

Drawing light

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This paper describes an artistic practice based on drawing that uses coloured marks to generate a space for enquiry. The focus is upon colour as light and upon the time taken to make and see the works. The works explore the limits of representation and perception.

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Introduction

'Pure drawing is an abstraction, drawing and colour are not distinct points, everything in nature is coloured.' [1]

This essay focuses on the journey I have made from an art practice built upon painting and printmaking, in which layers of transparent or semi-transparent coloured pigment were built to achieve chromatically dense yet luminous surfaces, to one in which colour relationships are activated by drawn points of colour pencil. What follows is a reflection upon my drawing practice as a form of thinking and inquiry into colour as light, and upon time in two senses: time required to produce work via a slow and patient marking of the surface and the time required for the viewer to perceive the indeterminate range of marks. In essence, my work seeks to investigate the process of drawing as a means of generating a sensory experience of fluctuating colour that explores the limits of representation and a deceleration of perception.

A change of emphasis: reflection and context

Colour as an embodiment of light has always been a central concern in my practice. Drawing, however, has until recently been a stage in the preparation of making a painting or print. A few years ago a significant change began to take place in my work and I began to reassess the main intentions of my practice.

For the past fifteen years I have dealt in a shifting abstraction, characterised by highly reduced means. For several years I explored qualities of light through a series of dark almost monochromatic works. I then began to explore the potential of geometrics - shaped panels – as carriers of colour. However, I found that the geometric form asserted itself at the expense of colour and led one away from a perceptual engagement with surface to one with shape. I realised that I was more interested in an abstraction that has its origin in perceptual experience. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty tellingly observed: *'Perception does not give me truths like geometry but presences'* [2].

In 2005 I was artist in residence at the Experimental Printmaking Institute (EPI), Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, working on a set of aquatint etchings. EPI is based in the small town called Easton and it was here that I found myself walking around its Crayola factory and shop, enchanted by the range of coloured drawing pencils, crayons and pens. I bought a selection for my four year old daughter but I took away something else – some nagging questions about the relationship between colour and drawing. Historically colour (*colore*) and drawing (*disegno*) have often been seen in opposition, with drawing being seen as essential to the creative act and colour being an additional, inessential add-on. This binary opposition or duality is something I have worked to overcome within my own practice.



Figure 1: Rose Bullen, felt pen on paper towel, 2005.

One of the first drawings my daughter Rose made with a Crayola marker was onto a paper towel (Figure 1). She very patiently and diligently marked the surface following the indented pattern, which resulted in a drawing that proved to be a hugely significant turning point for me! Observing Rose was to watch someone totally absorbed and attentive to the activity. Alongside the sense of order that the drawing displays, there was a sense of flow, lightness and playfulness in which points of colour delineate shape. This delight in the drawn colour world of a child suggested to me something elemental about both colour and drawing and as Walter Benjamin remarked *'Children's drawings take colour as their point of departure'* [3]. The 'innocent eye' seemed to rekindle in me a sense of *'colour and wonder'* [4], while at the same time recognising the impossibility of seeing the world as if for the first time.

Figuring light

My impulse was to take on the challenge I had set myself to extend my practice through a drawing-based process, yet continue to develop interests in colour. The first drawings I made were on paper, using materials such as pencils, graphite, pastel and ink. After a while I picked up the silverpoint that I had used to mark out the structure of the paintings and began to draw on to a gesso ground. I became preoccupied with the way the silverpoint seemed to reflect and gather light and with the possibility of making drawings that suggested colour, by using only the silver greys of the silverpoint and graphite. These initial studies led directly to the drawings that I made in 2008 for the exhibition *Figuring Light; Colour and the Intangible* (Figure 2). The drawings were made on aluminium panels primed with several coats of gesso and sanded to a smooth eggshell-like finish. The final two or three coats of gesso contained a tint of colour – perhaps a very pale yellow over a pale pink - that is almost imperceptible. I would then begin to draw with a silverpoint and colour pencils, marking the surface at regular intervals.

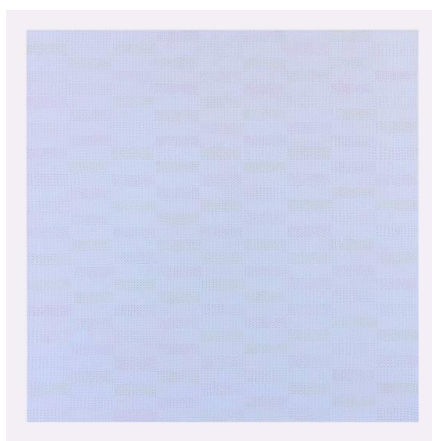


Figure 2. Duncan Bullen, *Drawing #1 04.08*, gesso, tempera, silverpoint, colour pencil on aluminium, 50×50cm, 2008.

In the publication that accompanied the exhibition, I describe these drawings as ‘a kind of *Abstract Impressionism*’ [5]. By this I mean there is an emphasis on a pointillist approach and an optical mixing of colour, such as that proposed by Seurat, which enacts a ceaselessly rhythmical, shifting vision between perceived stillness and movement. I wanted to create awareness that our experience of reality is never static but comprised of infinitesimal modulations of colour and transformations of light.

