

The Minimalist¹

By Stacey Richter

When even my white-on-white canvasses began to seem too representative, too ornate, when *Number 23* looked like a mouthful of chewed-up aspirin floating in a saucer of milk, I removed every piece of furniture from my studio except a chair, a table, and a bare futon. I discarded my paints. I took off all my jewelry and sat in the chair with my eyes closed and pictured a pure, even expanse of blue. It had no ripples or edges or scent or weight. It was more glassy and uniform than the calmest lake.

I found that I was very happy.

I wished to be naked. The

gallery owner said, No, but might that not be even more distracting than simple clothing? He wore a clipped black beard and a plain black pullover with his black jeans. On his feet were shiny lace-up shoes, in black. I respected his opinion.

I agreed to wear simple clothing, but no underwear. I sat in the chair in the center of the gallery and pictured blue. There was no other work in the room. An engraved plaque on the wall explained that the artist is holding a mental conception of a blue colorfield.

I wished to title the piece *Untitled*.

Peter, the owner of the gallery, suggested I call it *Self-Portrait in Blue*.

I finally decided to call it *Untitled (Picturing Blue)*.

At first they came to offer ridicule. Crowds of people filed past my chair, muttering insults. You call this art? they sneered. This is how the Impressionists² were received. And the Cubists.³ People brought their children and lifted them up, so they could get a clearer look. That's dumb,



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¹ In the visual arts and music, minimalism is a style that uses pared-down design elements.

² Impressionism is a 19th-century art movement that originated with a group of Paris-based artists. Impressionist painting characteristics include relatively small, thin, yet visible brush strokes, open composition, emphasis on accurate depiction of light in its changing qualities (often accentuating the effects of the passage of time), ordinary subject matter, inclusion of movement as a crucial element of human perception and experience, and unusual visual angles.

³ Cubism is an early-20th-century avant-garde art movement. In Cubist artwork, objects are analyzed, broken up and reassembled in an abstracted form—instead of depicting objects from

the children said, and their parents shushed them. But their faces assented. I closed my eyes and pictured blue. Sometimes I opened my eyes and pictured blue as well, a cool, mammoth glacier of it advancing across the floor. Yet more even and featureless than any glacier.

Yellow! The sun piled in through a high window one afternoon while a man in a baseball cap shouted this at



me: Yellow, baby! Yellow! There was a slit of belly bulging between the bottom of his shirt and the top of his pants, a fleshy strip of chaos.

I let my eyes sink shut and drifted deeper into the blue. Peter wished to erect a little metal fence around me. He said he was concerned that someone would touch me, or do me harm.

I said no. That would spoil everything.

I sat quietly all day. I was not bored. I was concentrating on my art. Sometimes Peter emptied the room briefly, so I could get up and move around. He brought me muffins or little avocado sandwiches on wheat bread. I hadn't asked for these breaks. I hadn't thought of it. I hadn't considered anything very seriously for quite a while, aside from my color.

I told Peter that the artist wished to spend nights in the gallery. I explained that it would help the artist to maintain the purity of the piece.

He gazed at me for a time, then said, But isn't the artist you?

I said that it was. His eyes were the color of blue ink dripped into still water.

He set up a cot in the office area for me and stayed until after midnight the first night, tidying up, bringing me towels, and making sure I was warm enough. Then he sat quietly at his metal desk, leafing through a stack of papers.

He told me he had made sure all the bedding was the exact same shade of eggshell white. He was very beautiful and kind. I thought he must be gay.

I slept poorly.

During the day attendance records were set at the gallery. Some of the people who visited were moved by the piece. Some of the people bought paintings that were for sale in other rooms.

one viewpoint, the artist depicts the subject from a multitude of viewpoints to represent the subject in a greater context.

Critics wrote of the intense spiritual calm. They spoke of a reemergence of the aura.⁴ A writer from a women's magazine wrote a review of my clothing.

