

## Yunhee Min: The Pass, The Band, The Color

Jan Tumlir, Winter 2014

Yunhee Min is still largely known for her postminimalist cross-pollinations of painting and sculpture. That she pursued a degree in architecture some years after completing art school indicates a particular seriousness and ambition in this regard, as it is no longer enough to simply concretize painting's inherently virtual condition by extending it into actual space—that is, to transform painting, as the emblematic fetish of art, by way of its displacement from the eternal now of the white wall and into the contingent everyday world of things among things. Here instead painting would become a means of transforming space, whether as a structural element in the case of her painted and leaning wall sections, or as one of design and décor in the case of her tinted window treatments or dyed hanging (theatrical) curtain-like fabrics. In relation to these various trans-disciplinary hybrids, her more recent output suggests a kind of retrenchment, for this consists of more or less conventional paintings, unobtrusively proportioned and scaled, and once more wall-hung, free-floating. Moreover, these paintings no longer bear just one evenly applied color, but many, gesturally composed and boasting a wide range of finely tuned internal relations. Relations of parts, of discrete but interacting formal elements, invite us to approach the work as a world onto itself and to become absorbed in that world in a way that the work that is “all of one part,” in the language of Donald Judd, categorically disallows. The un-composed and non-relational not-paintings and not-sculptures that Judd favored are left empty inside so as to be filled in a spontaneous, aleatory manner with the real and existing conditions of life outside. Much the same could be said for Min's earlier works, which also automatically register the presence of all the persons, places and things that constitute their environment, but in these newer ones, what matters most is what is intentionally put inside the framing edge.

The former materialist equation of Minimalism, and by extension Constructivism, is upended by an absolute insistence on painting as a zone of perceptual concentration and subjective investment. However abstract, the work holds its place on the wall as a window of sorts onto outlying worlds, and a moveable plane. In its transportability, it relates to the studio and gallery as transitional spaces, successive stops en route to the domestic interior as final destination. There it can exercise to the fullest extent its prerogative to exist in and among us, in the midst of our most intimate day-to-day routines, while simultaneously claiming a state of exception, never fully belonging, always pointing somewhere beyond. Certainly Min's new paintings are primed to do just this: They flicker suggestively between objective flatness and pictorial depth, an intractable surface upon which layers of pigment have collected one atop another in a seemingly endless oceanic recession. Her meticulous technique distantly recalls the exertions of the Washington School of Color-Field painters to avoid any trace of material buildup on the canvas while

nevertheless loading it with visual incident. Here too we are left stranded on the unsteady threshold that separates things from pictures, and hence also from memories, dreams, fantasies and hallucinations.

In Min's work, paint is poured onto stretched canvases placed face-up on the artist's worktable and then swiped across their length with squeegees in thick bands. The width of this mark-making implement is to an extent predetermined in relation to the overall surface area to allow for just one or several passes to sit side by side, and occasionally comingle. In their general structure, these works are resoundingly simple, almost rote, yet all kinds of painterly incidents accrue in the process. Changes in the pressure of the paint's application, its inherent density or thinness, the tautness or give of the underlying support, the preparation of the canvas, and a host of environmental factors—time of day, temperature, humidity, etc.—all contribute to a procedurally revealing and formally rich variegation. The colored bands transition between areas of pooled-up saturation and sheer translucent washes. Each pass of the squeegee leaves a trail of runoff at its edges that register on the surface as gently curving, serpentine lines running top to bottom. And between these, within the bands themselves, a variety of graceful arabesque shapes appear in the bare patches where the canvas resists the paint altogether. One after and atop another, these bands are drawn in changing hues and tones, selectively concealing and revealing the underpainting in a way that the artist can anticipate but never wholly control. This, then, is where composition happens, a steadily narrowing window of opportunity: The painting must always be finished before every last trace of the first mark—its origin—is obliterated. This too is a relatively simple formula, on paper at least, but within these given parameters, the variables multiply exponentially.

Works that are "all of one part" are typically planned and then executed in one fell swoop, but the design of Min's multi-part paintings is instead patiently elaborated in the process of making. It takes shape as the accumulated record of a discontinuous series of actions, each responding to the last, while shoring up and rendering visible the interim periods of intellectually detached, sensually focused observation—time spent seated, immobile, taking in what one has already done and planning what to do next. Certainly, this is what all "real" painters do, and it could probably pass unmentioned if the artist did not mention it first and insist on its importance. And this again speaks to the backtracking course of her career path, which lends to the encounter with painterly convention a sense of surprise precisely because she comes at it from an unconventional, perhaps even anti-conventional, perspective.

