

Contemporary art and colour thinking

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This collection of texts about colour resulted from a request to colleagues known to be interested in colour and contemporary art, for 'position papers' to act as a starting point for a series of symposia. We were interested in whether the writings of the contributors who made their interest in colour manifest either through their own artistic practice, or through a close attention to the work of artists as a starting point for their interest, might differ from the words crafted by those looking at colour in contemporary art from the perspective of the critic or theorist. We wanted to see what 'colour thinking' might be in an aesthetic period where the insights of artists do not figure prominently in attempts to understand something of the substance and nature of colour. But most importantly, we wanted to examine how making art and thinking about art, with a particular focus on colour, can add to understanding of both the natural and man-made environment.

The intention is for the publication of these papers to start a dialogue between the participants and to invite others to join in. Two symposia are planned to take place in spring and autumn 2012, with additional contributors and an open invitation through this journal and other networks for interested colleagues to join us. We want to both map the range of interests within current academic and practitioner activity in the colour arena of the visual arts, and to draw interested colleagues together to initiate future projects to explore the field more systematically.

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Emerging Themes

Our initial work on the papers for this collection is giving us an indication of some interesting possibilities for further exploration. The first of the two main themes that are emerging at present is colour's 'challenge' to science. We propose that there is a collision of understanding about colour, with knowledge of the workings of light waves sitting uncomfortably alongside the perception of colour by variable physiologies, and the propensity to interpret colour in relation to external objects and emotions. The exploration will be of whether this is a challenge or unsolvable debate, or a space of creative engagement in which both sides can benefit and which provides a basis for intrigue and fascination which might lead to a reconciliation of the subjective and objective positions that have traditionally characterised the approaches to art and science. The second of the two themes focuses on whether we need to re-articulate the intellectual work embodied in the thinking of the maker in this particular context. We want to suggest that there is a place for or an approach to capturing the thinking of the artist that provides both material for other researchers as well as a contribution to thinking within a field in its own right.

The Contributors

The contributors for this collection are a purposeful selection of UK-based artists and academics in the visual arts, with the addition of one voice from the United States, Barbara Maria Stafford from the University of Chicago. We wanted to get a view of the object of our attention from a perspective that was familiar with the way in which the visual arts and the physical and biological sciences intersect in our understanding with reference to the early modern and the contemporary era. Her recent work explores how the brain sciences are challenging assumptions about the relationships between our senses and perception, sensation, emotion, mental imagery, and subjectivity. This notion of challenge or of revisiting our sense of what we might believe in within a field was our own stimulus for drawing these papers together; the absence of interest in the broader field indicated an uncertainty of what there was to be interested in.

The contributions also include those from three painters, Duncan Bullen, Richard Webb and John Lancaster, who write from the perspective of the practitioner. The contribution from David Sweet, also a painter, reads from the perspective of art history. Stephen Hoskins writes as a fine printmaker engaged within a more technically-orientated research arena. The final contributor and co-editor of this selection of papers, Richard Davey is a non-practitioner, who uses art works as the starting point for his investigation into the relationship of colour and light.

We have not required our authors to follow the standard guidelines of the journal for the structuring of their texts, rather we have accepted the material generated on its own terms and have engaged in sometimes extensive editing as a collaborative process. We wanted to ensure that the distinctive characteristics of each writer's words was maintained, but have sought to ensure that arguments are entered into fully and that claims are substantiated where possible.

The agenda for discussion

The process of drawing these papers together and our role as editors has enabled us to start shaping an agenda for the future discussion at the symposia. Our framing of one of the emergent themes as 'colour's challenge to science' is a deliberately provocative labelling of the problem that is continuing to keep colleagues interested in making works with coloured stuff, or writing about the making or scrutiny of them. In the papers, Hoskins' part is to propose a practical solution to the inability of inkjet printing to be able to replicate the nuances of manually mixed subtractive colour. The principle of mixing before application, and of adjusting or allowing further mixing upon a surface, reminds us that there is a unique and rarefied expertise that might yet generate challenges to technological progress by asking awkward questions. The role of contemporary art as the asker of such challenges might perhaps have spin-offs in the world of things, objects and practical applications, as well as the more usual (to a contemporary mind) contribution in the world of ideas.

More evident in the selected papers is the challenge to science and objective measurement that arises from the sheer cussedness of interpretation and perception. Despite colour's basis in wavelength, the apparent norms of developing colour terms in language development, and the physiology of the human eye, cultures do interpret and use colour in different and distinctive ways, the ability to discriminate some colours is extremely variable, and the interpretation and linkages between objects and their colour are multifarious. This problem perhaps is where colour gets its space for manoeuvre and where art can still be enthralled by it.

The papers suggest that this space is the source of the sheer delight of colour's variability when partnered with many other iterations of itself, and perhaps also the source of the holy grail of transcendence, flux or sublimity that can be encountered when seeing colours that are masterfully articulated by intent or process. The descriptions given by Davey (on James Hugonin's paintings), and by Bullen and Lancaster, clearly indicate how they both control the conditions within which colour may operate and how they leave room for things to happen.

Control through the use of grids or other systems for structuring colour application feature in the paintings and drawings discussed in the papers. A grid for holding the coloured patches and a system for the repetition of a set of marks feature in Hugonin's work as described by Davey. The combination of the two systems sets up a recurring wave pattern across the painted surface, disrupted by some dabs placed intuitively where the system itself precluded following its own rules. Davey notes that this destabilises the work but also animates it with an iridescent beauty.

