

## Eternal Summer

A distinctive, penetrating, compressed light is generated from the modulated pressure of Yunhee Min's application of paint on her canvas surface — the kind of vibrant color that is synonymous with heat. Often in the past the more common terms of choice to describe a painter's presence in the work were “gesture” or “mark making,” neither of which, however, seems in her case, like a particularly good fit. Cézanne's use of regular diagonal lines in his later landscapes comes to mind because of the way the delicacy of his palate and brushwork combined in the peculiar choice of color inspired by his lifetime spent in the south of France. Clyfford Still's heavy, crusty, flat, repetitive application of paint, on the other hand, could serve as a good counter-example to the way she approaches the canvas. In any case, Min's specific “touch” is what we are left with, literally how she lays on the paint and the allusion to the exotic shimmer of the hot neon nights and sunny days of Southern California's eternal summer that is so strangely manifested in these paintings. As anyone who has followed her work appreciates, Min is a colorist, and like any such painter, it quickly becomes clear that the most consistently rewarding approach is to let the color do as much of the hard work as possible — to allow for the unexpected result of the chance occurrence of paint build-up, puddling, mingling, and all the myriad other potential surprises wet medium and pigment can offer. Anything the artist can do to get out of the way of the end result, so the ethos goes, will only garner a better outcome. Consequently, there is a desire to confuse the situation as little as possible with the presence of the hand which has the unfortunate tendency, as soon as it is spotted, to get psychologized — to keep such an interference at bay as long as possible, always at a healthy remove, through the use of some distancing mechanism or other, such as a stick, weighted brush, or squeegee. To that end, anything goes, that is, anything short of the total physical remove from the activity of making the painting, because there is also the equally significant recognition among such painters that they are first and

foremost lifelong students of light and color, and as the old saw goes, the only way to learn is by doing. Kandinsky, as example, liked to use “materialist” to describe his method, not in the ideological and hence judgmental sense, but rather as a way of describing a picture that could only get discovered through the manipulation of the visceral, worldly physicality of paint.

Min's path to the present body of work was indirect. Like a number of painters from her generation, early on she was drawn to the brand of rationale offered by conceptual practices, the kind of consideration, at least where painting was concerned, primarily characterized by objectification. Whether in Daniel Buren, or Sol LeWitt, let's say, the strategy was often to literalize the medium, to relocate it in the all-around space of architecture, for instance, and redirect the discussion from that of the lyrical space of the picture plane to the painting as a structure in the world. Objectification was the great insight of the Enlightenment and there would in fact, be no science as we know it today without the kind of cold, hard scrutiny symbolized by the butterfly pinned to a board and framed on a wall. For a while at the end of the last century, if the artist wanted to seem smart about painting or, conversely, if he or she wished to poke fun, the most common way to do so was to re-conceive the medium as an analytical object of study and reflection. Either way, by disallowing a broader discussion, such a gesture, even if it opened up a semiotic field of discussion, as was sometimes the case, proved reductive in other significant regards. Min's earlier work, inspired by that period is, not surprisingly, trapezoidal and leans sculpturally at an angle rather than maintaining the verticality necessary for the painting surface to exist unencumbered.

Often, when the space of abstraction is described, some of the more common terms of choice are: “oceanic”, “atmospheric”, even “nebular”. Especially where the light touch is concerned, Turner is the undisputed champion. It is not simply that his favorite subjects are in the roiling sea, the haze of the marine layer, the approaching storm, etc.; his last ghostly works, at least among certain painters, are considered some of his best. The uncertainty over whether they were ever actually completed or are

only the most meager initial sketches of under-painting doesn't seem to matter. The marks are no less deliberate for their seeming weightlessness, as if they were bleached out like over-exposed photographs taken on a bright day. If only barely visible, the presence of their subject is no less felt. By contrast, it is difficult to talk about a term like “touch” in a correspondingly spatial Morris Louis curtain painting because it is clear from the outset that the washes of color were poured from a location outside the painting. The light produced is enveloping, as if we are looking up at the sun from under a parachute.

With her latest abstractions Min arguably splits the difference between implied space and systematic application. No longer is the canvas a play on the architectural object. These are full-frontal works emphasizing the field, their shimmering transparent layers entirely concerned with painterly depth. Neither are they atmospheric in the soupy, moody way that a Turner can be, nor are they quite as insistently flowing and ethereal as a Louis. The pressure applied to the squeegee that allows for the paint to puddle more opaquely in certain places than in others to cause the modulated intensification or diffusion of color, or the stuttered up-and-down motion that creates a wavering, crackling ribbon-like effect of a buzzing light is a direct trace indicator of the artist's presence as she gently presses her implement up against the surface and gracefully (yet firmly) drags it vertically across the canvas. At the same time as there is the palpable softness of her applied force, reminiscent of the quality of lightness in Turner's late work when the color is pressed as thinly as possible, the receding veils are closer to the kind of systematic approach to layering in Louis.

The key difference is that Min's abstractions do not swell with breezy, cool air in the same way as the work of either of those painters. Not by a long-shot. There is nothing gray or cloudy in her pictures. They are not soothing or enveloping. There is no shady place to curl up. The atmosphere in her paintings is about as breathable as the hot gas in a fluorescent light bulb. You might as well suck on the tailpipe of a running car. Her work is more accurately about an impenetrable, artificial, glowing, bright light — a searing incandescence that threatens to suck all the oxygen out of the room at the same

time as it fries your retina. Yet, Min, is after a more complicated and nuanced experience. As forceful as these paintings are, because of their light touch they are also undeniably majestic and elegant.

Attraction and repulsion work to mysterious effects. At the last moment before you feel as if you are about to become consumed by the light, she interrupts the laser-harsh brightness with the cooler, more soothing film of a less aggressive, softer color in much the same way you put on a pair of dark sunglasses when you go outside to protect your naked eyes from the extreme, burning, high-contrast brightness of the endless procession of clear sunny days here in Southern California.

-Daniel Mendel-Black, Los Angeles, California, November 2013