Painting as Metaphor

Painting is a competition. The fact of paint vies with the transformation of paint. Historically, transformation wins. A painting becomes a window through which we see a world of space and light as well as people, places and things. We’re designed to see this and to make it happen. We humans have been turning paint into worlds for at least 30,000 years; ancient dirt smeared on cave walls still persuades us. We see, without doubt, space and light and animals, from spotted horses to bison to wooly mammoths to people.
The Dappled Horses of Pech-Merle, Pech-Merle, France, 23,000 BCE

We also see the hand of the maker, that someone long ago took mineral and carbon pigment and dragged it across a stone wall — rubbing, dabbing, pressing and smearing, and sometimes blowing it as colored dust — until that transformation occurred. We see the dirt. We see the wall. And we see the world.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti: detail, Effect of Good Government on City and Country Life, 1338-40, fresco, 47.25’ long, Sala della Pace in the Piazzale Pubblico, Siena, Italy

In this respect, painting is metaphor. It’s not like the world, it is the world; but it’s also, without doubt, paint applied to a surface by human beings. The magic lies here, that physical fact is manipulated into fiction. Paintings don’t hide what they are, yet they convince us that they’re something else. We see upfront, on the surface, their physical truth and formation, yet we believe their transformation is their truth.
Anna Kunz’s three-dimensional painting installations invert this metaphor. They begin with an actual window. Her installations usually require daylight. Planes of fabric hang in space in proximity to a window so that light travels around and leaks through them. To further this, they are translucent, made of wide woven material that is saturated with color. In this respect, they become a window, a permeable planar division of space penetrated by light and air. The cloth itself has what Kunz refers to as “stained geometry,” fractured colored divisions reminiscent of stained glass. Rhyming with these suspended elements, are wall paintings. The latter is the indirect product of the former. The hanging material is first soaked in paint or dye, and then painted with a brush against the wall. The paint is pressed through the pores of the fabric, imprinting the surface below. This impression may stand alone, or become a “ground” for future layers of paint.
So, imagine a day lit space, sunlight spilling through a southern window. Cloth hangs loose from the ceiling, like veils or netting or shed skin. Its fiber holds absorbed color, but also supports a skin of paint—a second membrane on top of already membranous material. We may or may not see this skin, depending on where we stand and how we move. As our position shifts, the light shifts. It may bounce off paint—which then becomes opaque—or it may pass through—creating pockets of colored air and an internal glow. We see luminous zones of color formed by reflection and translucency. These can be more vivid than physical pigment. Material and light combine to transform the chamber of the gallery into colored space. It's not an illusion or a depiction. It's physical light in measurable space. We can see quite easily how it's done and what it's made of: paint, fabric, floor, ceiling, walls, window, light. The space is physical fact, and yet it's transformed.


This experience combines with and transitions into the wall-painting. The rigidity of the wall offers us a picture plane, akin to a window pane. We look at its hard flatness, but we also look through it, seeing once again, light and air—another kind of glowing colored space. But this is fiction, a product of layered pigment that becomes the metaphorical window of paintings’ past.
And it also is fact — another reflective skin of paint. Light bounces color off Kunz’s painted wall, onto the ceiling, floor and other walls. And it optically plays with us: colors interact with areas that are “unpainted neutrals,” the standard gallery-wall-white is pushed to violet by a sizzling neon yellow.

And finally, the wall painting is the remnant of Kunz’s process — the echo of her action. It represents the history of making her 3-D painting, which then moves through the actual world of the gallery as an actual factual physical thing, transforming physical space while interacting with physical light and air.
In this current exhibition, *Physical Sunshine*, the interior of the Freeark Gallery is transformed. We begin our experience on the sidewalk, looking through the window into Kunz’s glowing world. We’re pulled inside and moved through, each step shifting our sense of space, surface, luminosity and light. Color shifts as we shift. The physicality of material shifts as we shift. We look at and into whatever we see. And we are hard pressed to determine where fiction ends and fact begins; yet both are clear as daylight. The transformation is honest. We see how it’s done. The magic lies here — that fact and fiction form each other. Neither wins. We believe both. The entire installation is a metaphor for painting. We are behind the window and inside the painted world.

*If I make a painting correctly it’s almost about what is not there, more than what is seen. The space in between.... the ghost. I work on the surface, work through the surface, work in the surface, but I don’t want that to be surface-equals-superficial. I want surface to equal depth, to open up a space that’s not previously determined.* —Anna Kunz

--Anne Harris, Curator
About the Artist

Anna Kunz lives in Oak Park, IL, and teaches at Columbia College Chicago. She received her BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991, her MFA at Northwestern University in 2000, and attended the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2009. Kunz has exhibited her paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures and installations at such venues as White BOX, NYC, Art Expo Projects Chicago, and the Smart Museum at University of Chicago. Her work can be found in such public collections as the Prudential Building in Chicago, the Philadelphia Art Museum, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and St. Salvador’s College in Scotland. Honors and awards include residencies from the Edward Albee Foundation and the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation, as well as nominations for grants such as 3Arts, the Artadia Fund and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award. In addition to her own work she has curated exhibitions such as the HATCH GALLERY PROJECTS for the Chicago Artists Coalition, and NATURE, Unframed, at the Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL. She is currently Director of Tiger Strikes Asteroid (TSA) in Chicago, part of a national artist-driven coalition of alternative galleries. More information on the artist can be found on her website.

Currently, Kunz’s solo exhibition Heroes for Ghosts is on view through June 17 at Galleri Urbane in Dallas, TX. She also will be having a solo show in 2018 at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, curated by Alison Peters Quinn. She is represented by McCormick Gallery, Chicago, IL, and Galleri Urbane Dallas/Marfa.

About the Curator

Anne Harris lives in Riverside, IL and teaches at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She received her BFA from Washington University in St. Louis in 1986 and her MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1988. Her paintings and drawings have been exhibited at venues ranging from Alexandre Gallery (NYC), DC Moore Gallery (NYC), and Nielsen Gallery (Boston), to the National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian Institute, The Portland Museum of Art, The California Center for Contemporary Art and the North Dakota Museum of Art. Her work is in such public collections as The Fogg Museum at Harvard, The Yale University Art Gallery and The New York Public Library. She is the recipient of fellowships and awards such as the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship, and most recently, an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, University of New Haven. Harris serves on the board of the Riverside Arts Center and is Chair of their Exhibition Committee. This is the 14th exhibition she has curated for the RAC.

Harris is also the originator of The Mind’s I, an expanding collaborative drawing project currently on view at The Ed Paschke Art Center in Chicago, IL. This will next appear at Dalton Warehouse, Los Angeles, CA, October, 2017. Harris is represented by Alexandre Gallery, New York, NY.