

James Hugonin: variations on the theme of colour, similarity and difference

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James Hugonin has made just eighteen paintings in the last twenty two years. Each has been the same size and used an identical silverpoint grid drawn into a gesso surface. Using a pre-composed system he has covered the grid with small rectangles of colour. This essay uses these paintings to discuss insights into the nature of colour that Hugonin's slow reflective practice has generated over the years, revealing the iridescent fluid nature of this elusive substance.

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Introduction

In 1988 James Hugonin took a gesso covered board measuring 170.8×152.6cm and started to work on a new painting (Figure 1). First, he used silverpoint to inscribe the surface with a series of parallel lines that were separated by an alternating rhythm of 3.8mm and 1.2mm gaps. When completed, they formed the fine mesh of individual, yet interconnected, rectangles that provided the composition's underlying, linear structure. With the smooth white gesso energised by these scored lines, Hugonin then turned to colour, which not only provided the work's material substance but its subject matter as well. Its initial introduction through three base colours was tantalisingly subtle. Whilst alternating, insubstantial glazes of a pale blue/green and its complementary, orange/red were applied to the broader 3.8mm vertical columns, the narrower 1.2mm gaps were picked out by the light grey that was formed when the blue green and orange red were mixed together. Although barely distinguishable from the overwhelming white of the gesso the interplay between these translucent tones sent an almost imperceptible ripple across the picture surface.



Figure 1: James Hugonin, Untitled (I) – Arts Council Collection, London, oil and wax on wood, 170.8×152.6 cm, 1988, photograph by Keith Pattison.

Once Hugonin had completed the preparatory work, he then began to cover the grid with small rectangular strokes of colour, one square wide by two squares and the intervening gap high. These were designed to be just large enough to register as a distinctive unit of visual information, but small enough for their edges to become blurred and their individual integrity to be compromised when seen from a distance. Although they appeared to be randomly located within the structure, the positioning of these marks followed a precise set of rules. The first rectangle of the first colour was applied near the top left hand corner of the grid followed by three more rectangles of the same colour. Then, leaving a gap of 8cm he painted another four rectangles of the same colour further down the grid. Together these eight loosely related colour marks suggested an inverted ‘S’ shape, which became the painting’s constantly repeated core motif. Having applied the first ‘S’, the position of the next was found a hand’s breadth to the right of the first with a 16cm gap between the two groups of four rectangles, whilst a further hand’s breadth and a 12cm gap between the groups provided the next position. This initiated the system’s other recurring pattern; a basic triplet that sent a wave across the surface and was then repeated at hand-breadth gaps down the grid until the system *ran out of space*, at which point Hugonin returned to the top of the painting and started again with the next colour.

It took months of unhurried repetition, and more than 60 colours, for every 3.8mm rectangle to be filled. Eventually, however, the compositional ‘rules’ could no longer be followed, at which point, the few, isolated empty spaces that remained were filled with colours that had not previously been used. But the move from abstract theory to organic reality had seen the laws governing the system disrupted almost immediately, as the introduction of more and more colours made it increasingly difficult for all eight marks in the ‘S’ motif to be placed in their assigned positions. Frequently, there was already a colour occupying part or all of its space. With the ‘ideal’ purity of the grid compromised therefore, Hugonin was forced to make intuitive and instinctive decisions with the system, abandoning rigid regularity for a melange of incomplete ‘S’ motifs and extended multicoloured rectangles, which brought the painting to life with their incidents of subtle dissonance.

Composition and colour

The formal aspects of the work, with its fractally repeated ‘S’ motifs in small rectangles and clearly defined vertical boundaries, gave the composition an underlying sense of rigid strength, separation, isolation, and distinctiveness. However, the introduction of colour dissolved this boundaried

individuality, transforming the surface into a liquid world; a space of flux and fluid borders. Whilst the initial underlying bands of colour had sent a faint shiver across the surface, the finished work was animated by a more definite sense of visual oscillation as complementary and contrasting colours came into energising contact. This surface playfulness was reinforced by the addition of white to some colours, creating opaque mounds of pastel pigment whose jewel-like, subtle colours protruded from the smooth gesso surface like shards of glass. These contrasted with other colours that were applied as less assertive glazes; translucent reliquaries holding the trace of the brush in a drift of pigment; and reminding us of the liquid origins of all paint. The resulting interplay between these translucent and opaque marks sent a further destabilising ripple both through and across the silvery filaments of the grid.

