

Touching Colour

Artists' Statements

2013

Artists exhibiting in the exhibition were asked to provide a text that discussed their approach and use of colour in both the specific works exhibited and/or their practice more generally. Submitted texts are reproduced here in full.

David Batchelor

I made the first 'Idiot Stick' about 10 years ago. It came from noticing how certain shelves in supermarkets (those housing hair products and cleaning fluids in particular) are repositories of vivid colour. At the time I was looking for those areas in the city where colour was most prominent and for the typical types of colour that were present. This led me to experiment with plastics and with forms of illuminated colour - neon, fluorescent light, fairy lights, fairground lights, illuminated shop signs, and so on. I thought of colour in the city as a readymade rather than something that had to be made and mixed, and for the most part I still do. My aim then was to produce the most vivid and vulgar colour combinations that I could, to throw colour back at an art world that had, it seemed to me, largely dismissed it as trivial or cosmetic.

Extract from 'The Luminous and the Grey', Reaktion Books, 2014:

In the illuminated colour space of the city, colour is in a constant state of beginning and ending, of switching on and switching off, of being born and dying out. Colour comes and goes of its own accord but also in the eye and the mind of its beholder. The slightest turn of the head or the blink of an eye will bring colours into being and will wipe them away. This is colour in a constant state inconstancy, of beginning and ending; it is always there and always changing and it is never quite there or quite the same as it was a moment ago. Colour begins and colour ends in an instant. There are so many glowing colours to be caught in the web of reflective surfaces and so many shiny surfaces to bend, stretch, compress and redistribute colour freely across the city's surfaces. Colour is new each time and the city provides the platform for colour to perform its magic acts of appearing and disappearing and reappearing. It isn't so much that the city is full of new colours; rather the colours of the city are in a continuous process of renewal. When Walter Benjamin pointed to the 'fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt' he was no longer looking at the advertisement, at the electrified metal and glass object that was the ostensible source of light and colour. He was looking at colour that had

escaped its container and had become liquid. He may have been looking at a reflection in a pool of water but he was also looking at colour that in its reflected state is itself liquid. Luminous colour seeps, spills, bleeds and stains. It is a substance-less fluid that flows over buildings, vehicles and people and, without any loss of energy or momentum, drenches the asphalt beneath our feet. This colour is most liquid at dusk and after dark. While surface colours retreat at night and re-emerge as the curtains are drawn back in the morning, luminous colour is primarily nocturnal. It emerges at night and melts into reflections that soak the city; and then, after a few hours, when night turns to day, when the sun comes out and warms the air, the reflections begin to evaporate and leave little or no trace of their existence.

This is one of the great differences between colour in nature and colour in the city. In the natural world colour depends on and thrives in daylight, and the brighter the ambient illumination the brighter and more sumptuous the colour of plants, insects, birds and other animals. In the city colour thrives on darkness and all the best colours appear at dusk and in the night. When Benjamin saw that 'fiery pool' he must have been out in the city after dark. His writings are often nocturnal. He was also not looking up at the advertisements which, by then, must have been hovering unsupported against the night sky, but at his feet or where his feet might just have been. He was looking down (the traditional angle of incidence for every melancholic soul) and he was looking at the dark asphalt. The fiery pool is not glimpsed in isolation, it is seen against the hard horizontal plane of the road. And this is the point. In the colour life of the city vivid colour almost always co-exists with dirt and a degree of darkness. By day or at night, colour is usually accompanied by the less-than-colourful. It is supported by the contingencies of the street: it is literally bolted onto the sides of buildings, propped up on ledges and secured to roofs, and its reflections form in the potholes and gutters on the ground. These less-to-be-looked-at elements are none the less essential to the experience of colour in the city. This colour needs resistance and thrives on opposition. In the city the luminous is almost always accompanied by the grey:

they cohabit and they sustain one another in an often unacknowledged relationship of interdependence. The grey makes the luminous more luminous and the luminous makes the grey so much greyer. But it is not an entirely equal relationship as while grey can live alone, unsupported, unremarked and seemingly unchanging, the luminous can only be present in the presence of that which it is not, and then only for a while. Whatever looks luminous does not look grey; but, on the other hand, whatever looks luminous looks luminous because of the grey and the darkness that surrounds and threatens to extinguish it. It was this relationship that Benjamin looked at on the ground beneath his feet. The city is at the intersection of the luminous and the grey, or is itself that intersection. And this is not just a fact of the colour space of the city but one of its defining qualities.

