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### *Blue : Poetry of Space and the Body*

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The theme of Viktor & Rolf's 2002 Autumn/Winter collection was "blue." However, this does not mean that they simply created blue clothes. Viktor & Rolf used chromakey—the technique used in TV shows where a royal blue background is electronically replaced by a different image. As a result, the models in blue outfits are walking down the catwalk in front of us and in turn, this image is simultaneously projected onto a giant screen behind them. However, the blue of the models' clothing on the screen is erased and replaced by moving scenes from somewhere else: the materiality of the clothing disappears to be replaced by completely different images. The purpose of the video images is not to amplify or intensify the reality that we see before us, but, if anything, it functions to disassemble and then extinguish that simple reality. Within the framework of the fashion show, the primary aim of which is to show clothing, Viktor & Rolf have robbed clothing of its materiality and have succeeded in revealing the diversity of the connection with image. This show was not an attempt to convey the originality of the clothing but a bold initiative in which the very way we view clothing was turned on its head.

I was not actually at this show and only managed to see a few minutes of the video recording of it. When I saw the footage, however, I realized that this Dutch duo's work is not superficial, aiming only at being different, but represented something dramatic in which the essence of "blue" that artists had explored throughout the history of art was condensed and presented to the public. The title of the show was "Long Live the Immaterial!" and blue was the color of the door to "immateriality."

The mystique of "blue" lies not in its presence in anything material but in the color of space that expands in an immaterial way. It is only now—as a result of chemosynthesis—that so many different blue pigments and coloring materials exist, to the extent that our everyday lives are now inundated with the color. However, "blue things" are rarely found in nature. People have gone to incredible lengths in search of blue. Ultramarine blue, derived from lapis lazuli that is only produced in one region in Afghanistan, was highly prized in the western world. Ultramarine blue was so expensive that it almost equaled the price of gold and is well known as the color used to depict the Virgin Mary's robes. Blue represented the Virgin Mary's infinite compassion.

Neither the blue bird nor the blue flower exists in the real world; they represent ideal life forms that people continue to search for. The blue sky is so clear to us and yet if we were to become a bird and fly into this sky we would never arrive at that blue or anything that is blue no matter how high we flew. Blue simply escapes into the beyond, no matter where we went. The more we pursue it, the further it becomes, glittering in the distance.

This represents a motion that is infinite. At this point, our attention should be directed to the fact that, in contrast to yellow, blue's infinite expansion becomes centered deep into the beyond. Even Rudolf Steiner—arguably the ultimate philosopher of the 20th century who inherited Goethe's color theory and developed it into a unique form of mysticism—says that in contrast to yellow which is a light that becomes diffused from the center outwards, blue is a light that becomes diffused from the periphery towards the center and at the same towards the depths beyond. This is why, when faced with blue, we are filled with the urge to leap into it, as if jumping into a well: we are filled with the desire to dive into the blue sky.

No one personifies this desire towards blue in the history of art as much as Yves Klein. Klein did not just create a monochromatic work titled *IKB* (*International Klein Blue*) using only ultramarine blue. The most wonderful thing about Yves Klein is that he actually leapt into space. A photograph shows Yves Klein lying horizontally, body straightened, to actually dive into space. Although blue did not feature in this

performance, which was carried out on a pavement of grey stone in Paris, the work is stamped with the strong desire of this artist to dive into the blue of space. Yves Klein threw his own body into the blue space (although Klein was a keen judo practitioner to the extent of visiting the Kodokan in Japan in order to practice the art and he must have been confident of his passive move, he was apparently slightly injured during the performance).

In actual fact, the ultimate schema of blue can be glimpsed from this performance.

Yves Klein's passion for the blue sky was such that he hated birds because they create holes in the perfect blue sky, and as a result he created perfectly monochromatic and flat blue surfaces with an absence of any distinction. Simultaneously, he attempts to physically leap into that perfect blue space. The reason for this is so that he can ultimately penetrate the blue beyond to melt into and disappear into the immaterial world, the spiritual world that lies beyond the material. However, because of its very spirituality, blue would highlight the fact that our existence on this earth takes the material form of the body. Our bodies are revealed against the background of blue space.

Klein produced a series of works titled *Anthropometry* in which IKB is applied to a woman's body and then her body "printed" on paper to leave a blue mark—the same technique as a "fish print." This time, the blue is reversed to represent the mark of the body. For Klein who also produced the IKB-saturated *Blue Sponge* series during the same period this body has absorbed, like a sponge, the spiritual blue that fills the sky. The result is a blue body in the emptiness of space, or the shadow of a body—like a white hole—in the blue space.

