both a deep illusionistic space and a flattened image in his paintings, absorbs the struggle between form and color. Cézanne sought to

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\(^6\) Argued in Dunning, “The Roots of Modernism,” 121.
\(^7\) Dunning, “The Roots of Modernism,” 122.
\(^8\) Dunning, “The Roots of Modernism,” 122.
create the psychological sensation of depth, rather than a mere visual illusion. In order to delineate objects in space, he utilized warm and cool planes of color according to their predisposition to visually recede or move forward. As a result, color fulfilled a role of providing spatial structure to the painting, while simultaneously enabling a phenomenological experience for the viewer. In other words, color and form became inseparable, thus allowing for the ambiguity between spatiality and flatness, reality and illusion.

Similar to Cézanne’s paintings, the integration of color and form to conjure a two-fold sensation of depth and flatness is present in my own work. In There, Not There (Fig. 1), the left-hand side of the composition is dominated by a large, dark form, spanning the vertical length of the canvas. The culmination of a deep cadmium red glaze atop a dark blue creates a weighty pull, as though the shape represents a receding void. With closer looking, however, the red top-most layer appears to glow, hovering on the surface like oil on water. Depending on the viewer’s angle and distance from the painting, the form can appear as a placid depth, a receding plane or simply a flat shape. The struggle to resolve the form spatially becomes all the more fraught by the sloping field of color on the right in which a sky blue descends into a cool white. This value gradation suggests the influence of light—perhaps the cool atmospheric light of a clear blue sky receding up and back. Yet, the implication of light does not settle the space, instead it muddles it even more. Together, the dark red-blue void and the sky blue gradient cannot agree on a cohesive image of space. If the viewer focuses on the left side, allowing the glazes to act on a sensation of depth, then the right side cannot achieve an illusion of towering, receding verticality and light. Alternatively, if the viewer believes in the illusion suggested by the gradation, then the

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shape on the left can no longer summon a sensational pull. In either case the space cannot be cohesively determined; it remains unfixed and fluctuant.

Fig. 1. *There, Not There*, 2018, Oil on paper, 98 x 65 inches.
Wedged amongst these forms is a central strip of pale yellow-green that travels half way up the painting. At first it feigns neutrality as it does not attempt illusion, nor does it optically recede or push forward. It is a solid shape of color that reads as flat. This flatness, however, is quickly at odds with the blue-to-white gradient on either side which in turn makes the central strip optically appear is though it has been painted in a reverse value gradient. The pale green and sky blue are of a similar value, and as a result there are moments when it seems to fall back and dissolve quietly before resurfacing as a flattened form. All of these forms, angled along a divisive diagonal, converge in at the center to meet a small grey horizontal rectangle. This rectangle functions like a keystone, either holding together an illusive, pictorial space, or dispelling any semblance of one. Meeting the viewer at eye level, the duplicity of painting is

most potent here because it anchors the picture and the viewer, while simultaneously bolstering the spatial rupture.

The spatial inconsistency and tension within *There, Not There* is not unlike Hans Hofmann’s concept of “push and pull” which describes the spatial ambiguity and movement between forms produced through the use of opposing color relationships. Take for example Hofmann’s painting *Rhapsody* (Fig. 2) of 1965, the composition of which centers on three rectangles: one blue, one purple and one red. The red and the blue rectangles are situated side by side, performing a perpetual game of tug-of-war. Both colors are saturated and therefore compete to occupy the forward most position. This creates a quivering tension that culminates along the edge where they meet. Above hangs the third, purple rectangle composed of a warm purple beneath a cool, nearly blue hue. Layered together, these two colors manifest a sensation of depth and dimension while also delineating the rectangle from the surrounding slur of greens, grays and browns. Altogether, the three rectangles seem to push forward, in front of the less articulated background, but the space is not so easily decided. The propensity of these forms and colors to come forward or fall back is dependent upon where the viewer is focusing at any given moment. As the viewer shifts his or her attention, so does the spatial read of the painting, thus demonstrating the “push and pull” Hofmann is known for.

