

The Local Color of Shadow

BYRON KIM

Such azure blue heavens.... Are they really blue or is it that they stretch away without end?

Chuang Tzu

Can the infinite have a color? I have no idea.

I once had the good fortune to visit Vija Celmins. On the way to sitting down with her I passed through her workspace. As I remember it, she had a half-dozen paintings on easels scattered throughout a small studio. Celmins makes paintings depicting the night sky. Somehow she has managed to combine Minimalism, realism, and the abstract sublime. She is the living artist (along with Robert Irwin, On Kawara, and Olafur Eliasson) I most envy. Like those of Ad Reinhardt, her paintings are black and perfect. They picture galaxies, yet you can carry one under your arm. If they were big, they might be schlocky; instead, they are intimate and questioning. They are very human works.

The reason I was over at Vija's was that she had agreed to let me make a painting of her skin color. I probably began by squeezing out a dollop of an off-white called zinc buff. I mixed in other colors with a palette knife, using one of those paper pads for a palette. Sometimes I get nervous when I'm mixing color in front of another painter, especially someone I admire, even if they make mostly black paintings. Anyhow, Vija was engaging me in a conversation about gardening when she mentioned that she thought my color was too light. So I was getting more nervous while trying to keep up my end of the conversation while staring at her arm while trying to see its local color while wondering whether local color was what I was after, after all. I can't remember how the discussion evolved, but I do recall Vija mentioning again how off my color seemed. What happens when

you're ineptly mixing color is that it gets muddy, and if you don't start over (which you should), the amount of paint starts to really grow because you compensate wildly for your mistakes, eventually using too much of every color in the spectrum. So a dollop had turned into quite a sizable glob. Suddenly unable to resist, Vija swooped a finger into my paint, smeared a bit on her arm, and said, "See?"

My whole project as an artist flashed before my mind's eye. What is the right color? Is there any meaning in it? Can I make any meaning out of it? What am I doing here? I got out of Vija's studio as fast as I could.

I've been painting a portrait of my son, Emmett. It's not a straightforward portrait. It's a stripe painting in which each horizontal stripe represents a color as I move my eye from his head to his sneakers. It's hard to describe, so suffice to say that it really is a stripe painting. In the course of my art practice, I often find myself copying things, but copying Emmett is a special thing. Can I make an abstract stack of colors have anything to do with this being who is so dear to me?

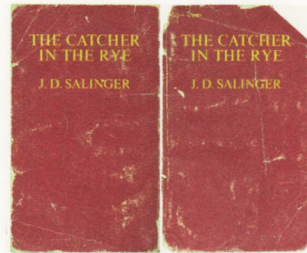
He's wearing his favorite shirt, the uniform of the Brazilian national soccer team, so the big swath of yellow is vaguely familiar. But it has become clear to me that the stripes representing Emmett's face—their color and their proportions—will be the key to this painting. His lips are a strange color. I think of them as pink, because lips are supposed to be pink, but they are a pasty violet color that seems too close to the color of the surrounding skin, more the color of a wound, the cobalt violet color of blood through translucent skin.

Adhering to local color has made this painting too static, so I'm now making stripes that incorporate shadows, which has been very challenging. It's difficult to make your mind forget what it thinks it sees and make it see only what your eyes see.

Yesterday, I asked Emmett to come in to pose for me. The photographs of his face have been driving me crazy because the color is so bad. As soon as he sat down, however, I realized that I was unprepared. You can't ask a ten-year-old to sit still indefinitely without something to focus on. In Emmett's case, I forgot

to ask him to bring a book. I wondered if there might be something for him to read in my studio, and I remembered my collection of copies of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Giving J. D. Salinger to a prepubescent kid may be questionable parenting, but somehow it felt okay.

The reason I have multiple copies of *The Catcher in the Rye* is that I am attached to the color of the book's cover. I'm talking about the red paperback edition that I read in the 1970s. The design of the cover fits the book perfectly. I take the red to be the color of Holden Caulfield's hunting cap, and like a favorite hat, the book looks better as it wears. It's a sturdy, minimal design without blurbs, explanations, not one extraneous word. As a matter of fact, the back cover simply duplicates the front.



The cadmium yellow of the typeface and its Indian red background have the matte stolidity of an early Brice Marden. It looks like a book that Holden himself would be carrying around or would recommend to us, and in this sense it is a beautiful marrying of form and content. I can't help but think that *The Catcher in the Rye* has transformed the color red.

Today is Sunday. There are fires racing out of control in San Diego, where my parents live. I picture my mom and her 102-year-old father in the same room, gazing at their separate TVs, watching flames leap over the freeway a few miles from their kitchen. I know how the landscape looks hovering over the freeway

through Santa Ana winds, but what does it look like through five hundred degrees Kelvin?

Some days I worry that I have lost all ambition. Three years ago, I began making a small painting of the sky every Sunday, a study, a kind of journal entry. Actually, the paintings literally comprise a journal, because I write something on each, just a few words about my life, sometimes in relation to the sky, which is both constant and constantly changing.

If she looks past the TV, my mom sees the sky out her kitchen window. What does the sky look like through all that smoke? I see the sky out my studio window. Is it the same sky?

What can I do to change the color blue?