

Sigrid Burton's Atmospherics: The Value of Color

Love for the physical properties of paint has motivated great artists since the Renaissance. The colors, forms, and light generated in paintings by Piero, Titian, and Pontormo continue to take us beyond biblical or mythological content into swooning appreciation of activated sky blue, rosy pink, and deep verdant green. Over the centuries, oil paint has steadily continued to perform, subtly animating the allegories of Vermeer and Poussin, splashily complimenting the exotic settings of Delacroix and Moreau, and emerging full force in the stormy skies of Turner, melodious waters of Monet, and crepuscular evenings of Redon.

Color for color's sake was a radical credo in the early twentieth century, espoused by artists coming from a variety of directions: Matisse and the Fauves, Marsden Hartley, Robert & Sonia Delaunay, Stanton MacDonald Wright. Although rarely acknowledged as such by art historians, a branch of abstraction grew out of those experiments, unleashing fields of variegated colors dedicated to the creation of atmospheric effects.

But this branch has remained largely under the radar. Color has never been celebrated as the primary focus for "serious" art. In his book, *Chromophobia*, art historian David Batchelor tracked the sidelining of the consideration of color in Western culture, tracing this prejudice from neo-classical art to the still reigning minimalist white-cube.[1] In a review of the book, Matthew Afron neatly summarized Batchelor's findings:

References to Locke, Kant, and modern perceptual psychology merely add to the record of an old and persistent aesthetic binary dividing primary and objective processes (design) from secondary, subjective ones (color). The inevitable conclusion is that aesthetics, art history, criticism, and the teaching of art in the West are profoundly resistant to color. But Batchelor is also interested in a second, larger claim. He wants to show that the denigration of color is connected to deep social structures. Returning to the standard texts on color, he notes that the old design/color binary never fails to implicitly or explicitly connect with distinctions of a moral, social, racial, and sexual character. Line's virtue is normatively virile, European, and heterosexual, while color is not only surface-oriented, impure, and deceptive, but is also coded feminine, infantile, queer, primitive, foreign, vulgar, and pathological.[2]

In post-war art, the chief experimenters with color that come to mind – Mark Rothko, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jules Olitski – are artists whose works have an uneasy relationship with the paint-slinging, chest-thumping efforts of the Abstract Expressionists. Rothko's spiritual concerns – like those of the Transcendental Painting Group of the late 1940s – were out of step with the strict formalism espoused by Clement Greenberg.

Robert Rosenblum has famously traced the religiosity of the Northern Romantic landscape tradition from Caspar David Friedrich to the ethereal grandeur of Rothko's Chapel in Houston.^[3] Rothko's pursuit of spirituality is perhaps best summed up by the artist's own 1957 assessment of his works' intentions:

The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!^[4]

For Rothko, color offered viewers something more. "Color relationships" were the cause, "religious experience" the effect. Greenberg, be damned!

Colorists in the wake of Rothko are part of a largely neglected underground of abstract artists in full thrall of paint. Although working in isolation, usually without much media attention, these disparate artists – painters like Hyman Bloom, Porfirio di Donna, Stephen Mueller, Howard Hodgkin - have used color as a vehicle to the ineffable. Their works are unencumbered by the common tropes currently celebrated in contemporary art: mundane social observation, formal game-playing, and cynical art-world commentary. Aiming for the transcendent, these painters' efforts render mute the chromophobes and naysayers of painting that have dominated art discourse of the past decades. The pursuit of the sublime by these isolated artists has unleashed investigations of the full range and potential of color. For these painters, color is the vehicle, the sublime the destination.

Sigrid Burton – who as a young artist was studio assistant to both Frankenthaler and Olitski – has over the past four decades methodically explored paint's ideal potential in an unapologetic pursuit of the sublime. As she has stated about her work, color "creates atmosphere and elicits not only an emotional, but also a physiological response. For me, color is *sui generis*; it communicates in its own unique language."^[5]

Burton's paintings are performances of theatrical light, color, and space, presenting apertures into realms beyond or within the everyday. They conjure states/moods/ thoughts/dreams that are both cosmic and corporeal, extraterrestrial and internal, charted in slowly accreted paint that is masterfully layered and blended. The paintings' auspicious fields set the stage for loose, unfettered, drawings whose elements dangle in

the foreground as evidence of phenomena from the artist's experience and the natural world. Titles originate from the artist's responses to her own work; all are given after the fact.