The construct of the prototypical problem underlying the possibility of reversing, through the blue, the material body and the immaterial and spiritual spatiality found in Viktor & Rolf's work is also clearly apparent here. In fact Viktor & Rolf clearly acknowledge Yves Klein's influence on their work.

When the body and space—or more accurately, the naked body and space—come into the picture, we cannot help but be surprised when we realize that the construct of this problem is in fact pointing to an axis of

20th century painting.

No one can determine where 20th century painting began. In my opinion, however, what Cézanne attempted in his mysterious late work *Large Bathers* is certainly one candidate. I use "mysterious" because Cézanne had spent many years directing all his energy into his pursuit of a unique "truth in painting" through his landscapes, still lifes and portraits to realize a unique "truth in painting"; and as a result succeeding in introducing a completely new technique and philosophy of painting. And, although I understand that Cézanne was carrying out a huge experiment using the nude as the theme of his work, what this actual quest entailed is not necessarily clear. Cézanne's quest was not successful. This, too, I can understand. And it is for this very reason that it is so difficult for us to understand what it was that Cézanne was trying to achieve. At the very least, it is clear that this quest was something that had potential through the most elemental scene in painting—the presence of several nudes in a vertical space—which could arguably be described as the birth of Venus.

In the year 1899, the young Matisse purchased a small oil painting by Cézanne depicting a bathing scene (*Three Bathers*, 1879–82). Matisse kept this work close at hand for most of his life. I made many discoveries while writing a book titled *Ao no bijutsushi* [The history of blue in art] (1999), but nothing moved me as much as this minor fact. I took this as Cézanne, the master, handing over his baton—a painting—to another master, Matisse, almost from one century to another. In other words, it represents a transferal of the major issue in painting—that of the nude in space.

If this was the case, Matisse obviously didn't attempt to solve the same problem in the same way that Cézanne did. An "authentic" successor—whether in art or academia—is not simply an epigone but is someone who departs from the same problem and yet is able to come up with something completely different from his master and it is this that creates history in the true sense. What Matisse achieved is the very example of this. To put it simply, if Cézanne was attempting to depict space by "laying touches of fine color" (it was this very technique that he inherited from the impressionist School), Matisse "invented" the ability to evoke the emotion of space within the "global" surface of color itself. This was

a decisive step and a stroke of genius. In extreme terms, the history of 20th century painting can be described as being consumed with taking the significance of this one step further.

This is why I can only look at the *Dance* series by also thinking of this huge history in a way that produces a lump in my throat. These are the monumental works depicting a group of nudes dancing in a ring against a bright blue background. *Dance* was produced in 1909 and *Dance II* in 1910. This is more than 3 years after Cézanne's death in 1906. Matisse inherited and then incorporated the issue surrounding *Large Bathers* that Cézanne wrestled with, translating it into his own unique language of painting. Here, space is not captured on a sensory or perceptive level but emotionally, that is, musically. Matisse declared that painting is the "music" of color. That's why he depicted *Dance*. In fact, the title of a contrasting work painted during the same period by Matisse is *Music*.

It should not be forgotten that Matisse never approached abstraction. Although Matisse has described color as "weaving" music, he does not mean that it constructs an abstract language of painting in which form is lost. Rather, to Matisse, painting represented a medium in which people—people with a physical form—exist in the always-present, closed space. Arguably, no other artist is so much a painter of the indoors as Matisse. The essence of Matisse lies in this personal place—"the indoors." It is this personal space that is transformed into "music" and where Matisse's color magic is created.

I believe that the path of painting taken by Matisse was, in one sense, a happy path. On this path, bright colors are always rising up to fill the canvas. The final destination—putting aside that beautiful chapel in Venice—is the *Blue Nude* series (1952) of simple curvilinear shapes that everyone is familiar with. This series was nothing more than several pieces of blue paper cutouts against a white background. However, the series represents the nude in space. This is the elemental and prototypical scene that Matisse inherited from Cézanne. That Matisse realized a depth of simplicity to such a degree is nothing short of astounding. However, perhaps we should turn our attention to the fact that a blue nude is present in a white space. A body is not floating in a blue space. Rather, the nude has absorbed the entire blue space so that it is spreading its limbs as though this nude represented the heavens, and represents the final stage

before the realization of Yves Klein's *Anthropometry* several years later. Arguably this represents a secret handing over of the baton from Matisse to Yves Klein through the color blue and the nude. If so, the relay must have been located in the blue of Southern France and the Mediterranean. Yves Klein was originally from Nice. The beaches of Nice inspired Klein to become an "apostle of blue". And, Nice is where Matisse spent the latter half of his life. The Mediterranean sky and the smell of the ocean drift from *Blue Nude*.