When viewed close up the structure of the grid still seemed to dominate, with each colour mark contained within a rectangular boundary that helped to maintain its strict identity. From a distance, however, these divisions and distinctions became blurred, and any sense of individuality was absorbed into the larger whole; an indeterminate space of iridescent beauty across which shoals of fluctuating yellow light seemed to swim in serpentine waves.



Figure 2: James Hugonin, Untitled (XVIII) – Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, oil and wax on wood, 170.8×152.6 cm, 2009-10, photograph by John McKenzie.

Hugonin has completed just eighteen of these paintings in the last twenty two years (Figure 2). Inevitably, the passing of time has seen the compositional system and technique undergo definitive and significant changes. Before starting the twelfth painting in the series, Untitled [XII], (2002-3) Hugonin composed its 'score', setting out in a notebook the parameters by which each colour could be placed within the painting. This was not like a conventional musical score, but echoed instead the organic, imprecise instructions written by American 'indeterminate' composers such as Morton Feldman and John Cage. Through this simple notational system Hugonin has been able to devise and refine each painting's distinctive compositional structure before committing it to the strict discipline

of the grid. It was also with this twelfth painting that a change in the core motif occurred, with the 'S' replaced by a double oval constructed from two ellipses, each made up of six rectangles. This was then introduced in *Untitled (XV)*, (2006/07) from both the left and right hand sides of the painting to generate interlocking waves across the surface. Changes have also taken place in the overall colour register. Colours are no-longer mixed with white, and black has been introduced to create a bolder, more dynamic, less fugitive impression, which is reinforced by a greater degree of precision in the application of each mark.

And yet, despite these changes, both the painting process and the overall appearance of the works remains essentially the same. Their dimensions have not varied, the meticulously applied gesso surface is still incised with silverpoint lines using the same intervals to create a grid. This continues to provide the scaffold for the laboriously applied small rectangular marks. It offers a point of focus and a stability that defies the emphasis on surface change and difference that characterises so much of today's art world. These are not reflections on a culture that is in technological flux and a world in a state of constant evolution. Instead they provide a set of variations on the theme of colour; gently playing with and exposing its nature through the act of focused concentration that is imposed by the unavoidably time consuming and inherently painstaking process that Hugonin and his assistants are committed to undertake in performing the score.

In their self-contained regularity these small marks make no concession to anything outside of the grid. They are not concerned with representation or imitation, nor do they offer a sociological or confessional comment on contemporary society. But at the same time, neither are they a celebration of art for art's sake, deliberately employing or focusing on the quick thrill of optical effect, or colour's emotive and expressive potential. They are what they are; dabs of colour organised within a structured and ordered system and displayed within their silverpoint 'wunderkammer'. But it is through the very repetitive persistence of this process; its exclusion of any extraneous association that our concentrated focus can be fixed on colour. These small, individual marks are like the constantly repeated notes that form the soundscapes of minimalist composers such as Steve Reich or Philip Glass. Initially monotonous and indistinguishable, these passages of colour 'noise', like a constantly recurring series of notes, gradually overwhelm us with their persistent presence, drowning us in their total environment until we are brought to an almost meditative state. There we are enabled to see beyond the apparently solid surface skin that colour throws across the world; beyond its external and formal pre-occupations, to glimpse its phenomenological essential nature.

Colour variation 1: colour and embodiment

Hugonin's studio lies under the north-eastern foot hills of the Cheviots looking out across a wide valley towards the Scottish Borders. This is not a domesticated rural landscape, but a wilder, more exposed environment where the Northumbrian hills prepare to meet the horizontal expanse of the North Sea. Although the sea cannot be seen from the house its nearby presence is clearly felt, influencing the quality of light that bathes this landscape, and causing grey skies to sparkle with a changing palette of yellows, blues, greens, and pinks. At the same time, winds often blow in from Northern Europe ruffling the meadow grass into an ever shifting sea of blue and green, whilst causing the trees that surround the garden to move as if to some invisible puppeteer's strings. In winter the linear tracery of these bare limbs frames a multicoloured, irregular patchwork of fields, heather and rock strewn slopes. This is a landscape alive with dancing colour.

Hugonin's works make no obvious reference to this geography, apparently caught up in an interior, self-contained world; their rigid formalism unconnected to any natural environment. But to approach them in this essentially Cartesian way fails to recognize our embodied state as human beings [1]. These works may not seem to reflect the local landscape, but they are painted in studios bathed in sea dappled light from which wind blown meadows can be seen to dance like shoals of darting fish. Instead of mimicking appearances, they reflect and imitate the experience of 'natural' colour. For, when we are immersed in the landscape we do not encounter neatly divided and classified, individual colours, but something more generic; colour as dappled light, sparkling or dull, and colours rippling and flowing, in a state of constant flux; a substance as fugitive and ephemeral as quicksilver or a rainbow.