It is no coincidence, then, that a group of works that assimilate aspects of the impressionist aesthetic and have long intrigued me are Mondrian’s *Pier and Ocean* series made between 1914 and 1917. These works use a minimal amount of colour and are predominately made up of a modulated white ground, over which plus and minus marks are evenly distributed. Spending time with one of these pieces, one notices that different and discrete values of light emanate from the surface. Bridget Riley succinctly suggests: *By stacking and interlocking horizontal divisions of different weights and distances Mondrian creates a fluctuating, impalpable envelope of space.* [6]

Despite Mondrian’s documented interest in theosophy, these works seem to celebrate the visual, rather than inviting us to find meaning through symbolic form that points beyond the work of art. As John Milner put it: *As the eye seeks to sum up the composition and resolve it into the image of an object, its attention is drawn instead to the many small points of conjunction. This creates rhythm*

literally in the field of vision; it is no longer symbolic imagery but actual visual experience...visually the work shifts and pulsates before the eyes like a living organism. It breathes. [7]

New drawings

Reflecting upon my drawings exhibited in *Figuring Light*, I wondered if my use of a coloured ground was a hangover from previous work. In other words the layering of colour, which completely covers the white ground, could be seen as being closer to a painterly practice than a graphic process. Perhaps my use of colour was also too arbitrary. Why was I putting one colour next to another? A short period of essentially monochromatic drawings using silverpoint and graphite followed, before I began working solely with colour pencil on paper.

Putting away the coloured ground was a gradual decision and a consequence of re-locating my studio from one in which the windows faced northwest to a larger studio facing southeast. The new studio is flooded by light from early morning and I am far more aware of the rhythms of light and subtle variegations of tonal values, as the day passes into evening. This has clearly affected my thoughts about colour. What colour is the sky? What colour is the sea? What colour is the light reflected in the glass of the buildings of the city? However, the question that preoccupies me mostly is how can one make a drawing that deals with shifting qualities of light that is not a representation or a description.

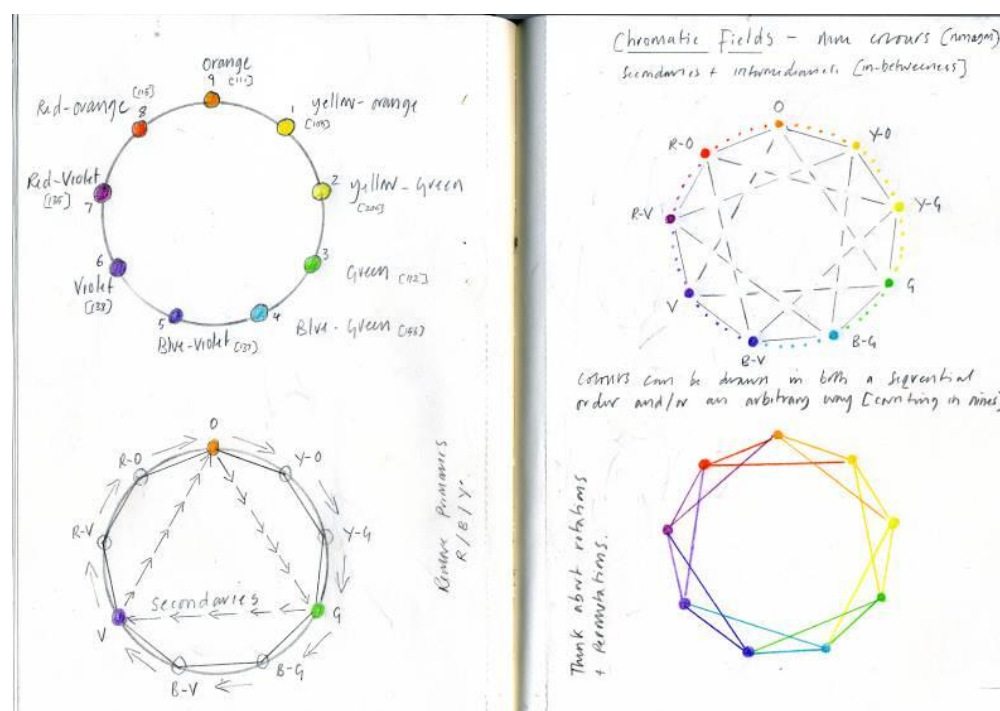


Figure 3. Duncan Bullen, pages from sketch book, 2010.

In my recent drawings colour relations are set in motion by single points of colour pencil arranged in patterned formations. The patterns are all formed from a square grid, which has been pulled and stretched somewhat like a piece of netting. A series of drawings – *Chromatic Fields* - utilize a nine-colour palette which consists of three secondary colours; orange, green and violet and six intermediary

colours; yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, red-violet, red-orange (Figure 3). In each drawing colour may be arranged in both ordered and arbitrary combinations and repeated and distributed evenly across the surface, giving no preference for one colour more than another. As a result, each drawing has the effect of producing its own distinct light, indeterminate colour and a kind of moiré patterning, in which the white of the paper works as a functioning perceptual element within the drawing (Figure 4).

