

## Evocations of Output Forms

Anju Michele, *Imaginarium*

Review by Hasegawa Yuko

According to Le Corbusier, “A building is like a soap bubble. This bubble is perfect and harmonious if the breath has been evenly distributed and regulated from the inside. The exterior is a result of an interior.”

An activated space can only be explained by the pre-eminence of the interior. Our world is like a great soap bubble, infinitely subdivided, with cellular units overlapping and intersecting in all directions. On entering the gallery where Anju Michele’s work was on view, the first things that struck me were the transparency of the paintings, with their diffuse rhythms and buoyant gestures, and the impression of soap bubbles bouncing off silver surfaces.

Michele works in oil or acrylic on silver-colored aluminum paper. The paintings’ forms, which appear to be rendered with almost no hesitation, vibrantly preserve the motions of the hands and the touch of the brush. The process of placing the support on the floor and painting from above, without preliminary drawings, comes across not as the rendering visible of already conceived compositions or concepts so much as a complex and comprehensive action-performance incorporating the paint, the brushes, the silvery aluminum, and hands already in motion. All the actions and gestures become inscriptions, and these in turn become forms.

“Forms” is the term I will use here, although I might also follow Max Ernst and call them “figures.” They are not geometric shapes arranged into compositions, but forms set free to roam on the paintings’ surfaces. With the energy of a mass exodus, making their way irrepressibly toward freedom, one form leads to the next in an ongoing sequence. When one form appears, it is inevitably accompanied by another.

Assigning interpretations to forms constrains how our imaginations grasp them, and at the same time enables a variety of creative associations to emerge. A curator’s partially improvised on-the-spot commentary can stimulate viewers who are present, and stimulate the imagination in diverse ways. Perhaps the most appropriate way to respond to Michele’s work would be with a performance, like those the works entail, composed of words and

gestures. However, as I was asked to review this exhibition half a year after I saw it, I had already lost the words that bubbled up on the spot at the time. Still, my purpose in writing this text is to turn a reaction, to the effects of chance and temporal elements, into a proper description of the emergent order in the paintings.

There are two sources of the sense of freedom I experienced when I first viewed the exhibition.

Unlike other works, in which dots are connected in a network, the spherical (circular) forms in the work entitled *circle* possess mass. Michele has a hearing impairment, as well as psychological issues relating to formation of interpersonal relationships, and his world takes shape at a remove from the social negotiations and relationships in which we are immersed. However, it is not a closed world, and while connections to some things are blocked and restricted, other connections are more profound and keenly felt.

The spheres with which he operates are cells, each a miniature world, but not a self-enclosed universe. Today, the “filter bubbles” that surround people in the post-Internet generation are bubbles formed of information conveniently delivered by computer algorithms, membranes that block off the outside. This is one model of an ecosystem formed by networks, and such bubbles have been proliferating at an accelerating rate due to COVID-19 self-isolation.

In contrast to these “confining” bubbles, Michele shows a kind of sphere (*circle*) as a bubble that liberates.

In setting out to write this text, I first of all recalled the book *The Life of Forms* by the French art historian Henri Focillon (1881-1943). Focillon employs the concept of psychological tribes to suggest that categories of forms are analogous to human tribal or social groupings, and that all humanity is a single community united by forms, regardless of the environment or the era.<sup>1</sup>

This is an observation of the affinity between formal structures and psychological structures. Michele takes geometric forms (circles, triangles, rhombuses), zigzag-like forms, and biomorphic forms, makes them transparent and soft, and places them in luminous pictorial spaces. His works struck me as summoning, as if inviting to a tea party, the spirits of “psychological tribes” that have existed at different times throughout history.

Michele's works are modest in appearance and yet resemble catalysts of chemical processes, taking on vibrancy when reacting with their surroundings, or when in dialogue with envisioned tribal affiliates.

One member of the same tribe would be Blinky Palermo. The artist was a protégé of Joseph Beuys who died at the young age of 33 (Beuys used the term "porosity" to describe his work, which was that of a heretical disciple rather than a faithful follower). Palermo emphasized practice over concept. His works featured simple geometric shapes and spontaneous natural gestures realized in fabric, wood and metal and arrayed so as to organize spaces, or taking the form of wall paintings. His practice, which Roberta Smith described as "thinking outside the canvas,"<sup>2</sup> was a wide-ranging, free-form experiment with dispersal of forms and pictorial elements into the external world, and with the appearances of paints that change in various ways depending on the material to which they are applied.

Focillon notes that forms only emerge when there is exterior space around them.<sup>3</sup> Among the factors determining forms are their margins, and how we perceive the forms' surroundings. While Palermo's margins extended into the spaces around the works, Michele determines forms in relation to negative spaces within the picture plane. In *incident illumination*, a 1970s painting on aluminum by Palermo, the inherent luminosity of the aluminum's slick surface, and the paint atop it, manifesting forms resulting from smooth movements of the hand, take on a clear physical presence and have a juggling effect on our perceptions. This is highly similar to the effects of luminous painting surfaces and forms in Michele's *mediation*, *last frontier*, and *propagation*.

Another member of the same tribe would be Max Ernst, who represented the psychologically, mythically, and biologically intertwined forms of living things in his "figures." In Michele's work we sense a process of delicately recollecting, one by one, the primitive life that first emerged on the earth and its relationships to forms and symbols. Ernst's figures manifest multifarious elements: birds (including his recurring character Loplop) and other parts of the natural world, hybrid concepts fusing the human with historical background and psychology. Let us compare Michele's *floating organism* (2020) and Ernst's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1947). Of course, the forms in the former can be said to have affinities with Miro and Matisse. It may seem rather far removed from the lurking darkness, and the intimate but ambiguous and perilous relationship between the two forms (figures), in the latter. However, I was struck first of all by the affinity between these two images.

Michele's simplified symbolic forms contain inherent conflict and are permeated by darkness. Enigmatic, incantatory elements seize the hearts of viewers, emerging softly through veils of transparency and light.

These forms, accumulated in layers in the artist's physical being, awareness, and psyche, are finally output into the world and exert a complex purifying or evocative effect on the viewer. They remind us of "Hope," the final escapee in the exodus from Pandora's box.

1. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms* (new translation by Sugimoto Hidetaro), Heibonsha, 2009, p.138.
2. Roberta Smith, "Thinking Outside the Canvas," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2011. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/arts/design/blinky-palermo-retrospective-1964-1977-review.html>)
3. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms* (new translation by Sugimoto Hidetaro), Heibonsha, 2009, p.137.

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