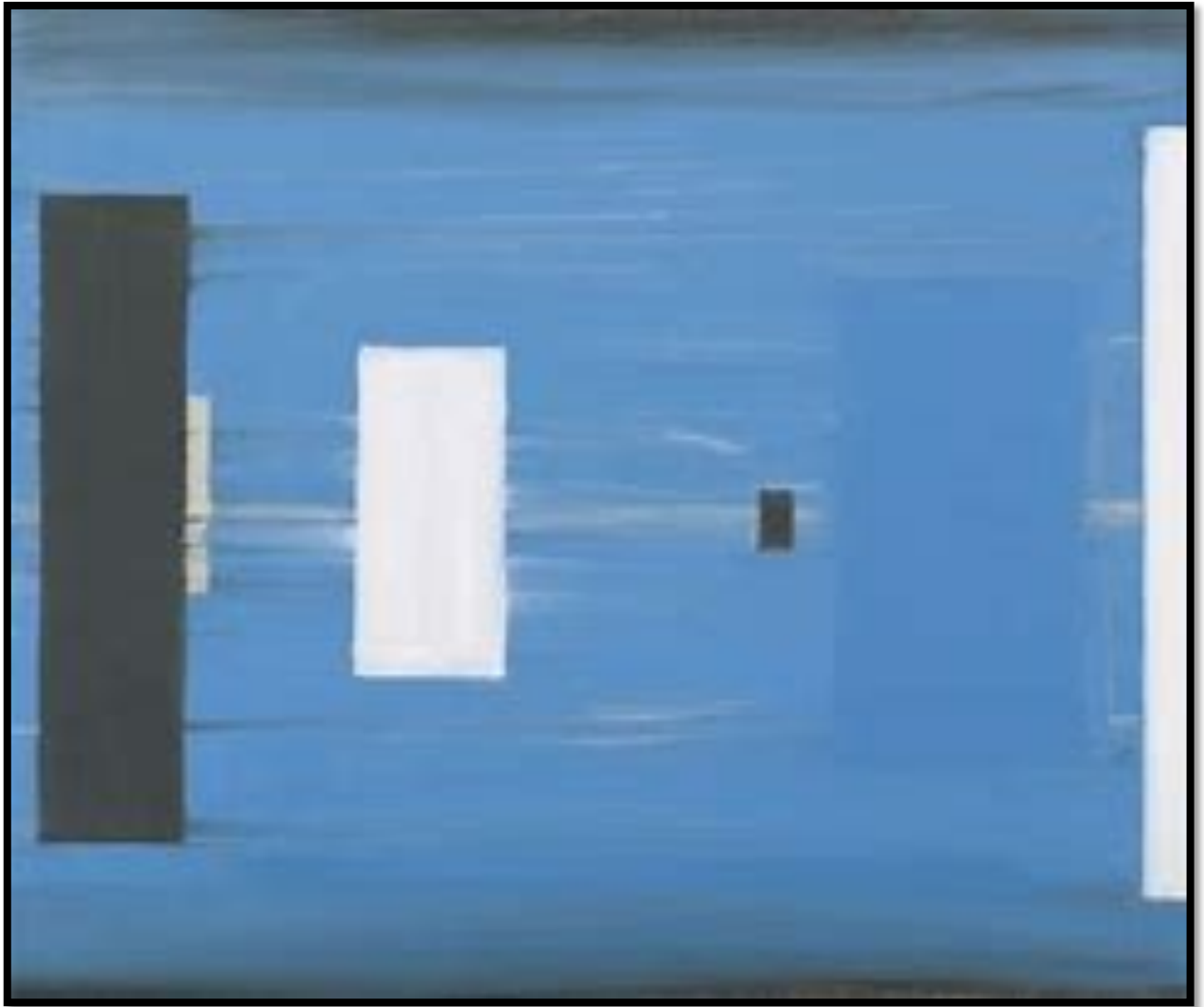


# “VICKEN PARSONS’ BLUE”<sup>1</sup>

CÉCILE VOISSET



« Untitled » – 2017, Oil on wood, 21 x 25 cm (1721)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Here is the second text about the Britain artist (she was born in 1957), the first was released in an online French review (*Plastir*, n°59/12/2020) <http://www.plasticites-sciences-arts.org/PLASTIR/Voisset%20P59.pdf> « Vicken Parsons: "Breath" » (exposition à la Cristea Roberts Gallery, Londres : 13 février- 21 mars 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Exhibited canvas in 2020 (Cristea Roberts Gallery).

*“I’m passionate about colour... Colour is everything.  
Blue is the colour I aspire to, it is space. I have the  
sensation of diving into it.”*  
(V. PARSONS, 2019)

The Parsons foreword, the exergue below, appears at the very outset of Cristea Roberts Gallery’s online exhibition (viewing room 19 March-5 April 2021)<sup>3</sup> where we can see and appreciate, consider, eight blue paintings the Britain artist made during last winter.