James Hugonin

The two screenprints are primarily about the relationship of adjacent colours and their location within different coloured grids. The prints are made according to a written set of instructions, a process closely aligned to my painting practice. This involves the positioning of double oval forms set at three different distances apart from each other, starting from both the left and right hand sides of the image. These written instructions indicate the exact location of each rhythm of colour. The grid provides a structure to contain the colours and separate them by the introduction of thin horizontal and vertical gaps. The prints are a complex amalgamation of these different forms and their oscillations.

The ordering of the colours is systematic, with each print using warm and cool variations of a basic group of 18 colours. These colours are arrived at intuitively. While the colour groups vary subtly between each print and the positions for the marks remain the same, it is the re-ordering of these colours within the system that creates a dynamic ambiguity. In Binary Rhythm (Dark Red), there is a predominance of orange, ultramarine blue, dark pink and dark green, while in Binary Rhythm (Indigo) it is cadmium red, blue-grey, black and violet grey that exert the most influence. In each print these first four colours dictate the overall tone, which is further modified by the influence of the underlying grid. Emphasis is also placed on the relative translucency and opacity of individual colours, which allows the grid to appear and disappear. These fluctuations generate an indeterminate and unpredictable colour field.

Winston Roeth

When I think about colour (visualize it) I think about the light in that colour and then I think about pigments. Raw pigments are essential, pigments are the material that I attempt to transform into colour and light. Working directly with raw pigments is like an evolving alchemy. This way of working is for me both complex and direct.

Each pigment holds knowledge stored within it. I'm interested in revealing aspects of that knowledge. I'm looking for the energy that can be generated by the colour....the light.

With years of experience I've learned to 'see' colour with my inner eyes and relate to it directly. Then I have a good idea for how to proceed with the mix of pigments necessary to 'paint' the colour.

In a painting the colour that I'm searching for is always in flux...it keeps moving. When working on a painting I'm intensely involved in the movement of the colour....the flow of it... moving...surfacing.....taking notice....sensing where the colour wants to go.....what are the urges there....a new colour with nuance and energy....full of light.

Some colours are deep and dry and resonate from within...like chroma rising out of the shadows pulling you into them. Some colours respond to available light and reach out....they can reach across the room to get you. Pigments can reflect and/or absorb light. Some can split light into different spectrums of colour....they can change colour. There is reflected lightrefracted light.....absorbed light. All are aspects of the knowledge held in pigment and represent the language of colour.....the immense vocabulary of colour.

Simon Payne

Colour Bars is the first of series of video works I have made using the primary and secondary colours, plus black and white, that are associated with the video test signal image of 'colour bars'. These colour bars - stripes of white, yellow, cyan, green, magenta, red, blue and black, of equal width - are used by broadcast technicians to provide a stable signal against which luminance, chrominance and saturation are referenced. For the purposes of this video piece, I generated a sequence of more-or-less randomly selected digital stills, in which the colour bars had been shifted, to the left or the right, and/or magnified. There are sequences throughout the video in which one has a sense of the colour bars moving across the screen, and also vertically, in a streaming fashion, but these are the product of pure chance. With respect to colour perception, some passages of the video involve two superimposed layers of colour bars, making for a palette of 28 colours ostensibly. In contrast, I have the impression that the range of colours one might see, in the flickering sequences of the piece, is innumerable. Studies in perceptual psychology may be able to address the unstable colour patterns and impressions of movement in this piece, but I'm sceptical about the degree to which what one sees (as opposed to how one sees) can ever be accounted for. In any case, making works that prompt one to question what one perceives has been a recurrent aim for me.

