

Thoughts on Anna Han's work

A Blue Room Where the Five Senses Interact

By Lee Sun Young (art critic)

I first came upon the work of Anna Han a few years ago at an exhibition that had the color blue as its theme. The exhibition was held at Salon de H, and on one side of the gallery there was a piece that combined a phone booth featuring blue neon lights with monochrome paintings that evoked the various colors of the sea. Given Han's career (she left South Korea as a teenager and remained out of the country for quite a while), I thought this reflected her longing for somewhere far away across the ocean. As a color occupying one end of the spectrum, blue signifies distant places. Even our experience shows that warm colors feel closer while cool colors feel further away. If you look into the flame of a candle, however, blue is closer to the wick, and it is hotter than red or yellow. Blue has a short wavelength, which means that it possesses more energy. In *The Temptation of Colors*, Eva Heller says that any color will fade and take on a blue tint as it grows more distant. This is because of the layer of air separating us from the colors. On a clear day, the sky is a brilliant blue. The water and air are not actually blue, but they seem blue. The air or water in a glass bottle has no color, but the deep sea looks blue.

The reason is that all colors are swallowed up by blue as the depth of a space increases. That is why Eva Heller considers blue to be a color without boundaries, a color of infinite dimensions. The status of blue in the theory of color developed in physics helps us understand the feelings that the color evokes. The color blue is not here, but there. We humans are creatures who miss *there* when we are *here*, and who miss *here* when we are *there*. A rock here becomes a shining star out there. In terms of mineralogy, there is no qualitative difference between a rock and a star. *There* becomes the object of longing because of the mere fact that it is over there and that it is not easy to get there. The color blue is linked to an absolute distance, like a utopia, which "exists nowhere." Blue connotes the state of transcendence, like the sky way over yonder, or in other words eternity. But eternity is a wish, and not a reality. When a vague feeling of nostalgia is combined with frustration and impossibility, it turns into melancholy. I thought of nostalgia at this exhibition that takes the color blue as its leitmotif, but when Han's works

are displayed in the massive space of the Cheongju Museum of Art, they cannot be reduced to mere nostalgia.

Just as in her previous work, the suave urbanity produced by the geometric neatness of the outlines and by the juxtaposition of unprocessed machines and objects is at some removed from the basic nostalgia for home/nature. This exhibition space is a huge square room that is 10 meters high and 20 meters long, which apparently was used by a TV station for shows featuring a studio audience. The space used to be white, for shooting television, but it was painted dark blue for this exhibition. Just as in its original function, the space could serve as a backdrop (rather like a blue screen) to facilitate the combination of different backgrounds when editing video footage. In other words, it is not a qualitative space that implies a certain meaning, but rather a neutral space that can convey any meaning. Just like a city, it is a space for codifying all the things that originated elsewhere and for lining or stacking them up. Color is no exception to this characteristic of codification. Han surreptitiously placed the phrase “2185C ONTO THE GREEN SHADOW” under a black umbrella lying in a corner of the exhibition space. The phrase is a signifier that is related to the standard shade of blue that has been commercialized as paint.

Even though there are standardized colors that reflect social conventions, they depend on what surface they are applied to. Here, Han does not insist on having a unique shade of blue (though Yves Klein, an artist famous for using blue, even patented his own hue of the color). This exhibition represents part of her study of colors, Han says, and it would not matter if that color was not blue. Blue/color is placed outside of Han’s self-expression. When combined with the sharp outlines of products and objects, this blue is removed even further from color as a means of ardent expression, such as the swirling night sky in the painting by Van Gogh. But a color that is made through chemical processes rather than the uneven colors made from natural materials is not guaranteed to have definiteness, either. While such difference can lead to errors, it is enjoyable in an exhibition that employs several types of materials, such as cloth and neon. While this work of art is location-specific, it began in an ambiguous space that is comparable to White Cube. Han’s works reconstitute only partial excerpts of reality, and what they reveal is not the place they belong to but the space they want to belong to.

This is not a familiar space, but one that is unknown. It is not a space to which individual people belong, but rather a structural space that transcends the individual. If there is a subject, it is not the center of the space, but rather ubiquitous throughout the space. Since spaces that one wants to belong to are rare in the real world, Han created this space instead of recreating it. Anyone who is thrust into an unfamiliar environment will end up redrawing the space in order to confirm their coordinates. In an unfamiliar

situation, people draw a magic circle to protect themselves. Though the spaces given to people today are generally temporary and not permanent, even so they attempt to recreate symbolic spaces out of the place they belong to. In so doing, they appropriate those spaces. Permanent ownership, rather than temporary appropriation, is probably only possible for a few privileged classes. Han's work is like entering what is both a landscape and an interior space, which lacks the feeling of stability of the internal and external landscapes of previous periods. The landscapes of previous periods have a definiteness that suggests that not only the objects but even the people therein are where they ought to be.

Recall *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, in which the color blue has not faded despite the passage of centuries. That is what feels reassuring when we look at a traditional work of art. An important artistic school that changed this fixedness into something fluid was impressionism. The spots of analytical color that float like particles of dust in the sky create an image by alternating each second between combination and dissolution. The impressionists colored shadows in blue, rather than the brown tones of previous periods. Even though the impressionist painters observed nature more closely than the painters of previous periods, they helped establish the independence of formative language by separating it from its referents. That departed from the tradition of fixedness and reflected the fluidity of modern society and modern sensibilities. The abstract paintings composed of blue planes that appear in Han's work are probably the culmination of the revolution that began with the impressionists. The columns of text that are added there further emphasize the planarity. For people today who cannot occupy a large space either through appropriation or ownership, changing spaces is preferable to actual movement.

