

NARRATIVES OF LIGHT: RECENT PAINTINGS BY ANNA YUSCHUK

Structure is the giver of light

--Louis Kahn

There are a number of large—if ethereal narratives running through the recent paintings of Anna Yuschuk. They are stories about light.

One of these narratives concerns the way light moves from place to place—as it does, for example, in Yuschuk’s paintings that are generated from her claiming of the effulgent light that veils in from windows and doors [such as **Terra Firma**, **Daydream** and **Blue Passage**] and, similarly, from light that is reflected—say in a polished floor [as in **Surface** and **Surface II**]. Here, reflection is the work’s initial subject, and the paintings are subsequently built upon the artist’s treating such sources of light as the stuff of a deepening and proliferating discourse.

Another of these light-narratives concerns the way light can be summoned or elicited from within pigment itself [as with paintings such as **Purple Light**, **Yellow Light** and **Deep End (Caramel)**]. Which is to say that this second light-narrative is about the creating of light ex-nihilo—as a primary and self-sufficient subject.

What this comes to is that, in the first narrative, Yuschuk’s paintings are about light. In the second narrative, they are, in themselves, light.

Because Yuschuk’s reflection paintings—let’s call them that for convenience, even if the designation is clearly not all-encompassing enough—are about the transfer of light, they are thus, at the same time, paintings about the positing of space. Elastic and absorptive by nature (at the conceptual level), these reflection paintings concede the existence of a stronger, more commanding light-source somewhere “outside” of the painting (flooding into the top of **Terra Firma**, for example, or sluicing into the picture-plane from the left side of **Daydream**), a light-source which, though it is, in essence, simply another subject or event in the painting (a fictive light-source), is nevertheless made to embody the actual site of the reflected light’s coming to rest.

The reflection paintings, then, are paintings-within-paintings. They represent a conflation—first, of the artist’s depiction of the transitional radiance of a canvas’s “external” light and, second, of the billowing, outwash effects, on the canvas, of that “initial” lightfall. Yuschuk’s subsequent folding of both kinds of light—primary and secondary—into a single canvas then results in an initial destabilization in the viewer (who is looking both at “outside light” and the inner, depicted light on the canvas surface

simultaneously)—which is ultimately resolved, I would argue, in an all-encompassing sense of the paintings' additive wholeness.

Light, primary or secondary, real, virtual or depicted, is, of course, ultimately constituted as wholeness of experience anyhow. Light is light. As Goethe once put it, "Ever splitting the light! How often do they strive to divide that which, despite everything, would always remain single and whole." (1) Nevertheless, the way Yuschuk uses light in her painting, radiance can be a doubled or paralleled or superimposable pair of matrices, sometimes working together, sometimes working separately or singly.

Let's be more specific, and look in some detail at a couple of Yuschuk's reflection paintings—works such as **Blue Passage**, **Daydream** and **Terra Firma**.

Here, there is a "visible" or spatially (even morphologically) understandable source of light. In **Blue Passage**, the light shafting vertically down through the painting's right third seems to have originated—so persuasively or "realistically" rendered is the painting—as light from a window or open door located far "ahead" of us (or deeply "within") the painting. This slot-like lozenge of light is the locus of an intense effulgence which, though fictive, is "real" enough to convince us that it is a wellspring of light sufficiently powerful to have lit (that is, irradiated and therefore "coloured") the rest of the painting—which might otherwise (we feel) have remained dark. As it is, the painting's soft system of graduated blues (darker blue at the top left, lighter blue through the middle left, a hierarchical structure of blues reversed at the right) seems to have been called into chromatic existence by this now charismatic and, in painterly terms, almost promiscuous light which has been allowed (by the artist) to stream "into" the painting from an "outside" source.

In **Daydream**, the apparent architectonics of Yuschuk's painting are perhaps even more familiar to us than the light-arrangement in **Blue Passage**, and it is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the artist can afford to be elegantly spare here with the cause-and-effect relationship, in the painting, between "external" light and "inner" radiance. Structurally, the painting is simplicity itself. What is apparently a window—a representation of a window—down the left side of the picture, admits of a delicate fall of light into the body of the painting. There is a creamy-beige "sill" or "floor" running across the painting at the bottom. That is what the painting has to show us—as incident. Obviously, this locating and identifying of the nature of the work's effulgence is only a starting-point, however, for any adequate reading of the painting's meaning. In the broadest terms, **Daydream** behaves as if an environmental light-work by, say, James Turrell (the light from the "window") had somehow or other been positioned immediately next to a Rothko (the rest of the canvas). Because the painting is as anecdotally evocative and

memorial as it is (who has not been drawn to the comfort of a light-filled corner, with its double appeal as a site both of bodily security and vista?), **Daydream** stands as the very emblemizing of the way luminosity can seem to build a physical place to be and then animate that fictive space with the imaginative expansiveness of recollected experience.