Burton uses drawing to situate her environments, offering the clusters or loose strands of marks as foregrounded content. She sets the shapes on or within atmospheric fields, in a somewhat traditional figure/ground relationship. But what a ground! Through Burton's skilled techniques of underpainting and glazing, her colors and tones seem to dissipate, blend, and coagulate, suggesting both microscopic and macroscopic activities beyond everyday perception.

In *Storm Heart* Burton set out to, as she puts it, "challenge myself to make a red painting," one that evokes Turner's expression of "turbulence and atmosphere through paint handling and mark making." She animates the painting's complexly toned maroon field with explosive puffs of melded white, blue, and grey that seem the aftermath of fireworks from a crepuscular Turner sea battle. Mysterious drawn symbols spiral out of the maelstrom into the far reaches of the red. Along the bottom edge of the work, what appears as a loosely delineated sailboat anchors the miraculous vapor above.

A hanging web of lines dangles in the foreground of *Candra* like some decomposed DNA spiral. The painting's title is a Sanskrit word for "moon" and refers to a canonical heroine in Indian painting and literature who meets her lover on a moonlit night. A warm gust of violet and red sweep upwards, highlighting the dangle, seemingly lifting it out of the tangle of scrub at the lower left.

But Burton does not only paint shades and shadows. In *Considering GBT*—an homage to Tiepolo's dizzying ceiling paintings — she unleashes an angelic gold and pink cloud within a mottled, evening-blue field. The ephemeral pink wings of the cloud-like form extend from a gold emanation shot with white light. The light seems both foregrounded and extending deep into space. In *The Angle of a Landscape* she presents a clustered bouquet of deconstructed red and orange petals delicately lit before a luminous blue field.

The drawn elements in Burton's paintings are spun from wide-ranging sources, including the forms of sea creatures, human anatomy, plant forms, diagrams of constellations, and written characters. But these sources reveal themselves only obliquely. They are private transmissions from the artist's subconscious to her brush. For the viewer, they are mysterious communications that reveal the artist's hand behind the curtain, the indications of the individual interests and experiences nourishing the vision.

Burton's far-reaching enthusiasms for Renaissance and Indian art, astronomical phenomena, weather maps, calligraphy, and arcane color theories fuel her endeavor.

Like the complex tones of her paintings, these sources mix and unravel. She blends notations from her own astronomical observations at observatories in Pasadena and Chile with elements taken from Hindu and Jain diagrams of the cosmos. Complexity is embraced. Featuring a queasy green, blue, and yellow palette, *Bhasura* refers in its title to Indian aesthetic theory's embrace of colors that can be at once "odious" and "radiant."

Burton's atmospheric paintings are not representations or perceptions of reality but responses to reality - attempted leaps into the sublime. In his introduction to the book, *Sticky Sublime*, Bill Beckley defined the concept of the sublime as a fundamental state:

The sublime depends on what it means to be human, because it is the response of a human -- physically, emotionally, and intellectually -- to the expansiveness of literature, art, or nature, that makes possible the "hypsous," or "state of transport," that is the spark of sublimity.^[6]

In his first century treatise, *On the Sublime*, the Greek rhetorician Longinus described "hypsous" as a moment that brings oral speech to an astonished halt. Burton's luminous, triumphal new body of work stops us in our tracks to transport us beyond.

[1]David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: [Reaktion Books](#), 2000).

[2]Matthew Afron, CAA Reviews, May 1, 2001, www.caareviews.org/reviews/407

[3]Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Harper & Row, New York, 1975.

[4]Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, New York: Capricorn, 1961, p. 93.

[5]Sigrid Burton, "Career Narrative," application for Guggenheim Foundation Grant, 2019.

[6]Bill Beckley, "Sticky Sublime," *Sticky Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), p. 4.