Objects that are employed to convey stories that are different each time will change, and their arrangement will vary as well. Since the story will continue to be told, the chosen objects and their arrangement are variable from the outset. The items that Han has employed to tell her story, including texts, are placed at intervals like stepping stones. The objects' sparse arrangement produces a roominess that is not solely the result of the exhibition space's large size. It is a vacuum that is designed to enable transformation—in the manner of a text that is written in poetry, not prose. Even if it is not poetry, a message with no spaces between the letters is impossible to deliver. If a narration is based on time, empty space is the potential that is allotted to chronological progression. This work, which is in a dialogic relationship with the entire space, is not merely physical, but symbolic. A space that has been constructed symbolically may not lead to an act as grand as laying a foundation stone, but it can serve as a base camp on the way to the new world to which one must proceed. Han's artwork, which tends to

encompass the entire space provided her, is connected with the basic human act of (re)building a symbolic universe. This is communicated in a style that may be aesthetic, but hardly decorative.

Han adapts to the size of the space, folding her work when it is small and unfolding it when it is large. Depending on the piece, it need not have a style that encompasses the entire space (such as in the private exhibition held at Gallery Baton this February). But in this exhibition, which opened in the middle of the summer, Han transposes a city that is as hot as the desert into a blue space. The color blue has a cold feeling to it. In *The Temptation of Colors*, Eva Heller argues that blue's cold feeling is based on our experience with our skin and lips turning blue from the cold. Ice and snow also give off a blue light. Blue is colder than white, because white signifies light while blue signifies shadow. Eva said that because blue opens up a space visually, we get the feeling of a rush of cold air. In the exhibition space, 9-meter-long strips of cloth made of a cool material dangle and sway in the air blown by a fan. These long strips of cloth transpose this vast blue room into a deep space. If the sea is deep, so are the dark blue evening and early morning. The round lights hanging from the wall evoke the chill of the moon.

Since it can be seen anywhere in the world, the moon is the symbol of nostalgia. The moon is more sensitive to temporality than the sun, and Han arranged round lights (which she managed to buy off the rack because they were just the right size) to impart a feeling of breathing. The moon that the lights throw on the opposite wall enhances the feeling of openness. The black umbrellas lying in the corners and hanging from the ceiling mask the light of the bare bulbs, which give off warmth, and create indirect lighting. The round lights on the wall evoke the moon, but the lights that use umbrellas evoke a chandelier. There is no distinguishing inside and outside. What is related to the pieces in previous "blue" exhibitions is the color blue, of course, as well as light and sound. What is different is the addition of poetic texts. To be sure, these exhibitions have always featured Han's notebooks, including ideas about her work, but it is only in the past few years that text has functioned as an important formative element in her work. The subtitle of the exhibition, "Fear Me Not," is included in the text formed by neon lights (which have an antique look now that they have given way to LED lamps). The text, hanging crookedly, can be seen from a distance, like a sign glowing in a dark city.

Fear is essential to an artist's existence. As Han observes, this is linked to the guilt she feels (as an artist, she must endure or enjoy eternal childhood) for "not feeling more comfortable as I age like I'm supposed to feel." The texts constituting the exhibition's subtitle ("Fear Me Not") and its formative elements (that is, "big room, big blue, big plane, and lines, dots") are jumbled up, with only their colors being different. The glowing blue and yellow texts bestow the relationship of light and shadow to form

and content. The installation pieces, which are composed of planes with sharp edges, risk looking like outmoded modernism, in the manner of hard-edge abstraction. There is a tradition in modernism of rationally calculating formal techniques to create the most painterly of paintings. But formalism (the process of reifying the pliable form created from new content) can easily degenerate into sophisticated decoration. The texts that Han has added to installation pieces occupying entire spaces since 2014 are designed to surpass the visuality that was reified by modernism. In this exhibition, text is not just a clumsy means of resorting to words to convey what cannot be shown visually.

The texts that have been materialized through a variety of materials stimulate not only visuality but also temporality. Given the difference between the categories of space and time, text is not secondary to the exhibition but central to it. Temporality is required to read letters that are arranged in a row. In this space, metal rods suspended from the ceiling move like the pendulum of a clock, and the LED lamps attached to the end of the rods play on the acrylic mirrors that are spaced out on the floor to create a diffuse reflection, endowing the moon-shaped lights with the rhythm of breathing. The space itself is activated by time. Then there are the computer-produced sounds that play on speakers and echo throughout the space. The temporality expressed through movement is created by physical and symbolic mechanisms. Temporality is an important element in contemporary art, which attempts to transcend the classical and modern spaces that require one-point perspective or decisive moments. The blue that Han chose for this exhibit, the difference implied in that infinite color series, is itself a chronological concept. Temporality on a higher level is found in the theatricality of the installation pieces.

Han's work prioritizes the perceptual experience that is imminent every moment after viewers enter this vast blue space. Even the planes that look like monochrome paintings have a gradation that gives them a virtual motion. This gradation (which is to say a colored surface) applies both to the planes and to the texts. There are gaps, just as Han's poetic texts are not complete sentences but are instead scattered throughout the entire space. "But it is continuum in solitude," as one of these poetic texts says. This is like music that accounts for echoes or the empty space in Asian paintings. Sprinkled behind the text on the fluttering cloth is blue glitter. A staircase-shaped object is hanging from that, turning the blue glitter that has fallen below it into the "light from abyss" that appears in the poetic text. [Atoz1] Language itself is grounded in the separation of signifier and signified. The stranding of signifiers is even worse in poetry than in prose. In this exhibition, blue serves as a medium connecting things that are separated, including text. Since the network of elements is more important to Han than the individual elements themselves, her work only provides the points of the network that each viewer will connect differently,

rather than expressing the subject or reflecting the object. It is then that blue serves as an ample backdrop on which all things can float, as if in the sky or the sea.