



2.10 / Fortification

Conversation with Kim Anno

By Bruno Fazzolari *January 26, 2011*

Image: *Sheer*, 2010; oil on metal; 39 x 47 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Kim Anno is a painter, photographer, and video artist whose work has been collected by museums nationally and shown internationally. Born in Los Angeles, Anno is the chair of the painting program at California College of the Arts and has been a professor at the college since 1996. A recipient of the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation Purchase Award and the Eureka Foundation's Fleishhaker Fellowship, she was recently awarded a fellowship by the Zellerbach Foundation in support of her new interdisciplinary work.

The interview from which this conversation was excerpted took place in Anno's studio on December 13, 2010.

Bruno Fazzolari: I'm sitting with Kim Anno in her studio. Kim, you have a complex studio practice that includes painting, photography, bookmaking, and more recently, a significant body of work in video. You are also known as a committed activist. In 2009, you organized the Rising Tide conference, which brought together creative professionals, scholars, and students to engage in a dialogue about the intersection of ethics, aesthetics, and environmentalism. Many of the artists you included in that conference do work which might fall under the category of social practice; however, your work, and in particular, your painting, seems to be an exception to that.

Since 2005 you've been making abstract paintings on aluminum, which seem to reference, among other things, sublime landscape painting of the nineteenth century. While there are in fact many abstract artists who are committed activists, I would venture that people tend to think of abstraction as being separate, and even antithetical, to activism and politics. I wonder if you would start by talking a little bit about the ways in which you understand the intersection of abstraction and political activism in your practice.

Kim Anno: Being an abstract artist, you're always asking the viewer to participate in the experience of looking at the art work or being with the art work. Any kind of ambiguity causes the viewer to be a participant, and in certain ways, a collaborator of the art work. And that to me is political in itself because you're taking the power out of the hands of the artist and sharing it. Any time you share power, it's a political act.

BF: In Tirza Latimer's essay on your work, she quotes you as saying: "Content is important to me, but I want to leave the viewer free to decide what the content means." Latimer then writes: "Anno embraces abstraction because it resists the kind of interpretative closure that figuration might solicit."¹ Do you see abstraction as liberating in some way, and narrative as confining?

KA: I wouldn't say that narrative is confining. I don't want to counter-pose those two things. In doing a lot of photography and video recently, more concrete images arose in my work, and in a certain way, it was like a catharsis from the kind of restraint that I've had with my painting for so long. On the other hand, when I go back to painting now, I feel liberated from having to be so specific constantly, and I want to be much more stealthy. I think of my paintings as the site for stealthiness, as something that slips under the door or inside your consciousness before you really become completely aware of it—a kind of echo of the image.

BF: In 2007, you collaborated with the poet Ann Carson on the book *Sleep*, which included photographs of pigment and objects floating in water. The swirling pigment clouds merging with the water have a strong relationship with the swirling lines in your paintings. It's clear that water is important both as form and metaphor for you. In *Sleep*, water seemed to be a way of exploring the unconscious. More recently in the video work, water has a strong ecological association. In your paintings on aluminum, however, the swirling lines reference water in a different way. They recall the ways in which water is represented in a variety of landscape traditions. Is it a formal decision on your part to reference water? Is it accidental that this form continues to keep coming up for you?

KA: It's both accidental and it's intuitive. When I'm making the paintings, it comes out of an intuitive process that's loose and visceral, sensual, and bodily. When I'm making the photos and the video, dropping pigment into water, the overall metaphorical intention is more specific, but there is no control using the medium of water—whatever happens does. You just have to be present with that happening. The processes overlap quite a bit.



