

Tamina Amadyar
out of the blue

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Summer Days in the House of Friends

by Andreas Prinzing

Poetry starts where meaning ceases.

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Plane, train, bus. It is hot, and increasingly empty. I disembark shortly before the border. Caviano, Ticino. This sleepy nest is still part of Switzerland, but language and culture don't care much about borders. It's Italian that shapes day-to-day life here. I begin to climb, searching for a house that crouches within the green of the steep slope, the serpentine route leaving me somewhat out of breath. If you ever want to leave Berlin behind, the key lies under the stone, I hear a voice saying in my head. I arrive sweaty, and step into the semi-darkness of a cool hallway. Silence surrounds me – along with a smell that abruptly invokes memories of childhood holidays. The mixture of anticipation and curiosity. Hot, dreamy days, when time stretched out endlessly. And ultimately, the melancholy of the farewell. Hazy reminiscences of places and atmospheres resound and echo. Everything is new here, yet so much seems strangely familiar.

Once the shutters are opened, the sun streams aslant into the house. I step out onto the balcony and squint into the light. A light wind. Slowly the gaze widens, gliding along the wooded slopes of the opposite shore, following the crest of a mountain ridge. Above is the deep blue sky, below it the lake, stretching out like a huge mirror. The mountains are a stratified archive of time, formed by glacial melt water. Sky, earth, water. Shapes and light, all bathed in gradations of blue. The eye wanders, scans textures. The landscape, radiating calm and clarity, is created in the mind. Occasional clouds pass by, tousled and languid, casting their shadows onto the gently rippling water. Beneath that sparkling surface, a cool, indeterminable depth opens.

As I soak up the continually changing image, I have to think of Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2006). In this collection of essays, Solnit wanders through external and internal landscapes and reflects on the color blue as a space for emotional resonance: "The world is blue at its edges and in its depths.[...] [It is] the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains.[...] Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world."

The blue of the landscape opens an immaterial space that can only be entered visually. A presence that evades while simultaneously marking an unbridgeable distance. In spite of what we may know about physics and the diffusion of light, a strange magic always emanates anew from the distant radiance of the sky and the water. Nor does an explanation of the phenomenon detract from its magic. Can't the same also be said of a good painting?

A steep path leads down to the lake. A small strip of land that runs into the water. In the distance are the silhouettes of two stand-up paddlers. I feel my way over the slippery rocks until the ground disappears beneath my feet. Diving into a wide-open space. Lightness, almost like floating. Then back to the shore. The water breaks against a wall in gentle, rhythmic waves. Fragments of words drift by, swirling with the voices and images in my head. Past and present, outside and inside blur together. And there, suddenly, are the light-flooded paintings of Tamina Amadyar, whose Kreuzberg studio I visited the week before. The atmosphere of this landscape has evoked them, brought them closer.

„A color has many faces“, writes Josef Albers. If this is true, Tamina Amadyar works out her changing facial expressions in close-up. Her paintings impart dynamic gestures to color, letting them dance and vibrate like living bodies. Using pure pigment bound in rabbit-skin glue, Amadyar creates electrifying color landscapes of indeterminable depth. The surface itself – transparently primed, and left partially blank – is always an element of the composition. Without exception, the primarily large-format canvases never present more than two colors at a time. In a seemingly weightless manner, the two chosen colors activate eye and space equally on the limited terrain of the canvas. On occasion they may wrestle with one another, but in a playful way. Touch can also mean friction. While the compositions are clearly laid out, flow is created primarily within the color forms and the areas of transition. Depending on the choice of color and the brushwork, what results are paintings through which the eye wanders and others through which it is breathlessly chased. Brushstrokes that lie gently across a canvas. And highways of perception along which the gaze races, changing direction without ever coming to rest.

The paintings are a celebration of light. They are created on the floor in a rapid process that blends consideration and intuition, tension and release. A calculated loss of control, no corrections possible. The bases of these works are casual sketches made by felt-tipped pen and the occasional mobile phone photo. Extracts of everyday life. From a continuous flow of impressions, Tamina Amadyar plucks out whatever gets caught in the net of her subjective awareness: landscapes, spatial constellations, or an object. These find their way into her sketchbooks, which function as both visual diaries and repositories of images, holding a voluminous trove of colors and forms at the ready. A flotsam of motifs that she may only draw upon years later, in a process of translation, reduction and fragmentation. Everything gets passed once again through her filter.

At first glance, Amadyar's works appear closely related to color field painting and the post-painterly abstraction of the 1950s and '60s. But they speak their own language. While the protagonists of post-war U.S. abstraction were mostly concerned with cutting all ties to an external reality in favor of an autonomous work of art, Tamina Amadyar works along different lines. Sure, the painting must function as a painting. But the small anchors that connect the pictorial space with her own experiences of reality, as well as those of the viewer, are of central importance. It is through precisely this referential trace that her work is loosely connected with a more recent line of tradition in painterly practice. Despite differing styles, techniques and questions posed, a visual spirit prevails here, an autobiographically grounded one, that is comparable to Mary Heilmann, Raoul de Keyser or Vivian Suter.