It was favorable.

Peter's photo was in a magazine. As was mine.

It began to grow warmer. The sun hit my chair in the afternoon. I started to picture a sweaty, Caribbean blue. I slept poorly. I dreamed of a turquoise ocean melting into a cerulean sky. From the water leapt fish, thousands of them, silver and gleaming and flying like knives tossed by the handful into the waves.

When I awoke I was trembling. My hands smelled of salmon. I went into the gallery and sat in my chair. It was very early. I thought that I would try to think of a plain expanse of smooth cobalt.

When Peter entered, he looked startled. He asked me if anything was wrong.

I gazed into his pale eyes. I told him I didn't have anything else. I had the blue and the openness of it. I told him that if it came to mean something, I would be lost.

He looked like he was going to smile, but then his face changed and became rather tense. He took my hand gently, as though I were very frail.

For the rest of the day I sat in the chair and battled to regain a pure field of blue. Yet it kept dissolving into an ocean pierced by schools of fish. Above was a cloudless palette of sky. I tried to use my mind to scrape it all down into a powder that would spread out into a uniform layer the color of toilet bowl cleaner.

The fish continued to leap.

After the gallery closed, Peter handed me a hinged box that fit neatly into my palm. A present, he said. Inside was a single layer of ball bearings that filled the bottom precisely. It was so simple and lovely. I began to weep.



I knew I was no longer capable of producing *Untitled (Picturing Blue)*. And if that were so, I would have to leave the gallery, and so leave Peter. He had been very kind.

That night when. I closed my eyes, I dreamed of the fish. They sprang from waves and wriggled in the air like live wires. Then they turned their noses downward and slipped beneath the surface, into an airless place where

⁴ the distinctive atmosphere or quality that seems to surround and be generated by a person, thing, or place

I couldn't follow. I wondered if they were jumping toward something, or away.

I believed myself to be in love.

The next day, I sat quietly, hands folded in my lap, struggling to picture blue. Whenever I tried to locate the purity of my color, I found my mind leapt to create a world instead. There was the Easter egg blue of a gingham⁵ dress I'd loved as a little girl, blowing on a clothesline. There was the stinging azure of the Pacific as I floated on a wave, surrounded by kelp; there was the faded blue of my old Volkswagen Beetle, broken down beside the road. Then there was the pale turquoise of a swimming pool where I was once knocked cold by a diver-- an endless, underwater blue where hair oozed like tentacles through a fading silence. And after that, the midnight, star-shot indigo of unconsciousness.



Each idea of color pushed open a door, and inside was a snapshot, a tale, a fragment of my life.

I was no longer picturing blue. Blue was picturing me.

I waited in the office. Peter came to me wearing a simple gray suit. On the lapel was an enamel button, a glossy blue lozenge.

I told him I'd failed. I said that the artist was no longer conceiving of a pure colorfield. I was trembling as I confessed. I would lose him, I knew.

I continued anyway. I told him that I'd encountered all unexpected richness within the blue. I said that despite my initial impressions, I'd come to believe it was protean⁶ and full of life. Even emptiness, I said, contained more. Particularly emptiness.

I said I thought there was no such thing as minimalism. He had those calm eyes that I so loved. He said, Oh, but I thought. Then he stopped. He said that perhaps he had misunderstood the piece, slightly.

I admitted that it was possible.

I packed my things. There was very little to pack.

It struck me that Peter's beard was a little stringy that day, his clothing somewhat rumpled. I thought that perhaps he was a bit sad. He asked me to come back and pay him a visit sometime. He made me promise.

The chair was the artist's own. I left the building and walked down the street with it propped against my shoulders. It was quite heavy. I pictured how I must look, striding down the sidewalk with an empty chair hanging over my head.

That was all then. A woman, a street, an empty chair carried aloft.

⁵ lightweight plain-woven cotton cloth

⁶ tending or able to change frequently or easily