Sunset Heavens Ball, 2010; photograph; 36 x 30 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

BF: There seems to be a performative thread in your work. For instance, your video, *Yosemite*, features a small poster of a landscape painting of Yosemite, which has been submerged underwater. As pigments are dropped into the water, they create swirling patterns, and as they mix with the water, the poster shrinks away from this activity, curling up and in on itself. The effect of the swirling pigments in high definition video is very theatrical. I was intrigued by this combination of performative and theatrical, and how it's reminiscent of the actions and intentions involved in gestural painting. Do you see painting as a performative activity, in the tradition of action painting?

KA: The theatricality of an art work is completely fascinating to me, whether it's concrete in a painting or actual in a performance. I think that the frame of a painting is like a little theatre, and there is an inherent theatricality to it, because you're asking the viewer to think of all the associations that the image suggests. The viewer is experiencing a kind of theatre. In fact, some of my most abstract paintings look like little theatre sets, and as I was developing them, I was thinking, "Wow, I'm making little theatre sets, and now I want to make the protagonist, and now I want to make the narrative without actually creating a specific narrative." I know that sounds contradictory but I think that the joy of being an artist is to hold two very contradictory things in your hand.

Theatricality has been used as a pejorative term. As though reality is somehow better. I'm rejecting that. I'm saying it's all theatre. It's all magic, and that's what we are artists to do. We create a sensual, sensory-driven magic.

BF: Why do you paint?

KA: It's a physical, visceral activity—I almost feel like I'm practicing some weird ritual or something. Painting is very

old. Human beings have always made images. There are parts of me that are just not expressed intellectually that have to be expressed in a physical way. And painting does that for me. It expresses something that has no voice in any other medium.

BF: So these paintings are humanizing in a lot of ways.

KA: I hope so. I think that human beings are always looking for ways to feel connected to something. And I think an artwork or a painting does reassure the viewer of a primal sort of beginning. When somebody says, "Oh, my kid could do that," what they're saying is that their kid has this unfettered impulse to make something, and the work reminds them of that impulse. That's a compliment.

To hear the full interview, listen to the upcoming episode, available Sunday, January 30, on Bad at Sports.

BF: Are you interested in content?

KA: Content is important to me in the paintings. It's not enough to just try to be authentic. By that, I mean relying on an unconscious process. I have respect for that, but that's not enough for me.

I've been working on this idea of hydrodynamics and fluids moving into fluids, as well as issues around the environment, which I think is the most abstract kind of thought we could have. Fundamental change of the entire globe is a hugely abstract thought, and therefore it makes me hungry to paint it.

BF: I'm curious to hear about your choice of support, this bare aluminum that does not have a ground applied to it. How did that come about?

KA: The metal does two things. It's solid as a material and can take a lot. It's very resistant. But when you look at it, there's a sense of ambiguity about its depth of field, which I play with. The paint sits on the surface, but if I use a very transparent paint over the metal and let the metal still show through, it creates depth. It's a perceptual joy for me to be able to have those two things happen.

BF: It sounds like there's sort of a living quality to the metal.

KA: It changes with the time of day; whole colors change in the morning, and at night, there's a huge, radical change, so there's a liveliness to it. I remember when Sigmar Polke was making those paintings that keep changing over time. I thought that was so cool to have your painting change so much like that. The metal does that in a way. Maybe not in the same way that his paintings have done that, but just to have it be alive and in flux is really interesting to me.

BF: But our associations with metal are actually more about permanence, immobility, and lack of suppleness.

KA: Yes, that's true. Aluminum is really light and very different than steel. Steel is super heavy and much more dense. Aluminum is strong, yet when you look at it in its bare qualities and walk around it, light makes it unstable and supple. That's theatrical, which to me, is really interesting.

BF: Is there an ecological awareness that informs your choice of using metal? Does it have a higher carbon footprint than canvas or does that matter to you?

KA: It probably does matter to me, and I probably have just been in denial about it. I don't want to make a prescription for one person or another. It is true that I'm worried about my own carbon footprint, but I'm also worried about that in a much larger scale. Individual carbon footprints mean one thing, but they don't add up to the much bigger industrial military producing kind of economy that we have in the West. So we have to see ourselves in context with that. We can adjust our personal carbon footprint, and we should, but we're not going to solve anything individually. We have to do it in a much, much bigger scale.