The work of the studio comes down to somehow calibrating the blind causality of the hand and its aesthetic effect on the eye, a groping in the dark in search of aesthetic illumination. Min's flatbed tabletop set-up and her use of the squeegee and Flasche pigments, which boast an intense, ink-like saturation, is reminiscent of screen-printing, and carries over its inherently incremental unfolding wherein no decision can be wholly erased, covered up

or amended. Every gesture is final, and this calls for concerted deliberation on the artist's part at each step in the production process, as well as a corresponding extension of the lag-time between these steps. But this is not to suggest that there is no room for mistake; rather more accurately one could say that every action attempted under these conditions must be patiently scrutinized as potentially wrong or right. One must "sit with it," sometimes for hours, even days. A successful painting should conform to what the painter would like to see, but it should also exceed expectations as something not yet seen and never before liked. As Theodor Adorno, for one, has noted, the thrill of art making in the most general sense is one of self-alienation, of surrendering some part of oneself to the demands of the material, the tool, the thing. It is not only about the execution of intentions, but the negotiation of intentions, with all the gains and losses this implies. Within this always partly indeterminate equation, an accident may well become a source of revelation, and so must be probed for as yet unimagined potentials. This is true in a general sense, but it is especially true when an artist renounces composing and then resumes it.

In the past, Min selected her colors from a range of tints at the local paint store. After Duchamp, of course, all color can be considered found, but these are the sorts of colors that proclaim their already made status upfront. Not only are they openly a product of industry—the construction and home improvement industry in this case—but they are chosen by others, and then appropriated from them. "To make is to choose, and only to choose" goes Duchamp's famous dictum, and here we might add that making is choosing from preexisting choices. (1) However, a key factor of these particular preliminary choices is that they were also rejected; the colors were mixed and then returned to the supplier, and this adds a kind of existential content to the works Min would go on to make with them. What constitutes a "failed color," as she puts it? And by extension, what constitutes a successful one? Is this merely an arbitrary question of taste, or should taste itself be approached as a concrete social fact, and thereby as something worth exploring on a plane that extends beyond strict formalism? No doubt, a large part of Min's project consisted in redeeming these colors, in making them "work" within an alternate configuration, but without necessarily obscuring their problematic origins.

In addition to its affective and/or ornamental functions, every color is also the color of something—that is, of something else, outside the work. In regard to a painting's referential capacity, color is perhaps the most direct, indexical link between the work and the world. It is what visual art actually shares with external reality, and this is not only because a canvas surface can bear the very same color as the object it represents, but because from the outset the color is not in that object, or even on it, but purely an effect of its appearance. The color is only what we see, and is therefore well suited to pass between material things and virtual things, like paintings, that exist only to be seen. And yet painting, as the receptacle of colors always transposed from some other thing, inevitably becomes associated with those things. Even when nothing in particular is depicted there, the work is nevertheless both

metonymically of and metaphorically about whatever else shares its color. In the case of the mistints, this imported content touches on the everyday business of the paint store, on paint as a manufactured product and color as a commodity, on all the various non-art disciplines, such as design and interior decoration, that may have played a part in determining the color of this paint, on the relation between industrial standardization and consumer choice within this professional context, on the aforementioned question of taste and to what extent it is culturally imposed or personally expressed, and so on. Such concerns, already embedded in her pre-mixed paints, were reinforced in their streamlined and modular presentation in color chip-like rows, as well as in the physical interplay of her painted objects with the architectures that they were shown in and on.

In her newer works, those strategies of aesthetic deferral and structural incursion have been emphatically tempered, and this turn begins with a palette that does not seem to reflect any predetermined order. Arbitrary to a point stopping just short of signifying arbitrariness, one could almost assume that her palette is freely chosen. And inasmuch as these works are made only of paint—the support structure having been demoted in relevance to a mere convention—this freedom also emerges as a kind of content that cannot be readily traced elsewhere. In a sense, one could say that these paintings are not of or about anything other than what they are in themselves, and yet the career path that lead to this point also prepares us to see them differently, not simply as breaks with a former way of working, but a further elaboration on it.

Min has always worked with colored bands. At first they were drawn in straight flag-like rows, one precisely abutting the next, and now they are irregular and overlaying, but the principle remains: The band as an efficient means of relating colors, and by extension, all the things those colors are derived from and stand for. As a template of sorts, it is located somewhere between the color wheel, which we tend to see as a propositional structure imparting a holistic theory of color, and the color grid, which functions conversely to randomize and render any such theory absurd. On the other hand, the colored band speaks to particular interest, to a kind of choosing that aspires to no universal truth, but nevertheless maintains its validity. Here, associations occur within a differential scheme that is openly declared and never transcended. There is no equalization of colors, which stand side-by-side, yet apart. The intervals are emphasized, and even when a color overruns its allotted space and intrudes upon another, it never completely subsumes it; some measure of integrity is always retained. “The color spectrum is continuous,” writes Thierry de Duve, “and it is language that cuts it up.” (2) What then is the language system operating here? What names shall we give these colors?

