

Lying side by side: fitting colour to eros

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This paper reflects upon colour as an essentially 'short form', aligning it to the new fast forms of communication that characterize the exchanges on Twitter and other social network media. She also associates this quality with Eros, through the release of emotional and retinal energy during perception. She notes that abstract or symbolic representations stimulate the same brain activity as when actually seeing. In a densely poetic text the attention is drawn to the quick bursts of sensation that make up our individual responses and experience of the world, whilst reminding us that these individual instances are not isolated but part of a wider whole.

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Introduction

"I think it was the smallness of these figures that carried them so penetratingly into my mind ... They were in their smallness like secret thoughts of mine projected into dimension and permanence, and they returned to me as a response that carried strangely into parts of my body ... We had come from love-making, and were to return to it, and the museum, visited between the evaporation and the recondensation of desire, was like a bridge whose either end is dissolved in mist—its suspension miraculous, its purpose remembered only by the murmuring stream running in the invisible ravine below ... My woman, fully searched, and my museum, fully possessed ..." [1].

Condensed social media, like Twitter, "with their hummingbird metabolisms" keep you from "being precious about things" [2]. But preciousness and perfectionism are not just the enemies of concise comedy, wit, and laughter, they undercut creativity itself. Reading about the positive implications of the new tiny electronic genres for "nano-clowning" — a sort of disposable ideation — made me reflect on the relationship between eros and colour as quintessentially short forms. Like John Updike's "dainty white dream" statuette of an eighteenth-century sleeping nude, tinted smallness "intensifie(s) sensual content" [2]. Not just aesthetic, but philosophical and epistemological, implications follow from conceiving thinking and feeling as a sort of bantering with prismatic bits.

What the eighteenth-century British Empiricists (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) variously termed "perceptual acquaintance" usefully captures the problem of what it means to acquaint oneself with a sensation or an experience for the first time. I argue that first knowledge is a rare thing since memory is necessary to all experience. Each piece of knowledge like every sensation exists increasingly within the context of all the rest of our perceptions. The ancient artisanal inlay format [3], I believe, addresses the fact that each human subject, because of our hardwired neural machinery, lays down connections between these divided bits.

Crafting this coexistence of ideas, however, originates in personal history, the way in which an abstract system of standing-alone components gets inwardly oriented to ourselves. Helene Cixous, writing on passion in her *Coming to Writing*, remarks that breaking down walls does not necessarily lead to oneness [4]. Mosaicist-painters and tessellated compositions (from intarsia to collage and montage to comic-book “packaged” panel structure [5]) recognise the aptness of this observation since they create composite formats as well as composite selves (“Who are you that are so strangely me?”). By re-positioning the anomalous elements of experience laterally, we see the stranger even in those we love. And, more importantly, we see *how* we came to such a judgment since splintered works make visible the order and intensity by which sensations come to us and get grouped together.

To be sure, there is much expressive spatter and even agonized application of paint evident in the history of art. Consider Titian’s pastose *Scourging of Christ*, El Greco’s tormented *View of Toledo*, Kokoschka’s swirling Salzburg landscapes, or Francis Bacon’s bloody and strangled bedroom triptychs. But one also finds the truth and beauty of raw colour: unfettered, unfamiliar, impermanent as the momentarily slumbering, blank and unpockmarked sun [6] or as pleasingly brief and pointilliste as a touch of pigment: a surprisingly free agent capable of regenerating itself. Colour encased within mosaic tesserae is literally atwitter (“bats that moved on the walls like intelligent black gloves.” [1]) or patchy, like a quilt. This essay, then, explores a pavement-like combinatoric that self-assembles according to one’s feelings. Knowledge comes from noticing, from being present and adjusting to the fact that things are getting amassed and must be inserted into a stretch of one’s life [7].

