

Art and colour: in pursuit of the intangible

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This paper describes the artist John Lancaster's fascination to colour as a 'catalyst for transformation', allowing base materials to become something 'wonderful and surprising'. He uses the locations which have inspired him to describe a practice that for more than twenty four years has been concerned with the intangible and elusive through colour.

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Introduction

Nothing is further from the artist's mind than the assumption that he is producing a scientific work, what is important to him is to specify a dimension or a perspective, to recognize the limits of space and time in which one's own existence manifests itself, to reweave the weft of the universe, from the starting point of one's own ego, with its will to make or to shape¹ [1].

My particular artistic journey over the past twenty-four years attempts to track down the elusive and enigmatic qualities in art that inspire and guide my experimentation. The intrigue in a work of art for me is the transformation of base materials into something wonderful and surprising. The journey has led me to recognize the importance of colour and, particularly in the work of the last ten years or so colour has become the catalyst for this transformation. The wonder and surprise at times does not seem tangible, but I feel it is deeply connected to the use of colour. In order to discuss colour I need to plot this journey. While colour has been the catalyst for the transformation, location has acted as the driving force behind the visual exploration. In order to try and articulate this relationship between personal experimentation, art and intangibility, I need to provide some background context to my work, and particularly to those locations that have provided key points of inspiration. Reflecting on these locations, it was not necessarily colour that drew my attention to a particular site or sense of place but the mystery and intrigue of the place and the experience of something that could not rationally be explained.

The journey has certainly not been direct or predictable. My travels have taken me from Rome with its excessive rhetorical and Baroque visual language and emphasis on chiaroscuro for definition of form and atmosphere, to places such as the Alhambra Palace in Granada and the Ryoan-ji Zen garden in Kyoto, that have stimulated a quieter, more economic language in recent work where colour is the dominant force.

¹ The quote by Giulio Carlo Argan in his introduction relates to Klee's creative process in which colour plays a significant role.

Colour: space and light in Rome

The Baroque world of Rome, where I studied for two years in the mid to late 1980s, became a significant location for me. The Baroque period was essentially if not exclusively a sacred and religious movement, flourishing under the patronage of the Catholic Church, and on reflection I now recognize that my interests have been focused on the sacred in art and architecture.

It was not however the overt religious message that interested me in the Caravaggio painting, the image in question is *The Calling of St Matthew*, 1598–1600 [2], commissioned for the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, but the mystery of his creation of light and space. The Baroque was full of artistic statements that try to encapsulate the spiritual or religious relationship of the manifest world and the transformation into the spiritual dimension. This idea of transformation works on two levels; one as a religious message encapsulated in the subject of the painting, and supported by a wealth of cultural material, and the other which intrigued me, was in the craft and pictorial invention of the painting. How Caravaggio managed to create the most beautiful and beguiling atmosphere and mysterious sense of space through a masterful orchestration of colour, building a subtle palette of greys and intensifying the deep dark tones through translucent layering of glazed colour is for me the mystery of this transformation. Caravaggio had many imitators and followers across Europe who were able to recreate the drama and theatricality of a scene but very few were able to achieve the ‘spiritual profundity’² [3] that Caravaggio managed to elevate in his work. My own work when I was in Rome was constructed by the use of glazing as a technique for building spatial ambiguity and atmosphere in my compositions. The challenge, or question, stimulating my work, was how was it possible to create a painting of beauty and wonder from simply pigment, mediums, brushes and canvas, without recourse to the drama and theatricality of the scene.

The second revelation regarding the mystery and intrigue of pictorial construction was discovered through Caravaggio’s use of space. The spatial ambiguity in *The Taking of Christ*, 1602 [4] where forms appear and disappear out of shadow in a flurry of visual activity, and in *The Supper at Emmaus* 1602 [5] where the illusionistic play of space in relationship to the picture plane is explored, inspired me to think about experimenting with certain pictorial devices that aim to trick and deceive the eye into ever more subtle and secondary readings of a painting (Figures 1 and 2). These may well serve to underpin and support the subject but may also provide a counter balance or alternative reading to the subject or narrative of the painting.

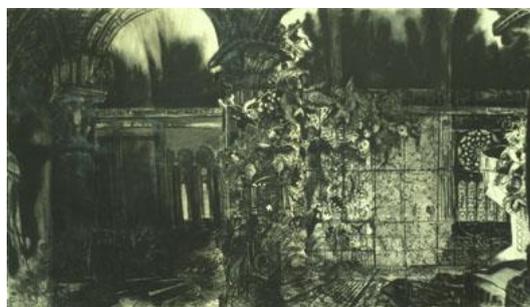


Figure 1: John Lancaster, *Art and Religion*, charcoal on paper, 195×336cm, 1997.

² The author makes this very point that amongst the many imitators and artists influenced across Europe, especially by Caravaggio, the emphasis tended to concentrate on the dramatic and theatrical quality of light and a truly profound mystery within the painting remained elusive.



Figure 2: John Lancaster, *Sacred Excavation*, oil on canvas, 195×145cm, 1988.

