

Travis Diehl 2/17/12
Windows & Mirrors at New Capital
Sayre Gomez and Norman Wilson

MONOCHROMES UNLIMITED

Although the room was comfortable and luxurious, I was a bit nervous and distracted there. In order to prevent my heart from racing uncomfortably, I had to concentrate and keep calm. Both screens flickered on to blue and filled me with an oppressive sense of hope. I only took maintenance drugs once in my life. It was a period of extreme anxiety.

Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings*

\\¥//

The diffusion of monochrome painting into the vocabulary of contemporary art coincides with a fourfold increase in antidepressant use and a tripling in abuse of anxiolytics. Is there something unsettling about the monochrome? Like a chromakey-blue field, the frame delimits an emptiness rich with potential. Painting since the Renaissance can be considered an attempt at an analog virtual reality. At the same time, the quest for an impossible and apocalyptic purity seems reprehensible, forsaking as it does the very real material injustices that define our world in favor of temporary, illusory balance—made all the more pernicious by its appeal. What then of an artwork that cites this totality while also embedded in substance and detail to the point where the work “escapes” itself in both directions—into its interior, pictorial space, and also into the world at large, where it disappears? What of an abstract painting that is a relentless reflection of the world?

Upstairs at New Capital, Sayre Gomez has installed three reclaimed windows backed with crackling vinyl film directly into the gallery's white walls. The bare brick space below contains an installation by Norman Wilson comprised of an enveloping blue glow emitted by consumer electronics. In both artworks, transcendent emptiness melts into the architecture. Wilson's video projection *Why is the No Video Signal Blue?* relates the artist's search for answers in the customer service departments of VIZIO, Panasonic, and Sony. Wilson has been seduced by the electric blue that has replaced the static on our televisions—a holdover of the brightest and purest blue register of CRTs, a liminal hue, neither calming nor depressing. Here we find a parable of the earnest yet ambivalent contemporary artist struggling to reconcile his subjective yearnings within an unlimited field. We might also ask why fast food restaurants are yellow or why the Apple screensaver is trippy. Tongue-in-cheek as the installation may be, Wilson seems genuinely infatuated. Yet something keeps him from letting the beauty of this color remain self-evident. A monitor ekes out a glow through a foam packing bag decorated with safety warnings in over a dozen languages. The blue from a projection in the corner illuminates a pair of recessed brick shelves. Our attempts to experience this color phenomenologically, as in a Klein or a Turrell—that is, in terms of self—are constantly tied to our surroundings: room, monitor or projector casings, the blue's origin in globalized commerce. The video ends with an associative montage of blue images taken from the Internet—futuristic entertainment centers, women in chromakey-blue vinyl bodysuits, a rendering of a dolphin in a VR headset. The viewer's body, too, is drawn in. “If you were to smile, would your teeth turn blue?” Wilson asks. “If you are awake, are the whites of your eyes now blue?”

But neither artist sets out to disprove purity; this would be all too easy. Their relationship to monochromatic painting, too, is tenuous, perhaps itself a projection allowed by a certain art context. At the same time, an essential emptiness lends the work of both artists its beauty. A mirror is both blank and never blank; a window is both always and never empty. We look through, or in, but never at; the same holds true for the monochrome. Blankness sustains the potentiality of video or chromakey blue, or of windows abstracted from an erased city. It seems possible to imagine almost any image in these amorphous frames. The window, the mirror, the monochrome repel or defer attention into scattered associations, anxious anticipation, an uneasy depth. It is the mark of the contemporary monochrome that it makes no case for autonomy and depends on context: some awareness of a painting's materiality,

acknowledgement of the space in which it is displayed, autobiographical cues, or art-historical reference. The acolytes of high modernism, such as Michael Fried and Ad Reinhardt, would say this is not painting, barely even art. Indeed, the monochromes of Gomez and Wilson have been thoroughly invaded. In their work we recognize the current state of a painterly trajectory, now idled and leeching from the frame—the pure rectangle of Gomez's windows filmed over and cracking, the pure color of Wilson's installation qualified with text. There can be no ideal conditions, save an ideally empty but forever polluted monochromatic blankness. “Art is art,” writes Reinhardt. “Everything else is everything else.”¹ But this separation seems unconvincing, even undesirable. We're closer today to Robert Smithson's double-edged assertion that “Art is just art.”²

Gomez's vinyl-backed windows are perhaps the most mirror-like objects at New Capital. Blocked from behind with sun-damaged black or white film, their monochromatic surfaces reflect the viewer and surrounding walls. The work is formally austere yet materially specific, salvaged from real buildings, marked by chipping paint and grime reminiscent of a disused commercial district. In addition, Gomez has gold-plated one of several mysterious industrial hangers found in the rafters above his windows. While the traditional frame demarcates a more or less illusionistic visual zone to the detriment of all else, here the lived environment keeps pressing in, invading the boundaries tentatively established by art. Gomez and Wilson set up permeable limits, liminal, subjective frames. Are the “reflections” a part of the work—and by extension, is the viewer? Are the walls? Is the generated glow? Where does the artwork end?

