

By Design: Artist and Colorist in the classroom

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1. INTRODUCTION

More often than not, color theory in the college curriculums in the United States is taught as part of a design fundamentals course where the basic color language and principles are introduced. Typically, the study of color is an integral component of the introductory design or freshman fundamentals course where it is integrated into the two and three dimensional design basics.

Color theory as an independent course provides an extraordinary opportunity to examine the topic of color in a larger context, embracing the interdisciplinary dimension of color study. My slide presentation traces the studio practice of fine art and design students at the Atlanta College of Art. Prepared with a basic understanding of color from the foundation year, students from a variety of artistic disciplines, whose interest is piqued about color, gravitate to my course called *Color Projects*. The diversity of students who elect this course propels the curriculum and the projects are tailored to accommodate a wide range of student interest and discipline. In addition to basic color theory exercises such as painting a color wheel and various color mixing assignments, a host alternative projects poised at the intersection of color and its relationship to nature and culture typify the emphasis of the lessons.

As a practicing visual artist and colorist, my pedagogical goal for the *Color Projects* course is to offer a unique educational experience where the dialogue and the exchange of ideas regarding color as both form and content is paramount. Illustrated lectures, assigned readings and field trips augment the course work. In addition, current ideas and trends in contemporary art, design and visual culture are introduced and provide a provocative counterpoint to a series of historically significant color theory demonstrations that are also included in my curricula.

2. METHOD

Every studio class at the Atlanta College of Art is five hours in length and meets once a week for fifteen weeks. I divide the color course into two segments, a lecture hour and a long studio lab. Assignments are executed, resolved and critiqued in the studio to insure uniform lighting conditions when applicable. Materials such as acrylic paint, colored paper collage and mixed media are used for most of the projects.

After executing a series of fundamental color mixing exercises using paint, the students investigate a succession of chapters from Josef Albers' seminal work *The Interaction of Color* [1]. Color Aid papers are used for these exercises and students have access to the Albers *Interaction of Color* portfolios from the Atlanta College of Art Rare Books Room.

Utilizing the portfolio pages from the Albers masterwork provides an immediacy for viewing firsthand the lush optical properties of the silk-screened plates that are unmatched in reproductions of this work. As an instrument for teaching color theory this remarkable tome became a catalyst for further investigations of historical color apparatuses used in teaching color. Albers' relationship to Black Mountain College, located in the southeastern United States, provides a direct link to the Bauhaus [2]. This connection to Bauhaus is significant, if not primary for understanding the evolution of most color theory and design education in college curriculums across the United States.

An overview of the Bauhaus pedagogy and the color philosophy of Johannes Itten [3] and Wassily Kandinsky [4] are introduced in the *Color Projects* course. Of particular interest was the subjective timbre color investigation of Johannes Itten. Recreating these color exercises reveal similar and uncanny color correspondences observed in the subjective harmony exercises of his students. Another color device used at the Bauhaus Workshop was a spinning top with specially designed disks for exploring optically mixed color. This spinning top of the Bauhaus was based on a disk-spinning

device used by Goethe [5], Chevreul [6], Maxwell, Rood [7] and others for color and vision experimentation. To reconstruct the spirit of these early color investigations I recreated a historical model based on the color disk device of Goethe; a wooden flywheel that spins disks of segmented color patterns producing vivid color illusions. The effectiveness of using this historical color mixing device provides a stunning educational experience; the voices of the revered past masters of color theory history are re-enacted in the classroom.

A contemporary influence in color theory education is acknowledged in the work of Lois Swirnoff whose challenging and systematic approach of transforming the relational color objectives from two dimensions into three dimensions offers an ingenious approach to the Albers interaction of color legacy. Examples of the student work from the *Color Projects* course quote from the remarkable spatial color interactions observed in Dimensional Color by Swirnoff [8].

To augment my assignments, extensive lectures illustrated with slides provide the stimulus for students to expand their thinking on the interdisciplinary scope of color. Navigating color as an omnidirectional construct takes precedence in the classroom. Contemplating the parallel universe of nature and culture while investigating a variety of color topics generates a confluence of ideas. While traditional color experimentation in the classroom explores theoretical and practical problem solving, often a disparity exists in the translation of these valuable lessons into viable strategies in the respective studio discipline of each student. An important objective is to join these esteemed lessons of the past masters of color theory education with new and original color projects that would address color in the broadest sense. In my slide presentation I will introduce some of the alternative color theory assignments that approach this level of complexity. The relativity of color and its illusive nature is a very ancient phenomena and one that has inspired and perplexed artists, philosophers and scientists for epochs. Regardless of the advances of technology, color remains almost as mystifying today as it was in earlier times. Color as a topic transcends boundaries—everything is affected by color, and the topic of color becomes a dynamic device for study and contemplation of our ever changing world.

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Creating a varied approach to understanding color concepts and its application in the classroom offers unique challenges given the dynamism and interconnectedness of our color saturated global environment. Color is ubiquitous and one of the most elusive elements for the artist and designer to master. Negotiating the materiality of color, the specificity of cross cultural symbolism and the embedded color codes inherent in a myriad of devices suggest the complex levels of investigations that engage students in my color courses at the Atlanta College of Art.

As a visual artist and professor actively engaged in professional practice, my paintings and photographs have investigated the cross-disciplinary possibilities of color for over two decades. Observing trends in contemporary art, design, installations and site-specific art work reinforces the notion that today's artists are engaged in exploring color with a remarkable exuberance.

Having exposure to the work and the ideas of leading edge artists, designers and colorists in combination with the historical influences from color theory provides a provocative balance for the students' continued appreciation of past and present applications of color thinking and problem solving.

Color is both enriching and complicated, and the effect it has on our daily lives is profound. Methodologies for the study of color provide an extraordinary opportunity for creativity in the classroom. The increased awareness of the power of the color in art, science and industry is well documented. My slide presentation will introduce the artwork and color explorations of very talented young artists and designers engaged in a progressive learning environment. Importantly, my presentation illustrates the artist's dialogue with students as they explore the enigmatic qualities of color in the academic studio setting of the Atlanta College of Art.

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