Blue as a remedy, an occasional medicine to lockdown? The life-color, one lively touch? How can we explain such a preference or choice? Unless blue is definitively her favourite color. But why only now exhibiting it? The first hypothesis seems to be the right one if we stress that blue in those latest works is the opposite of black, darkness (as opening is the opposite of closing). Indeed it just seems to. Yes blue is her color, blue is hers; listen to her: « If you were to ask me what my favourite colour is I’d say blue. But years go by when I can’t work with it at all and then, suddenly, there it is again. I think I need for blue has emerged with this bleak winter lockdown, a need for the sensation of infinite space, somewhere for the mind to go while physical life is isolating and constrained. I realized this in retrospect when I found myself surrounded by this group of blue paintings in the studio.” (2021)

So the color-title speaks for an atmosphere, expresses suitable surroundings; such as a climate (the weather metaphor), a named one: blue. Here is then the Gallery comment on these latest blue canvas: over the winter months, she produced

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<sup>3</sup> Cf the link: <https://cristearoberts.com/viewing-room/36-vicken-parsons-blue-online-viewing-room/>

a new body of blue paintings from her studio in Norfolk. These newly exhibited works are small in scale (it's her stamp), painted in thin layers of oil on wood; they depict a series of architectural spaces which feel large and endless, despite of their size.

Sure they inspire respite as well as escape; restful is her blue. Parsons skills are involved in a potential conversion (it seems too) by different ways and meanings in so far colour(ing) can be synonymous with opening. Here are some paradoxes of the artist within her artwork or by it. First of all, blue is supposed (we are taught in school) to be a "cold color". Not at all in that very case: diving in blue, or in ocean? For Parsons' work or from her vision, at least concerning these last works, blue is a dominant color: the main one, the tonal one, the sweet (smooth) one.

As usual, she processes with a three-colored base; it's her chromatic spectrum. The primary blue, and generally the two secondary ones by contrast for expressing depth: black-white/black-grey (a bit of light orange, sometimes like flesh-colored). As usual, a thin line (border), a vertical one (a trickle) appears as an add on one of those panels as elements of an inner space or own room (a homelike one), an inside stage. We can name such a space an "intensive space"; for it does not refer to an outside, a mere material world (with things); no "denotation", just a safe creative and free space.

What do the eight blue canvas have then in common? How is blue (which one is it?) each time V. Parsons worked at it, shaped it? Is it the same one with its gradients (or rays, light degrees, shades, like gradients)? Actually it's not a dark blue, it's not really a pale one neither. Vicken Parsons'blue is a deep blue, a solid color; a light one too (a clear one, such a clarity if we think about ocean imagery as well as about sky when the weather is steadily nice).

Richard Morphet comments (2016)<sup>4</sup> Vicken Parsons' color, as Cristea Roberts Gallery reports it, a comment I think is a right vision or an acute watching on such a dear colour for her, really hers: "Parsons has a special feeling for a deep and radiant blue which through used by her to represent interior spaces, has the substance and infinity of the summer sky. Calming, even enveloping, it's also sings." Yes "radiant" is Parsons'blue: a light rather than bright blue which expresses sweetness or quietness, an "affect" (what she feels and represents by itself) which her skills makes a "percept" (her translated feeling, her own artistic one)<sup>5</sup>. So: a tone, like a sound. A living, a vivid, a deepened color.

A light one, a sunny, summer-like one. We have a good, sounded impression, we feel a favourable influence, like a comfortable feeling when our eyes linger on such a blue. Impression or sensation of well-being. I add that her blue looks like cotton, a (wool)-like one, something cosy or – maybe – home-coming, something familiar (already seen) that is a well-known one.

Let's observe, look further, go in deep such canvas, for their texture, like clothes with their woof (the weather metaphor is then linked with the weaver one). Striking is the picture of Parsons where we see her sitting, wisely working with her pencil, her eyes focusing as well as her mind setting on the task.... as if he worked at a loom: artistic and domestic can quite support such a comparison.

We see there her preparing, her making with her usual meticulousness. And now raises the second paradox: her (art) practice succeeds also to make blue (a

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<sup>4</sup> R. Morphet is an Art historian and curator who was born in 1938.

<sup>5</sup> On the Deleuzian difference between "affect", "percept" (and "concept"), cf next pages.

conventional or social-gender color too, an antiquated political order) a mark of her at the same time she deprives it from its coldness; so, what about womanizing blue?