Max Mosscrop

I have long been interested in the issues of human agency, intentionality, and determinism - the extent to which we can be, or know, the true causes of our actions – and I've used my practice as a way of exploring some aspects of this, for example by doing things very quickly, or by using certain 'chance' procedures.

Painting is a physical process executed in real time. It involves conscious deliberation, but also intuition, habit, accident, mistakes, improvisation, chance and luck. When I start a painting, I both know and don't know what I'm doing, and the process of making the painting is a process of working out some of the uncertainty. As I write this sentence, I have an idea of what I'm trying to write, but it's only in the act of writing, of making the sentence, selecting the words and organising them, going back and changing and correcting, that my meaning becomes clear to me. I think it is similar with making a painting (except that 'meaning' takes a very different form). The chosen materials and means of making have a determining effect on what can be made and meant.

A painting begins with the question of how to cover a surface: how will it look if I do it like this, with this procedure, this geometry, these colours, etc? Some of this has to do with what's possible, what I think I can achieve, what means are to hand. And a lot do with what I've done before, each painting being to some extent a response to the last one. But there is also a huge uncertainty behind the question which drives the process: I don't know, and don't want to know, precisely what the painting will look like. Making the painting is then a process of realisation in which something previously unknown unfolds and becomes clear. I'm feeling my way through an experience hoping to end up with something I couldn't entirely have anticipated. Colour can play an important role in this uncertainty because it's infinitely variable and unpredictable.

For me, colour is tied to the properties and behaviour of paint. Choosing colour in a painting isn't like choosing colour on a computer, where all the

colours are made in the same way and are equally available. In a painting colour has to be made from paint. I have to go out and buy the paint, store it, mix it. The colour that comes to hand in the studio is dependent on what the manufacturers produce, what the shop stocked, what I could afford, what I mixed last week, what I haven't spilt or left in an out-of-reach corner, etc. All these factors help to determine which colours I use, but they aren't part of my consciousness when I'm painting.

The paintings you have selected are made with watercolour on gesso. Gesso is a traditional material, used historically on panels as a ground for oil and tempera painting, but it is more absorbent than most modern painting surfaces and can be stained so that colour can appear to sit under as well as on top of the surface. The behaviour of watercolour is very dependent on the particular pigments it is made from. For example, chromium green is made from a metallic oxide which feels granular, heavy, dense and opaque, and can be used to form a flat, matt film. Cadmium red shares the heavy granular quality, but it's also incredibly vibrant, giving it a completely different energy in a painting. Prussian blue is another intense colour, but it is deep, inky and transparent. These non-chromatic properties of the paint can be as important as the 'colour' itself. I almost never use white, so varying tones of a given colour are a result of varying degrees of transparency, allowing the white of the gesso to shine through to varying extents. Watercolour has the advantage of remaining soluble, so I can mix dozens of colours in pots which can be revitalised after days or weeks just by adding water, allowing me to get to work quickly without spending hours re-mixing. This fast and easy access to a really big range of colours has been hugely important to my way of working. I don't like to deliberate about colour, preferring to select colours haphazardly in the hope of creating an interesting visual predicament which I hadn't consciously intended. In order to help this I built a big turntable to hold the pots of paint. There's some serendipity involved, and a good deal of failure too, but the process has to be enjoyable and playful.

The works selected for this show are more systematic than most, made using some rules to help the decision process. I often avoid using any given colour more than once in a painting, but these works use the repetition of colour quite strategically. In the sculptural works I used dice to select colours from a limited palette. The painting called “What I Think of When I Think of You” tends toward green, but in much of the work from this period I used as much colour as I could muster rather than pre-select a particular palette.

In the works selected, as in much of my recent painting, I’ve used an idea of ‘patches’: discrete areas of paint which acquire identity through shape and colour. Here, colour does something very obvious and very specific by differentiating one bit of a painting from another, and thereby giving the painting its structure. One can think of colour purely as a system of infinite differences, and in this sense colour is incredibly productive and fertile.