Think of each precisionist spot as a Tweet uncoupled, yet assimilatable, into the collective din. Like niggatory sense impressions or the “hits” of love, the chromatic inlay emerges out of idle repetition that auto-coalesces into a recognisable pattern almost by chance. The compression of this saturated jot makes it wholly and intensely alive in the moment. It kinesthetically presents, not statically represents. Neither memorable (too insignificant) nor durable (too fleeting), the sensuous image-as-point is caught in the instant by the moving viewer. In that sense, delivering a dollop of pure colour resembles the fierce riffs of love. Both are condensed performances conducted on the fly using non-verbal cues.

Monochrome space and motion

The impact on the beholder is not completely dependent on physical scale. Monochromatic works – big or small – have the capacity to quintessence a sprawling field into a froth of flower or air into a cloud. Cy Twombly’s monumental seascape series, *A Gathering of Time* (2003), on view at the Art Institute of Chicago, includes two vast canvases of the Caribbean Ocean off the banks of St. Barthelemy. These shimmering sheets of turquoise have their pellucid volume of water only slightly troubled by opaque patches – indicating great depth – with lighter, almost transparent, passages, for the nacreous shallows. The delicate pink and white jellies – adorned with thin streamer-membranes floating free – occasionally bobbing on the surface scarcely ruffle the impression of the sea’s “green sameness.” Although written many decades before Twombly’s production of such barely nicked swaths of single colour, the keen observations of John Updike seem apt.

“But the marks on the sea move ... and the water near me is tinted with the white of the sand underneath, so that its clear deep-throated green is made delicate, acidulous, artificial. And I seem to see, now and then, running vertically with no regard for perspective, veins of a metallic colour,

filaments of silver or gold — it is impossible to be certain which — waver elusively, but valuably, at an indeterminate distance below the skin of the massive, flat, monotonous volume” [1].

In this flip-flop reality, the corresponding winter-white panels – capturing the bleak Tyrrhenian Sea – are marked with brown algae and drooping, trailing, clogging kelp. The dreary Gulf of Gaeta in Italy that Twombly now reveals possesses nothing of the Caribbean’s buoyancy or tissue-paper lightness. Its chilly world is somber, heavy, mottled: freighted with the sea’s decaying organisms. The muffled surf loses its deeps and becomes an impenetrable wall, inflexible and fixed. By contrast, the scintillant gem-coloured summer panels – suspended as if they were a single, fragile and breeze-responsive cloth – demonstrate optically as well as neurally freedom of motion, that is, the close connection of the visual with the motor cortex. In either case, visual illusion is operative. We become disoriented and dizzily “swim” in the sea’s ethereal green sameness just as we get cognitively entangled and trapped within the anti-perspectival contrivance of a hard-plastered murality.

The tendency of monochromatic colour – whether writ small or large – to release packets of retinal and emotional energy was also recently on display in Manhattan. Christo’s and Jean-Claude’s tropical *Gates* (2007) could be taken as the logical kinetic extension of Twombly’s drenched canvases, releasing the implicit dynamics locked in their concentrated hue. This luxuriant project consisted of 7000 hot orange ripstop nylon panels – suspended from steel frames – that festooned a snowy Central Park [8, 9]. Waving in the frosty wind and backlit by the rising and setting sun, these sensuous saffron curtains served as a gilded scrim for the bare or blackened skeletal trees that glinted through their pools of colour. The video documentary made chronicling the evolution of this artificial garden island shows how the pedestrian’s and the bicyclist’s eyes were rivetted by the unpredictable overhead swing of coppery “portals” leading to a clement elsewhere. Each spicy billow – an externalized flutter of the heart – unleashed anticipation in the stroller or rider for the next visible beat. Like a galaxy of copper gates joyously opening onto undappled glowing suns, there were periodic lulls with virtually no activity. This serenity was followed by high spirits and tumultuous disruptions lifting the convulsed fabric into ever more fiery images. As Darwin recognized, emotional expressivity is hardly limited to human beings [10]. Even the ordinary world of sheer scarves or falling drapery is suffused by affecting patterns.