The place of these pieces within art history is as ambiguous as their relationship to the gallery's architecture. The exhibition's title, “Windows & Mirrors,” inverts the name of a show curated by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art in 1978, “Mirrors and Windows: American Photographs since 1960.” Included was *Chicago Landscape #299*, a photo by Art Sinsabaugh of a line of bland apartment towers in various stages of completion along the city's waterfront. Sunlight glances off the mirrored windows of some and pierces the skeletal floors of others. In his catalog essay, Szarkowski proposes a continuum between self-expressive and exploratory photography—that is, between “mirror” and “window” art—as a way to reconcile the sudden and “bewildering variety of technical, aesthetic, functional, and political philosophies that characterize contemporary photography's colloquium.”³ We might make the same statement today about art in any medium—the present work of Gomez and Wilson in particular, which occupies both poles at once. Their pieces recall Minimalism and the readymade, the color field and the appropriated image, while citing the history of painting, conceptual art, installation, video, and photography, touching on an art-historical lineage while traversing its categories. Everything unmade and authorless in art history reemerges here as a subjective prompt.

At Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago, Gomez displays a series of paintings made on Xeroxed images sourced from blogs. These hybrid works echo Szarkowski's statement that, “for the painter and printmaker, the introduction into their works of photographic imagery or photographic techniques constitute[s] clear evidence of modernity.”⁴ A woman's face is printed out a dozen times, painted with sludgy green here, white there, cropped or rotated or blotted out. Another group depicts a pair of gloved hands lifting the sash of a window. The images are at once authorless and subjective, chosen from an endless supply of anonymous images for the artist's own inscrutable reasons. The subject alone lends these images any meaning or power: the associations of the artist who culled them from the gray static of the Internet, or the associations of the viewer who imbues these abstracted images with affect. These works are one attempt to pause the expanding image universe and see the subject poised against it. But there is always another copy, another image, and another. The seductive windows of the MacBook and the HD television propose in their ways to contain totality, to envelop, to expand, to transcend. But this is an unfocused, dispersed totality—autonomous, but in the sense that the universe is all there is.

¹ Ad Reinhardt, “25 Lines of Words on Art: Statement,” 1958, in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 51.

² Robert Smithson, “A Refutation of Historical Humanism,” 1966-67, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 336.

³ John Szarkowski, introduction to *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 11.

⁴ Szarkowski, 12.

If Gomez's monochromes prompt us to reinstate the effaced building, is this not the subject reacting to limitlessness? "A dread of voids and blanks brings on a horrible anticipation," Smithson writes.⁵ This tension is partially formal: the uncertain "floating" quality of a painting on a white wall, the fragility of projected light. But beyond this, we struggle to reconcile the artwork in its proximity to the void, its nearness to "non-art" or nothing—to reinstate blankness in discernible meaning. The monitor brightens to blue, the artist opens his browser; soon the screen fills with dozens of shuffling windows, each containing an overwhelming number of images, an even larger number of links to other windows. The blank screen suggests an infinity of potential windows opening onto further windows and so on. When we see images in the unlimited monochrome, we might, as much as painting, see the dissolution of the photographic frame: a full-scale photorealism.

The provisional limits of the canvas have become an indeterminate interface rather than an impermeable border. The question is once more how to understand or experience the aesthetic in an unlimited environment. Is this the anxiety of the monochrome? Does the affect of infinity survive these encroaching realities? A monochromatic emptiness is the opposite of dense but carefully ordered mnemonic aids such as mandalas or memory palaces, which are designed to focus our attention. The video-blue mirror becomes an echo chamber for our thoughts. We might read Wilson's title, *Why is the No Video Signal Blue?*, with existential emphasis on "why is." The subject, alone in the meditative space of video blue, acknowledges each thought as it arrives—acknowledges it, and lets it pass. "Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—ad infinitum," writes Smithson in his refutation of Fried's "Art and Objecthood."⁶ Wilson implicates himself in the global consumer cycle when he buys his artwork from Target and Walmart. It would be naïve to take this gesture as outright critique. Similarly, the guided meditation gives way to an endless associative resonance—like the flags and photos moving through Wilson's video blue field: the self reflected in the void that mirrors the self. But it is also freeing to be able to move through all of art, all of history, all visuality, with the ease of a dolphin in a VR headset. It remains only to lose, as Gomez and Wilson have done, our dread of voids. In its distinctly contemporary ambivalence, their work flirts with transcendence yet basks in endless mediation.

The suffusion of the monochrome also coincides with the triumph of free-market commerce and its attendant product-based notion of the self. Indeed, the globalized commodity represents the ultimate in boundless, amorphous movement. Yet where capitalism relies on metaphors of totality, it enters the traditional territory of painting, itself becoming vulnerable to leveling appropriations. The field of art dissolves into a global unboundedness until paint is more idea than material. Resolution always seems imminent in the translucent blue distance. But the television screen no longer subdivides into neat narratives; the Rothko calibrated to deliver an "aesthetic experience" simply hangs on the wall. Is there terror in being, for a moment, un-entertained? It can be painful to face the monochromatic void that resides in the center of every subject. Yet for Szarkowski the photographers in his exhibition are "all, finally, concerned with the pursuit of beauty: that formal integrity which pays homage to the dream of meaningful life."⁷ Even as "Windows & Mirrors" refutes high modernism by merging with the lived environment, these works paradoxically take up a modernist concern for beauty. But this nearness to the void needn't make us uncomfortable. Today's polyvalent artist includes the dreams of modernism in his repertoire of untroubled visions—while, as Reinhardt reminds us with a Zen aphorism, the "pure old men of old" woke without anxiety but slept without dreams.

⁵ Smithson, "An Esthetics of Disappointment," c. 1966, *The Collected Writings*, 334.

⁶ Smithson, "Letter to the Editor," 1967, *The Collected Writings*, 67.

⁷ Szarkowski, 25.