Occasionally, reproductions give the impression of being small, quick color studies on paper. They seem to radiate spontaneity, a sketch-like quality. This may be due to the interplay of loose gestures, simple form and a reduced color scheme on a

canvas that is left partially bare. When one faces the paintings, the proportions shift. A blow-up. Even in Tamina Amadyar's most recent works, the viewer does not encounter any complex compositional structures or formal elements. Until now, Amadyar frequently concentrated on very few constellations of form, playing with these – albeit with some deviations – in different variations of color and proportion. Despite the limitations, the resulting work had something playful about it, and open, far removed from the serial deconstruction of specific image parameters in analytical painting. With her new paintings, almost all of which are in portrait format, the repertoire of forms has grown and the operational framework has expanded once more. Succinct, signet-like forms appear, resonating with a pinch of pop. This is especially so when the pictures are hung closely together and begin to get in each other's way like siblings with different temperaments, which thwarts contemplation of an individual painting in isolation and counteracts its aura-like charge.

living room (2020) is an eye-catcher, signal-like. With its intense cadmium red, wrapped around with a band of bottle green, it forms its own direct counterpart. A painting with a heartbeat that simultaneously lures and rebuffs the viewer. But its emblematic conciseness, the brash coloring and compact form with which it lures, are deceptive: The work refuses any clear message. Not a stop sign, but rather a springy trampoline. The broad line that loosely encloses the luminous color field, nearing the edge of the painting in doing so, forms neither a circle nor an octagon but something in between. Nor does Tamina Amadyar's other work contain any strictly geometrically constructed figures. What predominates is the organic; those who look for right angles or symmetries will seek in vain. Something is always longer, shorter, wider or narrower, and it is precisely this that breathes life into the paintings, in addition to the irregular brushwork. It is through the small deviations in form that the works acquire their unmistakable identity. And what appears at first glance to be centered never actually is upon closer examination, but shifts slightly adrift through the framework of the canvas.

Despite its pronounced contours, *living room* does not come across as static. Rather, it is more like a state that is only momentarily fixed. The broad, energetic strokes at the center almost seem like the creation of a paint roller. As the pigment density decreases towards the edges and to the left of the painting's center, the canvas partially flashes through and the color hints at the presence of depth. Opaqueness gives way to a subtle transparency; an organic corridor seems to lead into the interior of the energy field. The title refers to the central space of a home, a place of togetherness. It complements the warm tone of the painting and links it with Amadyar's recently created watercolors. Titles always play an important role for her. They function as additional notes, she says, suggesting a direction, giving the paintings an airstream in which to move.

If Amadyar's works were literature, they would not be prose, but rather haiku. With their condensed chords of color, the paintings can easily be related to poetry, another mode of evoking a great deal in condensed form, combining matter of fact expressions with the evocative power of words. If one runs further with this thought, the poetry of William Carlos Williams, for example, comes to mind. A leading figure of the *Imagist* movement, the American writer pleaded in the 1920s for the liberation of poetry from its metric corset and its emancipation from traditional models. Williams created poetry grounded on factuality that operates with an economy of means. A country doctor by profession, he found his motifs in everyday objects and slices of life in small towns, which he transformed into verbal images with lean, precise words: concentration

over digression, simplicity over metaphor, surface over depth. The best-known of his poetic snapshots, which Williams also described as *glimpses*, reads:

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

Those lines contain all that a poem needs, black on white. In just a handful of words, *The Red Wheelbarrow* (1923) draws a closely framed slice of reality. It could hardly be more minimalist, and even after almost ninety years, the raindrops still gleam freshly on the red-painted wheelbarrow while the chickens continue to peck. Yet the closer we examine the poem, the more unclear the scene becomes before our inner eye. Ultimately, it remains a picture of vast openness. As do all the other everyday snapshots Williams penned, whether his gaze was focused on broken bottles, icebox plums or his neighbors.

The small-format watercolors that Tamina Amadyar has been creating since the beginning of this year revolve similarly around their immediate surroundings. Speed is decisive in this medium, which thus offers a rather ideal playing field for an artist with an appreciation for the irregular and any moment that runs contrary to rigidity. The dilute paint leads an expansive life of its own, leaving an even greater role to chance. Each work of watercolor is an experiment with an open ending. It is the letting go that makes the technique as appealing as it is difficult to master. What seems at first to be a leap is more so a consistent continuation of Amadyar's painting practice. Figurative elements suddenly appear, and with them a narrative dimension. The tightly limited color radius undergoes an expansion as well. But haven't there been interior spaces in her paintings before, even if they were devoid of people? And an enormous variety of colors in her sketchbooks?