Colour: rhythm, design, pattern, and visual ambiguity in the Alhambra Palace, Granada (Spain)

The second important location on my artistic journey was a very different cultural experience. The Alhambra Palace in Granada was, for me, an experience that transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary (Figure 3). The intricate and beguiling Islamic design of the ceramic tile and stucco work, meshed together with the gentle seduction of the other senses – sound, smell and visual – created this transcendental state. Visual ambiguity founded upon the complexity of geometry and visual trickery came together, resulting in a transcendence of the corporeal world into the spiritual dimension.

My understanding was that the visual dynamics of movement and rhythm were created in the tiles and stucco through the busy intricate design work based on repetition, geometry, symmetry, colour balance, creation and inversion of form. These key elements gradually informed my work and led to a fundamental change of approach. The subject that once relied upon architecture as a pictorial structure was dropped, and colour became the catalyst to create movement, rhythm, pattern, visual ambiguity, and the means for a different quality of light (Figures 4 and 5). Colour



Figure 3: *Alhambra palace, Granada (Spain)*, photo taken by John Lancaster

previously referred to nature or the objective world for inspiration. I looked outwards to draw in ideas for colours to use within the work. Now the decision making process regarding colour looked inward to the process of painting itself, based upon the experience gained through experimentation, improvisation and critical reflection supported by an understanding of colour theory. Colour becomes the vehicle for change but also, to a greater extent, the purpose for experimentation.



Figure 4: John Lancaster, *Sacred Interiors *3 no.3*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 140×245cm, 1999.

Figure 5: John Lancaster, *Sacred Interiors *4 no.3*, oil on canvas, 160×245cm, 2001.

The particular achievements of Islamic art and architecture has been described by Valarie Gonzalez, who draws attention to how 'A skillful dynamic mechanism is built by means of the basic two dimensional elements of line, colour, light and dark values which actually sets the geometrical patterns in motion' [6]. She goes on to describe how 'the strong linear and chromatic rhythm create an animation of the pictorial plane and a vibration of the surface which are fundamentally effects of the principal of movement'. Gonzalez illuminates how colour and design are fundamental to generating the essential elements of rhythm and movement which not only animate the designs, but act as a process for change. Colour, and geometry did become the key elements in my work, with colour taking on a role that coaxes and teases out form and pattern, in order to create rhythm and kinetic energy that exists in space and generates light.

Colour flux and changing aspects

The paintings that I have made over the past thirteen years begin with a design based on interlocking circles to establish a basic geometric structure. Within this structure a controlled palette formed out of a triad of colour combinations is orchestrated within the individual shapes and eventually expands to the wider composition to create an evanescence of light, energy and rhythmic pattern. My intention is to create a state of flux, where colour and process are the catalyst for this state and created from within the painting process. Moving from a simple relatively static geometric starting point to a composition that generates pace, movement and creates light and additional colour in front of the painted surface, I attempt to create this catalytic opportunity by exploring relationships of colour formed out of complimentary and adjacent colours (Figures 6 and 7). A turquoise and orange relationship may act as a foundation (and functions much in the same way as the basic underlying geometry) then a red or orange may be placed alongside this relationship to change the temperature or pitch within that section. This in turn animates the surface and begins the process of setting up visual rhythms and creating a state of surprise, in effect an energetic, evanescent and transitory visual statement. This recognition of a shared objective to create an evanescent and transitory quality within

the painting can be seen as part of a shared cultural experimentation amongst contemporary painters. James Hugonin discusses a similar objective in reference to his paintings of the late 1980s in which he states ‘things continually disappear and reform: things do not stay the same...what I am trying to do is to present the evanescence of things, to heighten the fact that everything is in essence transitory’ [7].

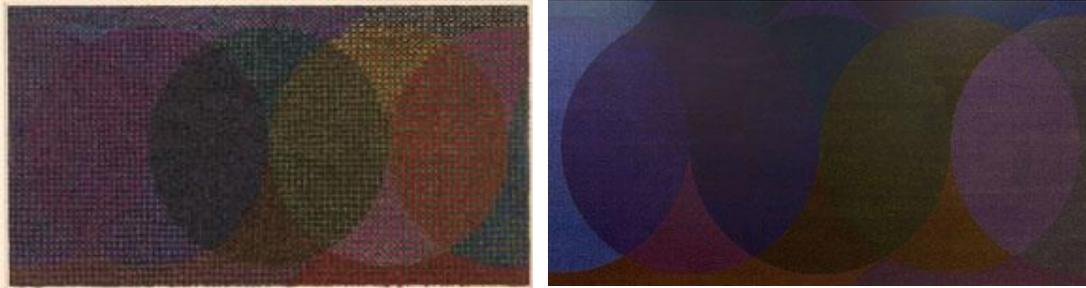


Figure 7 (left): John Lancaster, *Sacred Interiors *4 no.3*, oil on canvas, 160×245cm, 2001.
Figure 6 (right): John Lancaster, *Sacred Interiors *3 no.3*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 140×245cm, 1999.

