



Iceland Blue I, 2015, oil on canvas, 300 x 200 cm

Out of the Blue

For 20th century Modernists, blue acquired a different character than that of its traditional Western role as a signifier of attributes of the Virgin. As a primary color, it can allude *de facto* to an autonomy distinct from representation, and therefore it suited the aspiration to objecthood unfettered by a referent.

But this instrumentalization of blue was “compromised” by its inherent capacity to evoke emotion. Expressionists, who advanced to extreme primacy a tendency of van Gogh and others to use color not merely as a means of depiction, but to convey feeling, prized blue above other colors. Kandinsky was not only the author of the painting whose title gave its name to the group, *Der Blaue Reiter* and a subsequent member of *Die Blaue Vier*. His book, *On the Spiritual in Art*, which always has been readily at hand in Ingeborg zu Schlewig-Holstein’s studio, reveals for the color a status beyond the immanent. As the celestial color, blue, for Kandinsky, was the emblem *par excellence* of spiritual transcendence.

The reason these two opposed art historical precedents are notable here is that SH’s blue paintings posit a synthesis of both these uses of blue in the service of an aim to achieve an authentic representation of spiritual reality in the sense that this notion is understood by the Christian believer. Unlike the artist in whose studio she apprenticed, the “closeted” daily communicant, Warhol, or Yves Klein, the exuberantly pre-Vatican II reveler who tried to patent his own blue pigment, SH deliberately has integrated her spiritual practice as the *raison d’être* of her aesthetic practice. In this sense, there is, for SH, an identification of metaphysics with aesthetics.

At the outset, this condition entails an obvious and intrinsic conceptual tension: how to render on a two-dimensional surface an evocation of that which has no material aspect, without resorting to the banality of allegorical illustration? In what sense is it sensible to speak of representation of that which, by its nature, is not subject to visual presentation?

The artist’s strategy—if strategy is an appropriate word to apply to works executed in one continuous meditative state the artist has cultivated for this end—entails a recognition that in the strict sense, no matter which means the artist chooses to allow for its perception, color is also a medium. Implicit in SH’s work is the awareness of a distinction that recognizes a dominant color—i.e. dominant in the sense of its sheer prevalence in a given work—as a vehicle for a tension between two media, the painting and the color. They are both opposed and conjoined. In this sense, they evoke a dialectical relation of affirmation, negation, and synthesis that finds its analogy in Trinitarian theology.

This postulation of painting and color as distinct media presupposes a degree of idealization of painting in order that painting could retain a theoretical determinism as medium distinct from color—because in its material or *real* aspect, a painting presupposes a color, even if it is a monochrome. In SH’s blue paintings, this very idealization of the medium becomes an index of its metaphysical aim even as its blue color operates as the symbol of the aim’s divine object.

Drew Hammond