Compressed colour

But what of the erotics of compressive colour? Its self-contained form – or intarsia structure – operate like a magnetic field *bonding* and magically resolving otherwise divided components into a temporary unity. Qualities and functions are not separate, that is, indirect representations bifurcated from our neural and perceptual organization, but imbricated in the very shape of the experience as a direct physical *performance*. This enactive aspect of combinatorics appears to hold whether one is speaking of neurons, charged particles, or human behavior. That is, the apparatus supposedly driving the system is actually co-ordinate with matter, just as compact colour contracts what is distracted and dispersed. The hue + form patch points only to itself. As a gesture of insertion exhibiting how we touch the world, it is both signified and signifier intently focussing selective attention on itself and obliterating competing sensory stimuli.

But let us return to Cy Twombly and to a more sultry integration of perception, thought, and feeling into a single sensory-motor concept [11]. I want to consider another large-scale series, this one echoing the lavish six-panel format typical for Japanese folding screens coming from the Edo Period.

His sumptuous and worldly *Peony Blossom Paintings* (2007) are immersive horizontal works. Three of the six are currently on view [on loan] to the Art Institute of Chicago. Rather than exploring the relationship between the painter's inner consciousness and a misty oceanic vista, they configure the implacability of bodily awareness: the arousal, climax, and ebbing flicker of passion. These inter-art panels are inspired by a taut and suggestive haiku composed by Takari Kikaku about the famous fourteenth-century Samurai, Masashike Kusunoki. Grown weary of endless combat and violence, the warrior turns away from battle to give himself up to pleasure. The lust of war and the ferocity of sex are conflated. It is not accidental that Twombly only lightly rubbed out the pentimento, *amour*, leaving the erased word still legible when replacing it with the poet's *armour*.

"Ah, the peonies
for which
Kusunoki
Took off his armour."

The dramatic chromatic shifts distinguishing the three exhibited canvases trace a wrenching trajectory with one dominant or ruling colour tinting the roseate petals scattered over the picture plane. The opening salvo is launched by the lush, melting and dissolving mint green panel bearing five nectar-dripping peonies. Each huge creamy blossom is separated by Twombly's scrawl of the snatch of a verse commemorating the sensuous undoing of the formidable hero.

the white peony/ at the moon one evening/ crumbled and fell
the peony falls/ spilling out/ yesterday's rain
from the heart of the/ peony a drunken/ bee
the peony quivers/ quivers

The bud-like freshness and lyrical novelty of early love is overridden in the second panel by a ripe crimson voluptuousness. Incredible velvety blood-red peonies — evocative of unfolding labiae and a woman's distended sexual organs — erupt from a glistening golden ground. The synaesthetic effect arises from a rich interplay that leaves us reeling: it is acute and sharp like the insistent pangs of desire and explosive like inhaling a heady perfume. In the third panel, the heavy ruby flowers have withered into amethyst. Going to seed, they sink into the dry sere and metallic tarnish.

The original fertile five blossoms have now multiplied and fragmented into eight, wearily and repetitively speckling the surface like spilled wine. The browned and clouded hue signals deadening, the stagnation of sweetly exciting first encounter and exuberant high-noon fulfillment in the inexorable downward slide into bottomless loss. In the process of looking, the viewer's sensorium becomes the repercussive medium for the psychomachia taking place within Kusunoki. We are incessantly and instantaneously confronted with the increase and decrease in the chromatic strength of his emotional realities — from jubilantly wet to forlornly dessicated.

Long before manufacturers of personalized products began dropping tinctures of pheromones into their seductive compounds [12], painters as well as poets realized they not only boosted sex appeal but were intimately tied to colour as an erotic attractant. The ancient Egyptians knew the power of fragrance. Stepping into a New Kingdom temple after 5000 years, housing small jars of amber perfume, the visitor cannot help but notice they still emit a scent. Clive James's poem captures this dual sensory potency embodied in a legendary flower.

