

# *Wheels of Birds*

by

Dana Kinstler

Clogged/ only with/ Music, like/ the Wheels of Birds  
their high/ Appoint/ ment/ Afternoon and/  
the West and/ the gorgeous/ nothings  
which/ compose/ the/ sunset/ keep  
—Emily Dickinson, *Envelope Poems*

In *Luminous Flux*, at Cadogan Gallery in Milan, Elise Ansel presents 14 radiant, glowing paintings evenly divided into two sets of sevens: the *Woman in Blue* series inspired by Johannes Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* (c.1663) and the *Woman in Red* paintings which spring from Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Donor* also known as the Cornbury Park altarpiece (1505). The paintings of each color vary in size and lined up feel like a devotion to chroma and paint. Ansel entwines a love for painting with a deep reverence for narrative and melds these forms together in a complex, innovative dialogue between her paintings and those by the Old Masters. She opens up possibilities, in little explosions of color and brushwork.

Each painting in the series— Ansel calls them “iterations”—are variations, like Steve Reich's “Music for 18 Musicians” in which each section plays off the last one in a seamless but changed style, using slightly different notes and tempos which create distinct pieces yet are still connected to each other within the body of the work. Like Monet, who painted his Haystacks and the Cathedral at Rouen multiple times at different times of day, trying to capture the light as it changed, she unveils and illuminates with her iterative abstractions.

“I enter into Old Master paintings and the stories they depict through the lens of color. To create a deeper distillation, I focus on the purely visual

(chroma, value, structure) while at the same time allowing for improvisation and accident," Ansel says.

The first four of the *Woman in Blue* series retain the original compositional feel of the Vermeer. In the Vermeer, the woman stands to read a letter in her hand. Excitement rises her up. She won't sit. Anticipation in that reading. She stands over a table, direct sun hitting her face; the window is to her left, as is customary in Vermeer paintings. In her pale blue tunic, she appears pregnant. Overhead, an enormous map (Holland and surrounding area). The light on her is golden, a warm light, and the map behind her darker ochre. This is get-out-if-you-could light, seek-the-world-from-beyond-the-window light, read-and-dream light; maybe: you're-trapped-indoors-forever -- that light.

In *Woman in Blue II* the woman's body is divided into two different blues – a deep marine blue with a light blue over it and white, the light striking her from the window. The thick brush strokes are grainy, as if we see Ansel pushing the brush down, trailing the remaining paint on the brush across the canvas to create wispy veils. The pale blue sheen goes down over the heavy brown desk but its edges crumble as if encountering the desk makes it disintegrate. It also appears light is coming from inside the desk. It's as if the desk is an extension of her tunic, but it's sheer and the light shines through the scraped away paint. Overhead are two crossed wands of light. Ansel pulls the light into the room using these veils of paint, while still honoring the cut-away shapes in the original Vermeer.

In *Woman Blue III*, the light now casts a diffuse light over the desk. The map now green, like a fertile earth, hangs over the woman who is curvy and feminine, as if the masculinity of the world pervades the room, a symbol of the Dutch hegemony in the sea. The straight edge of the map accentuates the presence and power of the female form. Elise's technique of scraping, layering, then taking away again adds to a tension already in the room.

Why are women so often painted reading? Viewing Ansel's work, I ask questions I haven't considered before, the abstraction flips the images around, and the painter, female, is on the other side of the easel. Through writing and reading, women create a separate self and escape. In the different versions, it's as if Elise puts blue filters on a camera lens, moving closer in, asking questions.

What's in the desk?  
Who's written the letter?

Maybe it was dropped off at the front door from a lover who penned it at a café, or maybe he's on a ship.  
Will she write back? Is it a secret missive?  
It glows like a love letter.

There is a wildness in the three paintings, *Woman in Blue VI, VII and VIII*. Painted in blue and yellow, it feels like the center wants out. Ansel is moving now, inside the room, now on the canvas, from inside one of her paintings, brush in hand; she has climbed in the window, hovering with her paintbrush-wand -- no need to break the glass. Elise is spinning inside the Vermeer, as if dancing inside the painting with shades of blue: sky and sun and sea, meditations on blue. The essence of blue, the Out of the Blue, airletter blue, interview suit blue. Reliable blue. True blue. Blue moods. The blue of the veil. Dressing in blue: Nordic blue, Scandinavian blue – the dark grey-blue of the water around Narragansett Bay down at the bottom of the hill in Providence, Rhode Island. Baltic sea blue, from the waters which surround Denmark, the country of Ansel's mother and kin.

The *Woman in Blue* paintings are inspired by a painting of an interior whereas the seven *Women in Red* works spring from an exterior. Here the Madonna is outside, on display. She has a baby in her lap. She is surrounded by adoring men: St. Peter, St. Mark, and on his knees at her feet, a donor, who wears a royal purple robe and kneels. But Mary is not just in red; her top is in blue, the bottom of her skirt is in red. She wears a veil.

In Ansel's seven responses, she pulls from the colors of the robes. These are harvest paintings, in orange, red, and green. The red is passion, fecundity here; as if the Virginal Madonna that we see in blue is underneath, fiery with passion and love. But a flame is blue when we light it; and this juxtaposition of red and blue feels like an attempt to meld the two aspects of Divine Motherhood with female sexuality.

The bright red of Mary's dress and the dark eggplant of the donor's robes connect their physicality with their garments.

Ansel plays to the layers in the clothing, unfolds them. As if we see through the folds into the space beyond, into the experience in Mary's mind, on her lap, in her hand, on her fingers; and into the future; infinite story contained in the present moment of color.

In the Bellini, Madonna and child are featureless. Ansel transforms them into spiritual beings, illuminates her canvases with light and warmth; this is a glowing series of love and bounty.

Ansel uses paint with a physicality so that you feel her brushwork; it's as if you can see her brush dipping into the wet luscious batches of paint on the palette, raising them up and spreading them across the canvas. Her paintings tap into the joy of painting, the freedom of the play in it; you see it and you can feel it, hear it, it pushes and slides and the bristles open up. And when she creates a screen or a veil, there is a screen between you/the viewer and the subject: something to push aside, something to see through, a veil is a gauze which invites.

In her radiant series, Ansel makes the secular *Woman in Blue* divine and transforms the sacred *Woman in Red* into something earthy and warm.

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