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## 'Ann Veronica Janssens' Review: Lights, Color, Action

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By Willard Spiegelman

Ann Veronica Janssens proves to be a master of light in her first American solo show.



Ann Veronica Janssens's 'Blue, Red and Yellow' (2001). PHOTO: KEVIN TODORA/NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

The most civilized spot in this city of sprawl, tall buildings, shopping malls and a spider's web of highways is one of Renzo Piano's great buildings, the Nasher Sculpture Center in the downtown arts district. Until several years ago, at the end of its stately garden filled with masterpieces by Rodin, Picasso, Calder, De Kooning, Moore, Di Suvero, George Segal and Richard Serra, there also stood one of James Turrell's "sky spaces," an enclosed room in which a visitor could look up at the changing heavens. As a consequence of a continuing dispute with a neighboring condominium tower whose height eradicated the room's sky view, the piece has been closed permanently.

Mr. Turrell is a master of light. Now, another master of light's uses and effects, Ann Veronica Janssens (British born; Belgian based), is having her first solo American show here. Outside, to the right of the Nasher's main entrance, "Green Aurora" is a small, projected light piece, barely noticeable. Indoors, placed diagonally on the floor, lies "IPE 700," a single 23-foot-long steel I-beam, its top side polished and reflective. In its solid materiality, this is the most conventional of Ms. Janssens's works here. As you look around you, materiality gives way to light and lightness. Four pieces she calls "Aquariums," variations on

a theme, of identical size (21 5/8 inches cubed) and made of glass, distilled water, paraffin oil, and ink or silkscreen, stand atop identical wooden bases. They refract the light, and they also reflect Mr. Piano's signature grids for the Nasher roof above. Each is titled and colored differently: "Cocktail Sculpture" is pure glass; the others are called "Orange," "Margarita," and "Blue Wind" for their main shades. They will remind viewers of Donald Judd's 100 milled aluminum boxes in Marfa, Texas. Each, a world unto itself, conducts a dialogue with its surroundings.

The exhibition's most memorable piece looks like a backyard shed, an intruder in the Nasher's elegant garden. A storage container seems to have been dropped in front of the substantial sculptures, figurative as well as abstract, behind it. "Blue, Red and Yellow" (2001) is a box (12 feet tall, 30 feet long, 15 feet wide) made of steel, wood and polycarbonate. On its north side there's a half-buried fog machine. This fills the interior space with fog so thick that you cannot see any solid thing that is more than two feet away. The installation is not for anyone who suffers from claustrophobia or who is humidity-averse. You are in a chamber that is part hothouse, part above-ground tomb, part steam room.

Traditional sculpture asks us to consider the ways artists use their materials—wood, bronze, marble, steel, or stone—to make something permanent in space. In her outdoor room, Ms. Janssens has exchanged solidity for nebulosity. One wall of the box is semi-transparent, the others blue, yellow and red. Above, on the ceiling, you see what might be shadows and clouds on an uncharacteristically foggy day in Texas. "All smoke and mirrors," a skeptic might say.

The museum admits only a small group of visitors at a time, to avoid indoor collisions. I stayed for four 10-minute sessions (an extended period, according to the knowledgeable guard). Other visitors stepped inside and made a speedy retreat.

Some remained longer. Their overheard comments testify to the physical, psychological and emotional effects the work provokes: "Where am I?," "Where's the wall?," "My eyes hurt."

Looking at Ms. Janssen's crystalline boxes inspires quiet meditation. They prove their maker's mastery of the lessons of classicism, modernism and minimalism. Being inside her fog chamber induces uncertainty, disequilibrium, even fear.

It's hard to imagine how such a small space can create a feeling of infinity, and with more than a touch of the vertigo we associate with baroque art. The room is like an ocean: A cautious soul will keep close to shore, move gingerly around the periphery, holding on to the plastic walls and the supporting steel beams. A more daring one will head for the depths, the center, where one easily loses one's bearings. The only substantial thing at hand is the body of the viewer himself, adrift in fog, light and shifting colors. You grope your way to the exit, open the door, and find relief in your return to terra firma.