While the artist's elemental connection to personal experience is expressed only indirectly in her paintings, unencrypted moments from her private environment flow into her watercolors. The focus here is on ordinary, rather incidental situations and subjects, which she captures first as photographs and later transforms into watercolor. Greetings or goodbyes; family members as they read, think and dance. In other words, the obvious moments that comprise our rarely exceptional everyday lives. Moments of activity alternate with those of rest and interior movement. What is central is the closeness to life – though the term should not be understood in the sense of an accurate rendering.

With interiors, portraits and still lifes, Amadyar's work ties in with pictorial genres that flourished in watercolor painting, especially in the 19th century. Rather than reprising their highly nuanced color gradations and delicate linework, she explores the expressive breadth of the medium with hasty lines, eruptive settings and soft dissolves. Some of the motifs shown

in excerpts and from a slight overhead perspective have the feel of melting snapshots that wish to reach and expand over the edge of the paper. Dramas of color, rich in effect, are played out in the details. The degree of abstraction of the human figure is accordingly high. Whether subjects can be identified is of no matter, for the watercolors are better described as portraits of moods. While many of the works evoke a cheerful atmosphere, a melancholy mood runs through *solli* (2020). The watercolor depicts a possibly sleepless figure sitting in bed in a slightly sunken stance, the head rendered as no more than two or three diffuse blots of color. The jagged hair of the figure virtually blends into the brown-toned wall in the background, which appears to depict a sense of inner restlessness in fraying patches of color. The scene looks as if it could dissolve into a blur at any moment. The genesis and dissolution of form alternate in a state of flux. In its instability, the sheet of paper comes across at the same time as a symbol for the ever fragmentary process of memory.

Tamina Amadyar's engagement with watercolor also has consequences for her painting practice. Isolated areas now emerge in her paintings in which the color takes on a life of its own and the broad, clearly contoured brushstrokes fray at their edges like a watercolor. This kind of effect, achieved by dilution, is also evident in parts of the landscape-format *blue world* (2020).

A painting like a summer day in CinemaScope. At the center, an azure-blue surface expands, embedded in swelling, cloud-like color fields of orange from which a warm glow emanates. A pulsating, complementary contrast. Neither of the colors stops at the sides of the frame, which has the effect of amplifying the scenery, evoking associations with a landscape. Isn't that a slope in the foreground, descending towards the water, while an elongated mountain in the background caps off the upper third of the painting?

Everything is in motion. While the outer contours of the two orange color fields run almost parallel to the edges of the frame, they swing in large arcs towards the center. A restless brushwork underscores the dynamics of the image. Blue lies horizontally across the piece in long, translucent swathes of color suggestive of gentle waves, covering the orange and making it gleam as if from an indeterminable depth. The areas where the two colors meet tend towards violet, rusty brown or greenish. The intensity of the color application vacillates widely. As both diminish towards the center of the canvas, the orange becoming almost salmon-colored and the blue drifting into turquoise, a moving zone of light is created that runs diagonally through the painting. A landscape bathed in sunlight. Looking at the lower third of the frame, one can imagine seeing through clear water all the way to the bottom, while the orange in the upper third, covered by blue, appears as a reflection of the presumed mountain. The three-part layout echoes a compositional pattern that Amadyar developed after a trip to the west coast of the United States in 2018. Here, tilted into the horizontal, the reading of a landscape is the immediate result. The color scheme and graphic simplification of *blue world* are somewhat too pop to allow for meditative immersion. And yet the piece reveals a cooling pull upon the viewer.

Anyway, the blue. It runs like a thread through Tamina Amadyar's visual world. Blue makes frequent appearances in the titles of her exhibitions, sometimes directly, as in *Big Blue Sky*, and sometimes indirectly, as with *Making Waves*. Her particular affinity to the color connects her in a certain way with Helen Frankenthaler, who likewise titled one of her paintings



Out of the Blue. Frankenthaler, one of the major players in getting color field painting off the ground in the middle of the last century, once said: “My pictures are full of climates, abstract climates and not nature per se, but a feeling. And the feeling of an order that is associated more with nature.” By coupling the analogy of weather with subjective perception, she refers to a dimension that is central to her work. A similar sensibility for color’s qualities of emotional expression, its vitality and sensuousness, also resounds from Tamina Amadyar’s paintings. The most powerful of her seemingly casually thrown together works catapult us into another place as effortlessly as a pop song, even as we remain bound to the here and now.

A deafening noise tears me away from my thoughts. A helicopter is gliding over the lakeshore, its rotor drawing concentric rings on the dark, threatening surface of the water. The temperature has dropped; the weather is on the brink of change. As I set out on my way, I recall to myself, humming softly, the last line of Neil Young’s *Out of the Blue*, which gets to the heart of how so much of what appears clear cannot be grasped with rationality alone: “There’s more to the picture than meets the eye.”

This text by Andreas Prinzing is taken from the catalog of the exhibition *out of the blue* by Tamina Amadyar.