BF: Could you talk a little about your desire to attend the World Climate Summit? Is it to bring something there or to bring something back?

KA: I think that one could do both. Meeting people from around the world, and hearing what they're doing would be a way of bringing that information back to where I live here in California, and creating linkages. I'm interested in artists linking-up with government and other nonprofits, and even business organizations. I think that artists can be really interesting for activists, and I don't think there are enough bridges between environmental activism and the arts community. I feel like there's a huge disconnect between the two. It's clear that there are so many art exhibitions and projects all over the world that deal with environmental issues, and yet, the environmental movement itself doesn't seem to be connecting to that.

BF: Could you talk a little about how you think artists have been marginalized from the green movement? It's interesting because artists were essential to AIDS activism and various human rights campaigns, but it sounds like you're saying that they have not been integrated with the green movement.

KA: Well, what I see is not enough. There are inroads that people are starting to make, but the coalition between contemporary art and environmental organizations has not been fully established. I'm interested in seeing that get established for a variety of reasons. One is that we never would have had the national parks in the United States without the paintings of the sublime painters and the Hudson River School. Those paintings, brought to Congress, convinced the senators that there are certain areas that are so special and significant that we must set aside land for the public good and protect it. The birth of protecting land for its own sake, as opposed to merely preserving its resources, really began at the turn of the century. Because the arts played such an important role in that, it's natural

to think that it can happen again. Through photography, video, and other mediums, artists can show the world something that is really important. Maybe enough people will see this and it will motivate change. Sometimes, it just takes one person to kick over a domino.

My main hope is about adaptation; there are offices for adaptation in every water city around the world now. Artists are not really thinking as much about what adaptation could mean, although there are a lot of designers involved in this issue.

BF: Adaptation meaning? People's responses to rising water levels or—

KA: In the Netherlands, for instance, they're creating floating houses that exist on pontoons that could float when the waters rise and rest on the mud when they recede. That's one concrete example of making something that's adapted to an unknown future environment. But I think that there's also futility around adaptation. I'm interested in pointing that out...but there are also byproducts that are positive. It's not all negative.

BF: What do you mean by byproducts?

KA: I had a student who was in the Katrina disaster. I said that must have been a complete nightmare. He said, "Well, everything was really quiet. There were no lights from the city so everything was dark. The stars were way more visible and the sound was really quiet, so you were able to talk to people in a way you hadn't before." Any time there's a disaster or difficult social problem, there's both complete and utter suffering, but there can also be wonderful things that happen, too.

BF: Do you see art as being able to capture that?



Float, 2010; oil on metal; 39 x 47 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

KA: Yes. I'm trying to hold the difficult alongside the beautiful. Certainly using water as a medium is a natural place to be able to do that. There's something soothing and sensual and beautiful about water. There's a flood and people die, but then also there's something beautiful about how light moves through water. I know that it sounds weird to hold those two things at once, but I think that's what artists are expert at doing.

BF: Who is the audience for your abstract paintings? Who are you making them for?

KA: The audience for the abstract paintings is much smaller than the audience for the video and photography. I think that people are drawn to my painting because they are looking for something that is a tonic for mass produced images and text. People want to be taken out of their everyday lives. I know when I go to my kid's baseball game that's what I like. I like to be outside, I like watching the pitches. I don't think about work at all. I'm just having a wonderful experience there. So I think that looking at a painting fulfills a certain human impulse or need. I think people are greedy for escape or a place where they can dwell on things in a deeper way. Because we're always so

fast and sped up. We don't have a moment to reflect. I think painting offers that moment.

NOTES:

1. Tirza Latimer. Essay from exhibition catalogue for *Kim Anno—Liquescent*. (San Francisco: Patricia Sweetow Gallery, September 2009).

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