To draw a parallel between Vicken Parsons, for her “breath” (her exhibition title last year in Cristea Roberts Gallery) and Mark Rothko for his “breathingness” explains what is or what does it mean that an experimenting space, even if her artwork is the opposite of his : on the contrary of her, he only painted large canvas to have, to catch the feeling and make his own one that he could move, advance in them...because of its very scale; indeed he claimed such a need for a feeling truth, and he justified such a choice : having the true deep feeling of an inner movement (“painting a little surface amounts to withdraw from lived-field, it means watching our own experimentations from an upper stage where regarding them at the same time as if it was by a narrowing glass. When you make a big scale work, you are further inside it. You aren’t able of understanding what you’re making.”)<sup>6</sup> But both painters seek for an inner space or own spatiality without references other than oneself one.

It’s not thus the color by itself or it’s not only color that matters in both those artworks (actually, Rothko has always said that he didn’t belong to the so-called “Color Field Painting”), it’s also space which is valued at the same time with and by color: a vision of a space which is not former to color (so which doesn’t fulfil a space) for a space appears, emerge with color and color put a space into life, shapes a space. Moreover, both artists ignore, each by their artwork, the opposition between figurative and abstract art; and both leave design for color: no former neither primary empty space, a ready one, but a space to inhabit, which involves...., like a process (the same for an artwork like a work in process....).

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<sup>6</sup> This is the translated quotation from a French book by Jacob Baal-Teshuva (*Mark Rothko, 1903-1970. Des tableaux comme des drames*, Taschen, 2003), the original one is found in the next pages.

The comparison can also convince us, regarding a color field painting legacy, that Vicken Parsons (a discrete, quiet, almost wise artist or an introvert if we consider her way of making) on one hand and Mark Rothko (an extrovert or loud talkative [he wrote and gave lectures] if we consider his big-scale choice for painting) on the other hand are like siblings – one the quieter, one the louder – in the tone or color (strength, like for sound as intensity) within a colouring or painting field (a space which does not exist without them).

So, while Parsons works in accordance with small spaces (or windows), she also and often applies a kind of border line (a written difference) as well as she brushes boundaries of her own space ; it's her limits sense which is inscribed by such an add with the thick pencil stroke as well as the thin one. The peculiar original practice of her, with its effect: a cathartic blue, a sweet peaceful one (while Rothko, perhaps with a same cathartic purpose, used colors – he said it – with violence if we intend by that term a strong feeling of them (life by itself). Two tones, but tones; and an emotional spectrum.

A brief study of Vicken Parsons'Blue reminds us that “color vibrates”, as Gilles Deleuze had demonstrated in *What is Philosophy?* In the last chapter on “Percept, Affect, and Concept”<sup>7</sup>, the French philosopher assumes that color is sensation and artwork a “bloc of sensations” (color or tone, like music or painting), not a perception (color doesn't refer to anything, to an outer) but a “percept”; it exceeds formulaic or prosaic life. In that sense, Parsonsian blue turns perception into a “cosmic sensibility” (Deleuzian word); her need or sensation of diving into blue, the

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<sup>7</sup> G. DELEUZE, with F. GUATTARI, *What is Philosophy?* (chapter 7), Translated by H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell, New York : Columbia University Press, 1994.

calm and refreshed one during a tough winter, witnesses for such a vision of modern art. She is right in the middle of blue.

Vicken Parsons'Blue cannot be a period of the artist (a color which has been associated to some painters according to moments of their life) even if she is devoted to it, or more specifically she expresses a basic need of doing that; for she explicitly says that that color is the one she yearns, her predilection. Blue is therefore an affect *and* a percept, a depicted state of mind as well as a true feeling, so her frame of mind.

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### *Correspondences*

*Nature is a temple where living pillars  
Let sometimes emerge confused words;  
Man crosses it through forests of symbols  
Which watch him with intimate eyes.  
Like those deep echoes that meet from afar  
In a dark and profound harmony,  
As vast as night and clarity,  
So perfumes, colors, tones answer each other.  
There are perfumes fresh as children's flesh,  
Soft as oboes, green as meadows,  
And others, corrupted, rich, triumphant,*

*Possessing the diffusion of infinite things,  
Like amber, musk, incense and aromatic resin,  
Chanting the ecstasies of spirit and senses.*

— Geoffrey Wagner, *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire*  
(NY: Grove Press, 1974)

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COLOURING, TUNING

[ADDING]

Why such an add ? Because it deals with echoes – *correspondences* – by which scents (perfumes : fragrance), colo(u)rs and tones (sound) respond to each other. Indeed the starting-point, the reason of that add, is a famous poem of Charles Baudelaire regarding of which you can read and appreciate its American translation.

Actually, the French poet was also a translator (not only of E. Poe) as he attended (and commented) exhibition Halls and was interested in painting as well as in Modernity. After all, what is poetry? Music by words ? Evocations, analogies, renderings ? This Baudelaire poem exemplifies what kind of universe can stem from affection – affect & percept - as a whole, that is as many bridges between writing, painting, sounding. Vicken Parsons' Blue, when we watch her artwork as well as we listen to her (pay attention to her own declarations), is an experienced real-life which witnesses for such a vision of art.