Terra Firma, in comparison to the relative openness of **Blue Passage** and **Daydream**, is chromatically and, therefore, spatially complex—a rich layering of colouristically defined planes of (descending from the top of the painting) cream, milk chocolate brown, darker browns, bone whites and purple-greys. The disposition of these varying densities of colour seems to be variegated result of Yuschuk’s having begun with a horizontal crack of light located at the top of the painting. Much of the richness of this engaging painting derives from the ambiguities posited by this crack of light in its role as a “source” of illumination: the painting—which, after all, is perfectly flat—nevertheless requires that we contend, first, with its flat surface purely as a coloured field and that, second, we acknowledge, at the same time, the visceral pull the work exerts upon us as we try to locate ourselves amidst its shimmering, shifting, morphologically seductive, space-making planes.

This twinned set of perceptual fallout in a painting like **Terra Firma** locates lends it meditative agency. As Arthur Zajong notes in his remarkable **Catching the Light: The Intertwined History of Light and Mind**, in his discussion of light and meditation, “Among the nine other kasinas or devices (which include water, air, heat, blue, yellow, red, white, and space) is also the kasina of light. Of it, Buddhaghosa writes: ‘he who grasps the Light-device grasps the sign in light entering through a wall-crevice, keyhole or window-space.’ That is, every manifestation of light is potentially the occasion for the true grasping of light, be it the dappled disks of light beneath the shade of a tree, or the moonbeam that furtively makes its way through a chink in the wall. Each instance offers an occasion for enlightenment, for seeing light.” (2)

Which discussion brings us to Yuschuk’s second body of light-narrative paintings—those which, unlike the reflection paintings, appear to be about, as was mentioned earlier, the creation of light ex nihilo, from “within” the canvas itself (her **Large Blue** seems very much a transitional work that stands between the reflection-paintings and what we may as well call, for want of a better name, the pure-light paintings).

These pure-light works—paintings such as **Yellow Light**, **Purple Light** and **Deep End (Caramel)**—are, for the most part, square paintings. Unlike the rectangular reflection-paintings—where rectangularity tends to evoke architectonic dimensionality (most of these paintings seem to be systems of planes-in-rooms), a square format feels dimensionless, a perfected

geometrical figure that, in its essential scalelessness, feels unbound, transcendental, whole.

The square, therefore, is the almost inevitable choice of format for the hosting, as it were, of radically etherealized ideas such as the production of pure colour experience.

Yuschuk's pure-light paintings might be thought of, among other things, as "low threshold" paintings. Unlike the reflection-paintings generally—which you can (at least imaginatively) enter—the pure-light paintings establish a profound reversal of that perceptual vectoring: they enter you.

To look intently at one of Yuschuk's pure-light paintings is an engrossing experience, an experience that is as visceral and bodily as it is metaphysical and disembodied. The works are slowly but insistently performative, their performance lying in the quiet but persistent way they change before your eyes—if you give them the generous amounts of time they require. The blue-violet **Purple Light**, for example, will more and more insistently offer a floating horizontal rectangle of blue light hovering in its upper half—which you cannot recall having noticed when you first began gazing upon the painting. Similarly, the exquisite **Yellow Light** begins resolutely enough as a study in creamy-whites, only releasing, over time a beautifully strange bluish "cloud" that hovers at the bottom of the painting—like mist over water.

The pure-light paintings are enormously complicated works—which mask their complications with an initial guilelessness. Here, you may imagine, is a monochromatic painting about, say, yellow, or blue or gold. The truth of the matter is infinitely more sheer, more attenuated. The paintings merely begin in yellow or blue or gold. But after that, by means of some inspired, private, labour-intensive magic of Anna Yuschuk's, they travel far, far away from their initial chromatic moorings—to a "true grasping of light." There is rapture here. And an exquisite, if inchoate meaningfulness.

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1) In Arthur Zajonc, **Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind** (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), p. 292.

2) **Ibid**., p. 340.