But colour always does something in excess of this articulation, something to do with energy and intensity which is difficult to describe and to predict. How a colour feels is so dependent on how much of it there is, what’s underneath it, what’s next to it, how it’s applied, etc. The only way of really knowing what a particular colour will do in a particular spot is to put it there and see. If I do this, to see how it will look, and leave it, does that mean I meant it?

The panels that these paintings are made on are fairly heavy, solid objects - their three-dimensionality is important - but I feel a painting works when it achieves a kind of vitality that makes it appear light and immaterial, and the vibration and dynamism of colour plays a big role in this.

There is a line in Peter Handke’s “The Weight of the World” which has acquired some significance for me (“To keep from crying, a child stares at the satchels hanging in the cloakroom”) because of the way it gently raise the question of what it means to look at something, and the possibility that being wholly engaged in sensing the world might momentarily take us out of ourselves.

Guy Sherwin

Painted Screen 1970/2012 - notes for exhibition at the Hatton Gallery

It was during my art foundation course (1966-7) upon reading Rudolf Arnheim's book *Art & Visual Perception* and coming across the paintings of Joseph Albers that I learnt, to my surprise, that colours appear to change in reaction to their surroundings. Unlike chameleons however, they change in the opposite direction. Hence a grey tone surrounded by red appears green, whereas the same grey surrounded by green appears red. Colour is relative! [From this I developed a sense of the relative value of all things - not even the sun is at the centre - thus all things are relative].

My paintings at that time used blocks of colour often of close tonality since that is when colours seem most vulnerable to outside influence. [At dusk the bright colours of flowers are suppressed to the same tonality and appear to sing and vibrate in relation to each other]. I made shallow relief paintings in which the forward surfaces were painted in darker tones to match the colours in the shadows. In essence I was fascinated by visual perception, how our eyes play tricks on us, how nothing is what it seems. Arnheim's book was my bible.

I began experimenting with projecting coloured light, from a Standard 8 film projector, onto my paintings and observing how the blocks of colour would jump around depending on the particular combination of coloured light on coloured pigment. I filled sketchbooks with little gouache paintings to find out more about this phenomenon, and I began breaking up time into tiny fragments using the single-frame control on my cine-camera to better understand its possibilities. I could, if I wanted to, make up to eighteen changes of colour in every second. I was intrigued to find out what sense our eyes might make of that.

My painting course at Chelsea School of Art at that time barely supported film. [Most of the painting tutors considered that film wasn't a fine art because it

existed in time, or because it wasn't an object]. However in my final year I made a large 6' x 8' painted screen and projected film onto it. This work was never screened publicly and the painting was subsequently lost.

The work in this exhibition is taken directly from my sketchbooks and film of 1970. The 'painting' is a digital enlargement to A2 size of a small gouache sketch measuring 4" x 3". The video projection is a transfer to DVD of the original Standard 8 film that I'd made in 1970. I am using here a section from that original film slowed down.

The film is projected onto the painting slightly out of focus to minimize the distraction of particles of dust. Video has an advantage over film in that it plays loops easily and by keystoneing the image the projector can be placed out of the way. I am relaxed about these changes since in essence this is not a medium-specific work (unlike many of my other works) for at heart the work is about the influence of colour upon colour. However, in its form of exhibition there is a significant change in that the original was designed for one-off performance in a darkened room rather than as an on-going gallery installation in ambient light, as in this exhibition.

Although I would never use symmetrical compositions in my paintings, symmetry seems to work in these film/paintings where time provides an extra dimension. Actually the sketch I have chosen for this exhibition is slightly asymmetrical in its use of colour. This allows me to play with the symmetrical and asymmetrical appearance of the painting as this changes depending on the colour projected onto it.

Painted Screen 1970/2012 was first shown at Camden Arts Centre, London in Film in Space an exhibition of expanded cinema that I curated. The exhibition ran from Dec 2012 to Feb 2013. I have plans for a related performance that uses a coloured screen on a large scale.