The Brown Cloud Project: A New Blue?

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ABSTRACT

The Brown Cloud Project is a study that uses an immaterial material aerogel, a material that sits between the virtual and the physical world to ask new questions regarding the environment. It is through this cross-collaborative process that the medium of silica aerogel was manufactured, a product that fused scientific research with artistic vision, enabling ethereal physicality. This paper presents a fundamental issue that rests on an individual culture’s perception, historical experience and associations. The chapter ‘light’ investigates the importance of light and its role in the enlightenment. Finally, sky addresses the ether, the invisible yet present atmosphere that surrounds us as humans, viewed as something intangible that has the possibility of being made tangible, and investigated through the medium of art.

Keywords: Climate Crisis, Colour, Light, Nanomaterial, Scattering, Silica Aerogel, Sky, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

‘Not to Render the Visible but to Render Visible’ Paul Klee

The Brown Cloud Project is a paper that aims to present a new way of viewing our atmosphere: through the scientist’s lens, as described by an artist. While we live in a physical world, we are becoming increasingly dependent on the virtual, and as we become accustomed to dwelling in both, the lines between the two are less and less apparent, for instance ‘cloud computing’ where non-physical data is stored offsite in physical storage facilities, available to be retrieved on request. The key elements relate to this physical world, using the Aerogel, a material that sits between the virtual and the physical world, an immaterial material, to ask new questions regarding our environment. NASA has photographed the well-publicized ‘brown cloud’ that hangs over China, as seen in satellite imagery. This ever-expanding brown mass is a result of industry and pollution, issues that have global significance. This project seeks only to posit questions: How does a brown cloud in China affect us? What solutions can the arts provide? At some junctions, the fields of art and science cross over and overlap, and there is a rich source of media and inspiration available that can produce fresh insights and add value to either field. It is in this working space that

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the scientist and artist are not dissimilar – both are part of a search for truth, beauty and aim to present things previously unseen: new ways of viewing the world in which we live. It is through this cross-collaborative process that the medium of silica aerogel was manufactured, a product that fused scientific research with artistic vision, enabling its creation. This nanomaterial is one of the lightest solid materials on earth, having a unique ethereal physicality, one that contains and embodies our atmosphere – through its aesthetic, solid form. The phrase ‘solid smoke’ was coined later to describe the immaterial appearance of the medium, the color being a hazy pale blue – this is the same blue we see in the sky – due to mie scattering, particles that affect how we see that color (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

*Figure 1. ‘A Piece of Sky between Your Fingers’ mixed media, dimensions variable, ©Michalou(di)s 2004. Dr Ioannis Michalou(di)s inspects the aerogel sample containing the first encapsulated cloud when invited as artist in residence at Shivaji University, Maharastra, India.*

*Figure 2. ‘Sky Cloning Project (Detail)’ mixed media, dimensions variable, ©Michalou(di)s 2011*
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