“The wild White Nun, rarest and loveliest
 Of all her kind, takes form in the green shade
 Deep in the forest, Streams of filtered light
 Are tapped, distilled, and lavishly expressed
 As petals. Her sweet hunger is displayed
 By the labellum, set for bees in flight
 To land on. In her well, the viscin gleams:
 Mesmeric nectar, sticky stuff of dreams.
 This orchid’s sexual commerce is confined
 To flowers of her own class, and nothing less.
 And yet for humans she sends so sublime
 A sensual signal that it melts the mind
 . . .” [13]

Like Twombly’s splendid *Peony* series, Clive James’ rapturous lyric to a darkness-defying intoxicating bloom exhibits that conceptual knowledge is embodied, that is, mapped within our sensory-motor system. (“She opens utterly / To show how she can match his [the Minotaur’s] tears of pain. / He drinks her in, and she him, like the rain.”) The sensory-motor system, then, provides structure to conceptual content as well as characterizing semantic content in terms of our bodily behavior in the world (“looking,” “seeking,” “longing,” “kissing,” “tasting”). This hypothesis defies the claims of early cognitivism that concepts are disembodied abstract symbolic representations. Recent research, in fact, reveals that when we imagine seeing something some of the same parts of the brain are activated as when we actually see; and when we imagine moving something some of the same parts of the brain get activated as when we actually move.

Viewers of art and readers of poetry thus reenact affect and gesture or the “colours” of the emotions.

“Transported to the world, her wiles inspire
 The same frustration in rich connoisseurs
 Who pay the price for nourishing the stem
 To keep the bloom fresh, as if their desire
 To live forever lived again through hers:
 But in a day she fades, though every fold
 Be duplicated in fines shades of gold
 . . .”

It is instructive to consider such form/colour/emotion-encapsulating images (demonstrating imagining and doing as relying on the same neural substrate) in light of current reassessments of Kant’s ascription of feelings to reason. This is the startling argument that supposedly cold, disinterested reason, in fact, has obscure interests, tendencies, even needs [14]. In his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Kant associates feelings with “sensibility.” He means by this that to sense is to feel, to be stimulated, to alter our perceptions — not entirely a positive propensity because to be thus affected is also a fleeting and contingent state fraught with ambiguity. Nonetheless, for Kant, these rational “wanderings” in the realm of the supra-sensual are not merely Rousseauian empty reveries but serve as a compass to steer behavior and action in the world. Nor are they Burke’s

dangerous Sublime — that vast and boundless torrent of emotion unleashed before the great, the uncommon, and the stupendous — rare sights by which we are “forced into compliance” [15].

The framing of experience

What is significant for my purpose is how a disciplined or embodied reason imparts *shape* and even a *typology* to the softness of soft emotions. I want to suggest that intarsia formats [both artistic and poetic] staunch the bleeding of colours and channel concepts into zones (as in: “Because we have a mind to make her ours/and she belongs to nobody’s idea/of the sublime but hers.”) Even our most intense physical and psychological experiences can be *framed* and *contained* for viewing. Indeed, the only way the excitable and mutable passions assailing us can be scrutinised is if they are flashed down at the moment in which they are most intense. The aesthetic mechanism of “fixing” thus becomes all-important, enabling us to endure the pangs accompanying the comings and goings of arousal. On one hand, Burke is pertinent here since he speaks of the “awefulness” of the sudden and *single* strikes in the striking of a great clock or a “single stroke on a drum” — the aural equivalent of the bulk of any large object seen as one entire piece. But on the other hand, such unitary irrational experiences not only overwhelm, their excesses cannot be adequately contained by any aesthetic experience.

As I proposed earlier, but in a different context, monochromatic micro-or macro-mosaics, by contrast, intersect the rule-driven, or governing, structures of art with the particular short-lived bursts of feeling discharged in life. Imagine them as grafting, or setting side by side, bits of intense pleasure and pain. Consider this passage from a short story about the re-performance of Christ’s crucifixion in a New Mexican morada during Passion Week. The suffering of the whipped wooden man on the crucifix is as garish under the buzzing fluorescent bulbs as the hero’s is about to be personal and cruel.