Similarly in Lancaster's work, there is a static geometric starting point that, through the use of complimentary and adjacent colour dabs, generates a flux of colour and movement. A similar weaving of colour takes place in Lancaster, who notes the ability of such structures to generate a light of their own as an object or result in common with the work of Bridget Riley, James Hugonin and other artists. He describes the 'truly surprising nature of the transformation' that occurs when the retina responds to such works. He traces the lineage of this interest back to the Impressionists but notes how it has been regularly revisited by artists since then.

Bullen also imposes grid-like structures upon his work, but instead of using patches of paint he uses pin-head sized marks made by coloured pencils, repeated evenly, but with an arbitrary selection of colours, across a surface. He pulls and stretches the grid like a net, introducing the possibility for a moiré effect to be set up. He accepts the subjective chromatic experience of viewers, dependent on their own physiologies as well as ambient conditions, and cites colour's distinctiveness as 'its ability to speak to us in ways that are fluid, flexible and fleeting'.

What these three descriptions give us is a sense in which the grid and a simple marking system are necessary devices to hold on to an aesthetic property that generates scope for awe and delight precisely when it is constrained. These systems provide a retreat from the informal and more chaotic structural organising of representational idioms such as Impressionist or post-impressionist paintings, where images from the lived-in world meant that recognition and the reading of known forms still constrain the ability of colour to speak freely of itself. The grid provides a defence against 'chromophobia', David Batchelor's term for corruption or contamination by colour – let us keep the colour caged up, behind bars.

The way in which colour is a proper problem, or object of attention for the visual artist is discussed by Sweet. He explores how colour has been incorporated with various spatial strategies in paintings from Impressionism to the last quarter of the Twentieth Century. While not engaging specifically with the use of the grid form, he does describe a range of formal systems that all restrict the extent to which colour is compromised by recognition or representation. The challenge of the contemporary arena where technology now delivers a 'fully coloured' world, is likened to a rewiring of 'the human sensorium'.

The proposition drawn from these position papers is that the combination of the powerful and extremely effective aesthetic visual property of colour, requires some method of constraint in order to set up 'seeable' opportunities for delight and reverie. This reverie is described by the artists and by commentators on their work as flux or iridescence, and this is seen as a powerful but quiet attribute.

One challenge is its reproducibility. Sweet mentions the apparent 'chromatic verisimilitude of printed or screen-based pictures', but as noted, Hoskins challenges print technologies to deliver the

nuances achieved by the artist. Webb also addressed this problem, and argues for enabling viewers to experience the same neurological effects whether engaging with the original or a reproduction. We will need to find a platform on which we can accommodate the delight that can be found in the perception of small chromatic shifts. Screen-based colour just does not enable the discrimination of fat and lean, transparency and opacity, of earth and of synthetic colour that draws the painter to their medium. But the reading of this by the viewer, as we know, can be affected by not only cultural differences but also by biology. We thus have a challenge not only for reproduction but also for the intent of the artist. Is it realistic to try to reproduce the subtlety of effect generated by an artist's exploration of the shifts between pigment and media, pattern and light? And how are we to relate the accounts of the intentions of the artists to our readings of their works? Perhaps this is not only where colour challenges science but also where art confronts rationality.

What characterises much of the work discussed here is the need for the viewer to discriminate small shifts in colour. This is present in Sweet's discussion of field painting in the 1970s as well as in the work of Webb, Bullen, Hugonin or Lancaster described here. Despite the variability of colour vision between individuals, it is proposed that the act of looking and of discriminating small shifts or nuances, and of discerning pattern or repetition, within a relatively constrained visual environment, might provide a level of perceptual work that generates an appreciation of flux, iridescence, or engaged attention. It might be that the grid, or the narrow colour fields, with the absence of recognisable form to stimulate other sorts of recognising, provides a framework for aesthetic 'fixing', for appreciation of colour that generates a particular mental state. Stafford's 'gapped mosaics' enable the viewer to step away from conscious recognition, to just see, rather than see a thing. This is speculation, but one born from both looking at the works and reading the words, and from trying to find a way to explain their coming together.

Conclusion

The process of bringing the papers together has led to some discussion between the co-editors on the differences and similarities in nature and intent of the texts coming from those involved primarily in visual practice and those whose main medium is text. We believe that the nature of the papers produced here do evidence the sort of writing by artists to capture what they do and why they do it, and to articulate the lineage in which they see their work. The accounts by Webb, Bullen, and Lancaster also have a particular role as documents that provide a commentary to accompany the practical outcomes. They enable a signposting for those not working within the practical field on adjacent agendas. They provide a record of the nuances of their particular practice in their voice and, as such, can be seen as material for interrogation by future researchers as much as the actual art works provide such material. But once the work is completed it enters a different relationship to the maker, and takes on a range of other cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical associations and interpretations, which the artist's particular relationship to the work cannot always identify or recognize. It is this new territory that the writer who is not the artist is best able to occupy; although, as we have already acknowledged, there is a danger that these other filters can interfere with the knowledge that can be derived from the visual, imposing a distance from the unique insights of the visual object.

A recurrent discussion for both editors is whether there is a different responsibility for those looking at the made in comparison to those who did the making. We are beginning to suggest that for

art to take on an acknowledged place in legitimate epistemological pursuit, texts by both artist and an author who is not the maker might stand alongside each other in equal but distinct engagement with the objects of attention. Both have licence to explore the poetry of the written form in its propensity to be structured and given aesthetic properties, but there may be structural differences in the approaches taken. Framing these questions for a journal issue, and noting how the art under scrutiny is keeping colour under control by using grids and systems, leads us to ponder whether perhaps the conventions of the ways in which we converse as academics, across disciplines, functions much as the grid does, to keep the subject of our attention under control.