We cannot unravel the subtle variety of tones in an overcast sky, instead we give it the name 'grey', and even though we are aware that distant hills contain a myriad of individual colours we still perceive them as a hazy blue green. This is the experience we have when we stand back before one of Hugonin's paintings. We may know that there are at least one hundred and forty-four individual colours occupying each grid, but we experience their individuality only indistinctly, for we are overwhelmed by an encounter with the more general phenomenon of 'colour'; a nebulous, transient surface of embodied light pulsating beneath our gaze, like the dappled underbelly of passing clouds or the rolling waves of swaying meadow grass.

It is colour that helps to locate us within our environment, providing the world with form and texture, depth and difference. But, as science has revealed, the colours we perceive to be 'out there' are actually the product of neurological activity and therefore individual, subjective, and ultimately disembodied and insubstantial. Similarly, these paintings can also appear disembodied, self-referential, and self-contained; the product of a system whose ideal form exists within the pages of a notebook and therefore independent of any physical actualisation. But we exist in this world, and experience it, through our bodies, whose physicality anchors us in time and space. The world may be coloured in by a mental process, but that process is triggered by external substances; by the particular ability of surfaces to reflect and absorb light, and by those photons piercing the boundaries of our body to interact with the chemicals in our eyes and brain.

The body, as well as the landscape in which it is found, is therefore an unavoidable presence in the construction and composition of these paintings, with their double oval forms, being akin to the DNA helix, providing the basic building block of a system that is underpinned by measurements made in finger and hand spans. The marks that bring each colour into being on the grid are not the free gestures of the abstract expressionists, but are more tightly contained; a condensed declaration of physical control and concentration. And the choice of each colour is not decided by the disembodied, ideal system of the notebook but by a gut feeling on the day and at the time that a new colour is needed. Gradually, as more and more colours are introduced the clarity of the original system is overwhelmed until each double oval form is subsumed within a dazzling, effervescent whole. To relocate them Hugonin places his fingers onto the grid like a pianist locating the original elements of a chord, and just for a moment this act of physical contact helps to bring the other instances of that colour into focus.

And so, whilst these works may appear disembodied, and although they may eschew obvious references and allusions, if we look beyond the anonymity of the grid we come to realise that they are icons of embodiment; celebrations of being and body expressed through the catalyst of colour.

Colour variation 2: iridescence

Because of the complexity of his systems and technique Hugonin has rarely ventured into the territory of print-making; in 1986, however, he produced a book of four prints, 'Ode for Basil Bunting'¹. In these delicate and nebulous images an early form of the grid appeared. It was a structure dominated by its horizontal elements, with its vertical thrust confined to the short struts that helped to divide these horizontal bands into a series of rectangles. Its lattice of delicate lines was covered with tiny strokes of the palest pastel hues, which clustered across, between, and within the individual elements, bridging the gaps and gently animating the surfaces. The size of these marks, and the reticence of their colour, mean that they barely register on the eye. Instead, they confront us with an iridescent veil of white light; creating a liquid space flecked with tantalizing hints of colour that demand our concentrated gaze.



Figure 3: James Hugonin, Three fluctuations in contrary rhythm (Parts I-III) – Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, three 30-colour screenprints (edition 45), 74.8×65.4 cm (@ image size) and 97.7×83.7 cm (@ paper size), 2009, photograph by John McKenzie.

Iridescence as a quality of light and colour fascinates Hugonin. His paintings reveal its different aspects and qualities. In the early works of this series it is seen as an opaline translucence; with its echoes of mother of pearl, and its sense of fleeting shimmer and insubstantiality. The vibrant, substantial colours of the later works, however, have brought with them an iridescence of fluidity and flux, dynamic interplay and effervescence, intangible borders and irresolution. We can discern some of these qualities in Hugonin's recent group of prints 'Three Fluctuations in Contrary Rhythm' (2009), made in collaboration with Pip Gresham and the team from the Cambridge Print Studio. This is a triptych that both summarizes the current series of paintings and anticipates its future (Figure 3). Despite being restricted by the technical demands of the process to the use of only thirty colours, their

¹ Basil Bunting was a Northumbrian poet who died in 1985.

surfaces fizz and vibrate. Each mark is a starburst of energy; a chromatic explosion that seems to leap out and embrace us, before drawing us back into the grid. Every colour has a unique identity shaped by the particular combination of colours that surround it; colours which are in turn affected by their own specific context. In this space of interconnection and interplay 'chaotic' rules apply, where the presence of a transparent colour on one side of the grid can have a subtle, but significant affect on its complementary colour on the other side, causing an infinitely resonating wave of individual hues that activate the printed surface.