“There is violence in the very carving: chisel marks gouge belly and thigh, leave fingers and toes stumpy. The contours of the face are rough, ribs sharp, the body emaciated. Someone’s real hair hangs limply from the stature’s head. The artist did not stop at the five wounds, but inflicted his brush generously on the thin body. And there are the nails. Three. One in each hand, one skewering the long, pale feet. Amadeo feels his own palms throb and ache” [16]

Just as Amadeo begins to sense what these torments will physically and morally do to him at the instant when his daughter’s hand traces a trickle of blood down the bound wooden feet of the statue, inlaying genres are fundamentally *ethical*. As embodied simulation they trap our intuitive receptivity, pause our quick responsiveness to seductive stimulation, and hold these disquieting sensible impulses within peripersonal space — in all their singular coloration — for principled consideration. Grasping something means that the pathos/pathology of the merely empirical and of solipsistic self-interest gets admixed with balancing reason or, as we would say today, with the embodied and enactive insights of higher-order cognition.

Stepping even farther back into the eighteenth century, Bishop Berkeley’s *Essay toward a New Theory of Vision* belongs, as has recently been claimed, within a larger system foregrounding an embedded God. What interests me about Berkeley’s prismatic theory of vision wherein “knowledge comes from presence” [17], is that an *embedded* intimacy obtains not just between man and God but between chunks of perceived existence and the neural apparatus of the perceiver. Moreover, in line

with Gerald Edelman's hypothesis concerning the "remembered present," no perception is new but must already have something "old" or remembered about it.

Drawing from history

Like Olafur Eliasson's virtuoso installation, *Take Your Time* (2009), currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago — inspired by seventeenth-century Jesuit multiplying mirrors, crystal cabinets, and kaleidoscopic optical instruments — Berkeley's prismatic universe fits together a phantasmagoric inner reality from glittering facets of tinted glass [18]. This pieced-together antiquarian realm — reminiscent of *Wunderkammer* and Cabinet of Curiosity is still apt in our age of dark nostalgia and taxidermic bricolage. The *Multiple Grotto* — itself a spherical walk-in snowflake whose internal shadowy projecting angles are ornamented with geometric feldspar lenses — offers evidence not only for Eliasson's deep spelunking into the history of the vitreous but into ancestral empiricism as well. For the contemporary artist who stitches alternative realities together, just as for the revisionist neoplatonist Berkeley, ideas are auratic, amplifying, and transforming nodes of interchange. At once plastic and temporary, that is, dependent upon one's point of view, such magical haptics tie together vision and action in a gestural system of mutual exchange.

According to Berkeley, vision requires us to understand tactilely what it means to move in space. In that sense it is kaleidoscopic before its time since it establishes links in scale. Unless it is conjoined with the hand, we cannot measure, control, or evaluate the life world — seen from our particular vantage as a particular localized subject. As myriad, early-modern illusion-generating optical devices revealed — that is, devices dispensing with grasping the image — even when the mechanism behind the deception is unveiled the viewer cannot escape his intrinsic hardwiring. Vision without touch is a two-dimensional flatland, a chaos of intangible forms and broken colours. Only when their patchiness or gappiness is made manifest naturally, through contact, or artificially, through paint-gesture, do we get a momentary insight into the neural operating system standing behind it all.

For the immaterialist Berkeley, the ultimate guarantor for the continuity of the universe — even when we do not attend to it or feel it — is God. Today neuroscientists are like cryptographers trying to crack the code used by the nervous system to represent the external world. Or, as Ramachandran puts it: how does the message from the eyeball on the retina go through the optic nerve to the two major visual centers of the brain: the old, evolutionarily ancient pathway (including the superior colliculus) and the new pathway heading to the visual cortex in the back of the brain? [19]. Pathological disjunctions between locating objects spatially in the visual field (old pathway) and consciously recognizing objects (new pathway) help account for being unaware or aware that we are seeing things.