This role of colour in the state of flux, or the changing dynamics of forms and patterns that shift and reform, is particularly significant. While geometry is used as a basic structure where interlocking circles create form and pattern, the gradual weaving of colour into the overall orchestration provides additional layers of rhythm and variations to the reading of the compositions. A lozenge shape might morph into a rolling ‘S’ type shape, which then becomes a curvilinear triangular form, all the while, generating additional opportunities for the generation of light, rhythm and kinetic energy. Again I found a recognition of the way paintings can work in Wittgenstein, who discusses this visual phenomenon of forms and shapes that have the capacity to change emphasis and dynamics within the composition as a *change of aspect* [8].

Colour and scintillating greyness

The recent paintings seem to have the potential to exploit the visual experience of observing the painted surface up close, as well as moving back to gain a broader field of vision (Figures 8 and 9). As in alchemy, where base metals are magically transformed into gold, the composition from a distance is capable of mysteriously generating an unfathomable light. Bridget Riley talked about a similar experience in reading her stripe paintings of the early 1980s. ‘...its more as though the colour is breathing, giving off a subtly tinted cloud of its own transformed energy’ [9]. James Hugonin talks about a similarly spectacular visual phenomena in analyzing the painting of Seurat, ...(he) ‘draws to your attention the strong evidence of distinct complementary colours created on the surface ...but the merging of those complementaries at a distance creates a kind of scintillating greyness’ [7].

Bridget Riley describes the phenomenon of light and colour that is generated beyond the colour on the canvas in her series the Song of Orpheus, the image in question is *Aurulum 1977* [9]. She notes how the physical application of violet, blue, green, yellow and pink are orchestrated in such a way through the flowing vertical wave – like rhythm that the colour opposites are created in the viewers

eye rather than on the canvas ‘...therefore turquoise, being complementary to pink, is not actually painted.’ She goes on to say: The missing colours are all evoked by the colours actually present’ [9].

What is interesting about these observations is their recognition of truly surprising nature of the transformation of a painted surface, of a palette that has been created out of saturated colour on the painted surface, with the retina responding in quite a different way with unexpected results. I regard this capacity to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary as a further wonder of the act of painting and colour. To some extent we are familiar with the concept of colour and light being generated as optical phenomena in the experimentation of the Impressionist painters, but what is noteworthy is that this fascination has been regularly revisited and explored by painters throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.



Figure 8 (left): John Lancaster, *Hidden Connections 1*, oil on canvas, 180×180cm, 2008.

Figure 9 (right): John Lancaster, *Hidden Connections 2*, oil on canvas, 180×180cm, 2009.

Beauty, ornament and pleasure

The sorts of optical phenomena referred to above are among the factors also related to the way pattern and ornamentation work in paintings, and the pleasure that is associated with apprehending ornamentation. The early part of the 20th Century witnessed a great deal of discussion between artists and critics on the importance and significance of beauty and decoration in art. Matisse and Klee were attacked for their hedonist approach to painting, and to some extent the discussion has continued into contemporary practice. One such attack placed Matisse alongside Mozart and Watteau with the misguided hedonistic label of describing their works as Rococo frivolity. Elderfield does argue, however, that the works are created out of a rigorous application of critical reflection and inventiveness, and they do indeed possess a profound presence, which transcends the merely pleasurable. ‘The harmony in Matisse’s art far from being merely relaxing, is restorative, beneficent and spiritually uplifting, not a surrender to materialism but an escape from it’ [10]. The contemporary paintings of Bridget Riley, Edwina Leapman, James Hugonin, together with a number of younger artists and art critics, have added to the debate which still continues on the significance of beauty, pattern, ornament and design in 21st Century abstract painting. Matthew Collins in a recent article [11] strengthens the link between art history and contemporary art by stating the significance that ornament, pattern and design play in providing a deeply meaningful role. With its origins firmly grounded in the pre-renaissance paintings of Giotto and Byzantine mosaics, Collins emphasizes the fundamental importance of such constructions and as a result these continue to pre-occupy the artist. The article is making the connection to a recent exhibition by the systems painter Michael Kidner.

What seems to bring together my fascination with colour and ornament is the way they seem to be particularly important to achieving works that are transformative and those that can create a receptive state of mind. Gaston Bachelard's description of reverie in *Poetics of Space* epitomizes this suggestion of the effect that a poem or a painting can impress upon the viewer. He describes reverie as constituting 'a psychic condition that is too frequently confused with dream ... the mind is able to relax, but in poetic reverie the soul keeps watch, with no tension, calmed and active' [12]. I like the idea that a state of intellectual and emotional activity can be both relaxed and calm but at the same time alert and receptive and consider that maybe, the generation of this state is akin to a state of transformation that I have been exploring, and does in some way explain what seemed to be intangible.

Conclusion

In focusing on colour and intangibility in relation to my work I have tried to draw attention firstly to the locations and art that provided specific inspiration for me, and that which seemed to mirror my concerns and interest. Looking at the art of the past and my peers is an important part of the critical reflection that informs and provides direction to my practice. I do not however expect that any amount of analysis and deconstruction in pursuit of elusive and enigmatic qualities such as intangibility will provide the answers. It is the work itself that will have the potential to generate such extraordinary feelings and emotions and therefore have the potential to take us to a place beyond description.

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