If Hugonin's work allows us to encounter iridescence as insubstantial translucence and energetic interplay, it also allows us to experience colour as a liquid realm that defies boundaries. In his studio there are clearly numbered glass jars of paint that identify each colour that has been used in his works. Like a decorator's, or printer's colour chart, they classify and solidify the boundaries of colour taming it with numbers that seek to describe its identity. But these numbers are illusory and ultimately meaningless. For once these colours have been let loose onto the surface of the painting they revert back to their natural state. They become iridescent: their boundaries blur, the space begins to reverberate, and each individual mark becomes anonymous, *lost forever* in a sea of scintillating colour. Through the particular, pointillist focus afforded by the grid, we encounter colour as a will-o-the-wisp substance that cannot be pinned down or classified. Our minds may try to hold onto its lines and regularity for support, but inevitably we are sucked into a relentless whirlpool of colour, an iridescence that defies our control and refuses to be tamed. For in these paintings and in Hugonin's prints colour is a substance of the sublime: a shifting, indeterminate, mysterious element that confronts us with a glimpse of the invisible and ineffable; leading us to the edge of an abyss where 'all that is solid melts into air'².

Colour variation 3: bridging the chasm of dualism

The strictly defined vertical and horizontal lines of Hugonin's grids are symbolic of a dualist approach to the world; offering the cruciform model of dialectical engagement that has defined Western thought since classical times, where a distinct separation is seen to exist between the realms of the transcendent and immanent, visible and invisible, mind and body, near and far. It is the stratified world that Barbara Stafford associates with an allegorical world view in her book, **Visual Analogy** [2]. And yet this 'allegory' of difference is swept aside by colour which forms a tidal wave that blurs and disrupts the grid's strict borders, transforming individual cells into an interconnected whole. For as Hugonin's paintings reveal, colour is fluid, embodied, and iridescent; a substance that Stafford might describe as analogical for it bridges the chasm of dualism bringing together things that are usually seen as incompatible: making visible the invisible, merging the transcendent and immanent, and allowing the discovery of similarity in difference [2]. It does so because it itself exists in duality; a Siamese twin, inextricably and inevitably linked to light.

Light is an external, invisible, and transcendent substance, whose photons obey strict physical rules as their electromagnetic waves surf across space. Yet when these repositories of potential colour encounter the embodied reality of an immanent subject they are distorted by individuality; their objective rules are overthrown and they become fluid, individual, and unique moments of perceived

² Taken from the Communist Manifesto: *All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.*

colour that make visible this invisible, transcendent object. They exist in a duality that demands the interconnected term, 'trans-immanence' to describe their analogical relationship, where the external and internal, subjective and objective meet [3].

Through shade and tone, intensity and value colour contributes to the three-dimensionality of our everyday experience reinforcing the sense of separation essential to a world of dialectical difference. When we look at Hugonin's paintings our brains insist on seeing depth even though these drifts of pigment all occupy the same plane on the gesso board. For colour not only suggests depth, it can also collapse space, bringing together disparate objects, in different locations into a single two-dimensional field of sight. It allows us to perceive in the same moment and in the same space the flickering white of a star millions of miles away and thousands of light years distant and an object lying just before our eyes. It also allows the limpid blue insubstantiality of a winter sky to be caught within the grey, green, brown solidity of a tree's branches; two disparate, distinct entities fused in visual communion through colour's unifying bond.

Conclusion

Within the boundaries of Hugonin's paintings we are brought into an intense encounter with colour. Here, in these small shards of incarnated light we experience the phenomenological reality of a substance that is in constant flux; a sublime substance that is iridescent by nature rather than quality; an embodied substance that situates us within the world both physically and emotionally; and an analogical substance that makes visible the lines of communication light weaves between objects before penetrating the barriers of separation that serve to isolate. These rectangles of colour may not show us the world, but through their self-contained focus and subtle variations they allow us to see colour differently, and as a result, we inevitably come to see the world differently.

References

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