Olafur Eliasson revisits these metaphysical and epistemological conundrums concerning apparent solidity — dating back to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries — when he invokes Berkeley's rebus world. An endless succession of impalpable magic lantern phantoms and distorting puzzle-piece imagery disrupted a well-ordered story-line or any "normal" sequence of events. Unfurled by anamorphic cylinders and refracting prisms, these piercing packets of light-shot chromatic data desubstantialised matter and destabilized perception. The contemporary Icelandic/Danish artist's accordion-pleated stainless steel *One-Way Tunnel*, coated with colour-reflecting faceted acrylic mirrors, poses once more the venerable problem of objective knowledge and the truth of empirical observation. The machinic world view atomizes the illusion of space and time as a continuum, precipitating them into concrete patches or momentous instants [20].

Eliasson's installation is mechanistic in the sense that it is primarily about the spatio-temporal conditions and constraints or the singular adventures of units of light and colour, not about the completed ensemble. When the visitor enters his intarsia tunnel, she is bathed in a divided rainbow. But, upon turning around at its exit and looking back to the entrance, what originally appeared as a celebration of Newton's spectral optics is transformed into the blackest mine shaft because of kinetic occlusion. From this new vantage point, the rearranged combinatoric of facets interrupts the variable wavelengths of the sun's incoming rays, obscuring them. What a second before had been a vividly broken surface is now optically sheared away by a second, repetitively aligning surface passing in front and blotting the first from view [21]. Similarly, life requires us constantly to rethink those parts of experience that were not seen a moment before or whose prior meanings no longer seem to obtain. I have been arguing that it is specifically the emotional quotient of perception that brings this potent realization to the fore. We exclaim *aha* when we are forcefully put in contact with a traumatic packet of new data that punches a hole in the assumed perpetuation of existence as we know it, thus raising the local sensation to global awareness.

Eliasson's *Take Your Time* installation appropriately spills into many rooms since it provides an extended reflection on the dissolving and resolving modalities of visual order, considered as incommensurable world views. Like Berkeley's *Theory of Vision*, his work is deeply characterized by anamorphoses: Janus-faced imagery that looks different to the beholder depending upon the aspect and angle through which it is regarded [22]. Eliasson notably returns us to my initial coupling of colour with eros in his anamorphic series of photographs exploring various cave interiors found in his native Iceland. Severely cropped so that the resulting image focuses the viewer's attention exclusively on differently sized and shaped orifices – with milky glaciated streams rushing in and out of them – these equivocal caverns hover between biology and geology, visceral anatomy and mineralogical deposit.

It is not that he scrambles the scene for edification or entertainment. Nor do the perplexing lithic surroundings require the viewer actually to rotate the image by 90 or 180 degrees – as was the case in earlier times. Rather, the unfamiliar erotic adaptation of convoluted strata, carmine-tinted veins, and beckoning openings to a new visual purpose initiates a succession of affective, perceptual, and cognitive changes in the beholder. As his photos dissolve the idea of stone and replace it with the sensation of flesh, lapidary intractability shifts from being one object into quite another, formed from malleable tissues and spewing fluids. Red iron oxides and yellow sulfur shape-shift into membranes and semen before our eyes. The inorganic realm becomes inverted into the organic, that is, into its opposing pole. Or, rather, the inanimate and animate dimensions of the same scene are minutely laid side by side, set into a relational mosaic with the parts exhibited comparatively as dependent upon one another. The purpose of this medley of images as well as of compound thoughts, then, is to effect change in reality by jostling attention.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Eliasson demonstrates that inhuman and human entities concretely intersect with our identity – rendering it pointilliste and episodic. Yes, our neural system entangles us in coordinating, grouping, and seeing analogically. But hybrid inlaying genres teach us how to juggle a Blakean universe conceived as infinite pluralism [23]. Such congruency-forging systems of figuration reveal ways in which the heterogeneous objects coexisting in the universe might converse with one another

as well as with us. Like exceptional love, discrete colour-saturated formats demonstrate that events are anomalous, breaking the daily iterative grind by rupturing our expectation of what comes next. By seizing the viewer's sensory and emotional apparatus – through the interplay of shaped monochromatic colours that stand out against the blurry backdrop of mundane life and its dulling habits – gapped mosaics let unforeseen possibilities emerge into view.

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