Akin to Cézanne’s sensation of depth, color becomes the structural mechanism through which Hofmann’s paintings achieve their push-pull. In both examples, when color supersedes form as a mode of structure, the spatial coherence of the painting begins to dissolve. With Hofmann, the spatial instability stems from the sensation of movement happening between the
forms as they struggle to dominate one another. To quote Dunning, “The sensation of shifting back and forth in space as the viewer shifts attention around the contained territory of the painting destroys the spatial stability of the painting in favor of movement and dynamic, changing relationships.” Through their use of color, both Cézanne and Hofmann access a dual-read in their paintings, as they waver between flat and illusionistic space. This fluctuation between illusion and flatness presents a source of instability, but with Hoffman this instability is reinforced by the continuous sensation of movement between the forms.

While my paintings share similarities with Hofmann’s structural use of color to create an unsteady, sensational pictorial space, they also demonstrate the use of strong diagonals resembling lines of perspective. These lines are instrumental to luring the viewer into occupying the space of the painting. In contrast, Hofmann’s paintings avoid linear perspective and instead rely primarily on color relationships, as well as atmospheric perspective, to build a sense of space. In addition, his paintings do not attempt to depict or refer to a real, tangible space in the world; rather they exist in an abstract arena of color and ambiguous space. As a result, the viewer can experience the sensation of movement and depth while remaining detached from and outside of his paintings.

In her essay “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective”, Hito Steyerl discusses linear perspective and the importance of the horizon line in building the illusion of a grounded and cohesive space for the viewer. She makes the point that the horizon line not only builds a stable pictorial space, but it also implicates the viewer who is in turn assumed to be on

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10 Dunning, “Hofmann’s Spatial Chimera,” 163.
Our traditional sense of orientation—and, with it, modern concepts of time and space—are based on a stable line; the horizon line. Its stability hinges on the stability of an observer, who is thought to be located on a ground of sorts, a shoreline, a boat—a ground that can be imagined as stable, even if in fact it is not.\footnote{Steyerl, 14.}

When the horizon line is amiss, either obstructed or absent, the implied space and subsequent viewer lose their point of orientation and thus become destabilized.

In respect to my paintings, the inclining forms and diagonal lines imply the structure of linear perspective, but the horizon line is never accessible. Take for example, \textit{Cast Back} (Fig. 3), in which two diagonals extending from the bottom edge of the canvas to the top divide the picture plane into three sections. Two slanted forms resembling anonymous buildings occupy the left and centermost sections. The angle of the two forms indicate that they recede up and back into a space, pulling the viewer in while also coaxing them to look up. It is unclear, however, into what kind of space we’re entering because the horizon line is out of view and unattainable. Furthermore, the diagonal lines that partition each section interrupt the illusion of space that each building helps to construct. Instead of cohesive and stable, the space seems to undulate and double. The viewer is baited by the promise of stability, but is left in a moment of dislocation that rests on the implication but inaccessibility of the horizon. Consequently, the viewer is simultaneously oriented and not, grounded and suspended.
The instability inherent in my paintings is twofold. The lines, which attempt to structure and order an illusionist space, are rendered unsteady by the absence of an anchoring horizon and by the push-pull of an overriding use of color. From a distance, the lines and edges look precise and rigid, when in actuality they quiver and bow. Looking closely, each line is reiterated by layered edges of color that create an oscillating halo, revealing that even on a tectonic level these structures, and the spaces that they construct, are not secure.

The edges and lines, mnemonic of perspective, are an attempt to situate the viewer within the field of the painting. Size and scale are also crucial to achieving this. Towering over the
average viewer, both *There, Not There* and *Cast Back* measure over seven feet tall. This scale relationship to the viewer’s body makes it all the more tempting, and perhaps unavoidable, to step in to the paintings and to be subsumed by them. Looking becomes a physical, bodily act that does not allow the viewer to perceive of them all at once without stepping back. This physicality of looking reaffirms our own presence and being. The possibility of perceiving a sensation of depth becomes a reflection of the self in that it represents an effort to decipher pictorial space as it relates to our bodies and the space that we inhabit. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Orientation, polarity, envelopment are, in space, derived phenomena linked to my presence.”\(^{12}\) In other words, these mechanisms, as an attempt to understand our position in relationship to external objects, reflect back to us our own presence; a presence tethered to our bodily position; a physical, sensational act spurred by vision.