For starters, these are not colors we can imagine simply scraping off the “skin of the world,” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty would have it, but are rather colors synthesized in laboratories by chemists and physicists to brighten the corners of our various artificial paradises: Our shopping malls, gyms and spas, amusement parks,

clubs and bars. These colors correspond to almost nothing known under the sun, and if they maintain any residual connection with nature, it is mainly to that which thrives in obscurity, in the dark of night, deep underground or underwater. Here we find forms of organic and inorganic life that do not selectively reflect the light they are given, but are illuminated from within with the light that they store, like batteries, or secrete from their own cells. Min's paintings operate similarly, for they too appear bioluminescent. The predominance of iridescent and fluorescent pigments within her palette points to the somber yet radiant world of gemstones, crystals and pearls, as well as glow-worms, fire-flies and sub-aquatic fish—a world no longer as exotic and unfamiliar as it once was. Such animal, vegetable and mineral entities that emerge in the absence of sunlight, air and gravity are of course perfectly at home as well on glowing flat-screen monitors, nourished on scrolling codes and data streams, and perhaps this is why they have so consistently served as the aesthetic model of our present environment. And this also comprises a content of sorts that comes with her color, for it is stamped with the time-signature of the moment and speaks to the conditions of life as they are lived now in spaces contained and secluded, providing maximum physical detachment, yet electronically open and available to all as information. All the delirious exchanges between hiddenness and exposure, proximity and distance that we conduct on an everyday basis are shored up within these colors as well. Together they reflect our contemporary experience of space as a map endlessly folding in upon itself, where everything far comes near and everything near goes far.

Iridescent paints demand intimate inspection; they draw in the eyes to pore over their surface, as their shifting, prismatic effects are literally skin-deep. In this way, they position us and then direct our movements around them, and perhaps most importantly sensitize us to our presence before them. Everything that happens does so because we are there, making it happen. Iridescent paints solicit an active viewership, whereas fluorescent paints assume quite the opposite about us—that we are passive, distracted, remote. These colors were employed early on by the military as way of marking faraway targets and non-targets, and then in the postwar years by product designers and advertisers to catch the attention of an increasingly restless, mobilized public. This, then, is a projectile color that can be launched across great distances and reliably strike at bodies likewise travelling by at great speed. In Min's paintings, it performs this function as well, an *assault* on the beholder, and when placed beside a color that conversely retreats and seductively beckons our eyes to follow into its depths, then we are left standing in an impossible place. In the act of composing, she seeks out a point of equilibrium between these opposed forces, as any painter might, but one that remains precarious and thereby always in touch with the no less precarious state of the viewer. Simultaneously expanding and contracting, exploding and imploding, these colors reflect the convulsive relationship we have with an external reality that we have increasingly filled with the stuff of our interior selves. As mentioned, there are rules to their slow accretion, one beside and/or atop another—no cover-

up or erasure is allowed, and some trace of the origin always remains—but whatever results in the way of procedural record also stubbornly resists a forensic analysis. Rather, it would appear that a painting declares itself done at the point of greatest indeterminacy between what choice came first and what choices followed. David Reed's description of his own works as purposefully confounding is particularly apt in this case, for here too the painting is "a puzzle, not just one that can't be solved but one that shows there are no solutions." (3)

That "there are no solutions" holds as true for the color as the world that they come from, but in composing these colors, Min also directs them elsewhere. Her embrace of accident in the process of making implicitly argues against that other sort of accident that would only enter the work at the point of conception: The accident of the idea-machine that makes the art, as per Sol Lewitt, and that makes so much else besides. As we know from experience, life itself is most likely to become a continuous succession of those other accidents when it is planned and designed from scratch, or when the idea of what it should be precedes what it actually is. These are the kinds of accidents one can only endure, and if Min's works speak instead to freedom, as suggested earlier, it is because the accidents within them are always negotiable. These paintings allude a landscape that increasingly conforms to our ideas, the forms of our own inner lives, and that we therefore inhabit much like fish in water, but nevertheless assert the possibility of swimming against the tide.

## Notes

1. Marcel Duchamp, from a 1961 interview with Georges Charbonnier, cited in Thierry de Duve, "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," in *The Duchamp Effect*, eds. Martha Buskirk & Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA / London: The MIT Press, 1996), 104.
2. Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 135.
3. David Reed, quoted in Richard Shiff, "Love Her as Herself," *David Reed: Leave Yourself Behind, Paintings and Special Projects, 1967-2005* (Wichita, KS: Ulrich Museum of Art, 2005), 39.