From Cézanne to Matisse and then to Yves Klein—one feature is revealed to us as we follow the painting relay of "blue and the body"; the absence of the face.

In Cézanne's *Large Bathers*, attention is only directed at the bodies of the nudes and if anything he has ignored the faces of the women. Neither is any special attention paid to the faces in Matisse's *Dance*. If anything the faces have been roughly depicted without any sense of individuality. The nude has a head in *Blue Nude* but no face. In Yves Klein's *Anthropometry* the only visible traces of the body is the torso and the four limbs and the reason for this is probably not entirely due to a technical issue of the impossibility of covering the model's face in paint. The face is definitely absent.

Why is this? Needless to say, the face represents the individuality of that person. However, the human bodies in these "blue bodies" don't represent a person's individuality. Rather, the human body seems to represent the universality of human existence in which the human takes a material form. It is the filmmaker Derek Jarman who redefined IKB as "universal blue" in his film *Blue* (1993) in which blue fills the screen. There is something in blue that abandons all individuality and characteristics to fly off into a vast universality. The body that is present in the blue has already discarded the "face" which is the signpost of its individuality to appear as nothing more than the body which is the final materiality that we are bestowed with; the body which also happens to represent the final trace of materiality, the entirety of which is permeated by "universal blue." Blue makes it clear to us that the human body exists as the boundary between materiality and immateriality (spirituality).

In this case, I can not resist including, into this "body of blue" relay,

[image omitted]

the work of artist Kuroda Aki who is originally from Kyoto but has been based in Paris for most of his career. This is because Kuroda's rich world of color filled with a bright transparency inherits an extremely "French" sense of color that can be directly linked to Matisse's work. And, in particular, blue—a color that Michel Foucault apparently also favored—plays a unique role in applying a "cosmic sensibility" to Kuroda's world. Also because a hollow human body that Kuroda calls "caryatid" makes its appearance in Kuroda's blue space.

Caryatid is the goddess that stands above the entrances of stone buildings in Europe. Caryatid is the guardian of gateways, thresholds and boundaries. Interestingly, however, even Kuroda's Caryatid is faceless. In fact, her very body is nothing more than an outline, an empty space. It is like a cast-off skin. It is as if Matisse's *Blue Nude* and Yves Klein's *Anthropometry* have been reverted, once again. In other words, this time the space is blue. And the shape of a body, like a hole, remains in the blue, as though drilled into the emptiness or as though someone has already passed by.

At the same time, this body might very well be that of Caryatid and not that of a human. Matisse's nude and Yves Klein's "body trace" clearly represented the bodies of women. However, in Kuroda Aki's work, even the final symbol of a human being has disappeared. This can also be seen as a cast mold from which all human bodies are created. In response to this, even the space that surrounds the form is not an earthly space. Kuroda's blue is similar to IKB but is deeper, a blue that contains darkness. It is a blue that gushes forth like magma to fill the space.

In actual fact, Kuroda's departure point was the *Yami* [darkness] series, which featured only black lines. In Kuroda's paintings, "blue" was born out of this "darkness" and then the prototype of the body appeared from this "blue". Yves Klein once quoted from Gaston Bachelard—"At first there is nothing and this is followed by a deep nothingness and then a deep blue" (*Air & Dreams*). Based on this statement, Kuroda's work can arguably be described as "first there is nothing, followed by a deep darkness and then the depth of a blue cosmos," the body of Caryatid piercing the garden of that "cosmic blue" to create a vacuum.

Man first flew into space in 1961. Since Yuri Gagarin's statement on his return from this journey that "Earth was blue," "blue" has taken on

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a cosmic meaning. Hearing the news, Yves Klein—always the artist!—commented that Gagarin had attended the opening of Klein's exhibition held in space.

Blue could also be described as simply being linked to Earth. However, Kuroda Aki dreamed of transcending this by entering and exiting this "hole" that is the body as he played in space, the slightly blue "garden" of darkness—what he called the "cosmo garden." Caryatid's hole is like the cosmic blue hole that has been removed as a result of bluescreen chromakey. Any landscape or image can be projected onto the space created by that hole. This is because dreams are nothing other than immaterial.

That brings us back into Viktor & Rolf's world. If Kuroda Aki's blue introduced a cosmic dimension to the color, arguably Viktor & Rolf sent it back out into the everyday landscape here on earth. As a result of their undertaking, the models' bodies, while being real bodies, are also nothing other than empty Caryatids. Materiality and immateriality, emptiness and abundance, the body and the spirit—the boundary where these incomparable elements that make up our world come together is where the blue adventure unfolds. The play of blue is something that will never end, something eternal.