Matisse’s Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France (Fig. 4) exemplifies a literal physical subsummation of the viewer within the pictorial space of painting. In her book *Willem de Kooning Nonstop*, Rosalind Krauss describes the phenomenon of standing within the chapel:

The stained-glass windows of Matisse’s Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France (1948-51), with their depiction of the fronds in the garden just beyond the chapel’s walls, thus repeat the ambiguity between inside and outside, as light flooding the interior both includes and surrounds the body of the viewer/painter. The suggestion of the painter as subsumed within the field of representation is caused by the luminous aureole of the windows seeming to circulate the artist as a plane both before and behind him.\(^{13}\)

\(^{12}\) Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 134.
\(^{13}\) Krauss, 19.
What Krauss terms as the field of representation is the physical manifestation of the picture plane. The pictorial space is then produced as color, activated by light permeating the stained-glass windows, interacts with and defines the space within the chapel. Standing within this field, as the phenomena of light and color unfold and give form to the space, the viewer simultaneously experiences an interiority and exteriority. The ambiguity between inside and outside that Krauss describes is paralleled by the viewer’s attempt to reconcile the pictorial spatiality as it relates physically and externally to his or her body, while simultaneously being subsumed within it. Thus, in the apt context of a chapel, the viewer undergoes a kind of phenomenological transcendence provoked by the duality of inhabiting the very space through which he or she seeks to orient a sense of location and self. This synthesis, a kind of dematerialization, allows for the coexistence of interiority and exteriority, detachment and attachment, location and

This transcendental phenomenon is also present in the work of the architect Luis Barragán, whose adaptation of Le Corbusier’s architectonic color was specifically aimed at engaging visitors’ perceptual faculties (Fig. 5). Barragán incorporated ideas of spatio-visual scenography in his buildings, allowing him to integrate space with a kind of pictorial image. While moving through the space, visitors experience a visual and spatial undulation as the interaction of light, color and architectural form cause certain planes to optically recede, push forward or flatten. In his book *Luis Barragán: The Eye Embodied*, Wim van den Bergh describes this phenomenon as kine-aesthetic experience:

…Barragán was the master of an architecture that tried to involve its users and visitors (bodily and mentally) in a sort of ‘kine-aesthetic’ or ‘kine-aesthetic’ experience with all their senses. That is to say, the subtle choreography of movements and the modulation of sequences of different atmospheres (physical and spiritual) that he generated within his ‘architecture’ constantly involved the beholder.\(^\text{14}\)

Akin to Hofmann’s push-pull, the kine-aesthetic experience produced by Barragán’s synthesis of color and form relies on the shifting location of the visitors. This dependence on the visitors’ location and their bodies becomes a physical and spiritual reiteration of their own presence as they locate and orient themselves within the space they occupy.

\(^{14}\) van den Bergh, 67-68.
As Merleau-Ponty wrote, “Vision is conditioned thought; it is born ‘as occasioned’ by what happens in the body; it is incited to think by the body.”\(^{15}\) And so arises from the body a reflection of being, a kind of consciousness made possible by the duality presented through perceptual movement, ambiguity and instability. A two-fold consciousness that gives way to the dematerialization of and the absolution from literal and metaphorical structure is the end to which my paintings pursue. To join Cézanne in his perceptual flight from and quest for his humanity,\(^{16}\) or to hold hands with the enveloping, boundless space of Barnett Newman’s abstract

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\(^{15}\) Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 136.

\(^{16}\) Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 61.
sublime,\textsuperscript{17} to look out into the world to find one’s self so entirely immersed yet simultaneously transported, it is with this quandary I seek to engage.

\textsuperscript{17} Rosenblum, 243.
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