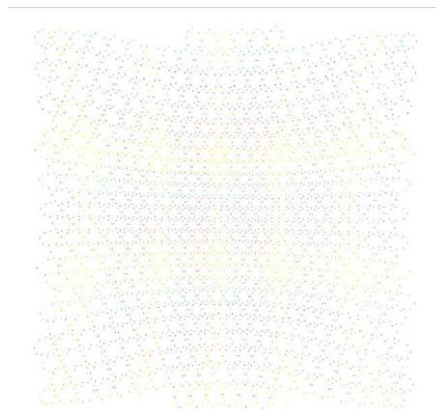


Figure 4. Duncan Bullen, Drawing # 31.10 (Chromatic Fields), colour pencil on paper, 40×40cm, 2010.

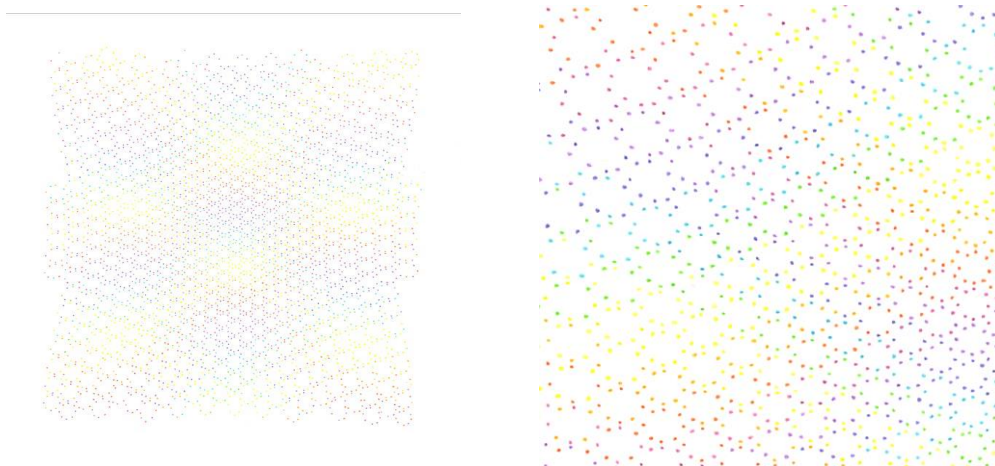
When selecting colours I am not attempting to make them stand for a particular quality of light as it may be experienced in the world, but rather I am increasingly interested in allowing the colours to be themselves and the resulting quality of light that this generates. Therefore when I select particular colour combinations I do so with the intention of opening up a speculative, meditative space, that is not so much about 'bringing out' but more about 'letting be'.

A slow unfolding colour, I believe has the potential to open us to experiences that are, wordless, intangible and elusive. I like the way colour appears to have the ability to elude finite systems and takes up its own positions, (which is also dependent upon ambient conditions) regardless of our actions and intention. I have come to accept this as being part of our subjective chromatic experience. Therefore, to me, it seems that the distinctiveness of colour as a phenomena is its ability to speak to us in ways that are fluid, flexible and fleeting. Implicit in this is a recognition that our understanding of colour is bound up with culture, memory, familiarity and experience.

As Charles A. Riley points out '*The sheer multiplicity of colour codes attests to the profound subjectivity of the colour sense and its resistance to categorical thought.*' He then points to recent biological discoveries that show '*the difference in a singular amino acid – the minimum genetic difference between two people – can cause a perceptible difference in colour vision. ... offering a biological explanation for the extreme subjectivity of chromatic response.*' [8]

As I draw, I am focused on developing formal interactions between colour, weight and space, yet I try to stop short of overly influencing these relationships. Rather, I am increasingly interested in allowing the process to open up and then trust in the resulting colour patterns as they unfold. In fact, working with points of colour pencil the size of pinheads and distributing each mark evenly allows me to combine colours that perhaps I would not normally be drawn to if seen as a large flat mass, but when seen in small doses evenly placed the colours create a different proposition.

My instinct is to make drawings in which all evidence of manufacture is out in the open and the recent colour pencil drawings, in contrast, to those made for *Figuring Light*, display no complex mysteries of layering. Working directly onto the white of the paper creates an entirely different set of propositions. Here the drawn mark and the white surface are the only generators of light and colour. There is nothing hidden, no concealing. The immediacy of the drawn mark is there for the eye to see and to trace its path. I like the fact that people can get caught up in the surface and think about the way the drawing is made. When viewed from close up, these drawings are rather prosaic. It is only when one-steps back that each individual dot dissolves and a sensation of light may be experienced. In fact, from a distance of a few metres the drawings appear to be an indistinct grey tone, but if one walks slowly toward the surface, colour relationships emerge and, closer still, individual colours can be recognised and an ocular ‘fizz’ may become apparent (Figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 (left) & 6 (right). Duncan Bullen, Drawing # 30.10 (Chromatic Fields), colour pencil on paper, 40×40cm, 2010.

As each drawing takes shape, I feel there is a measured unfolding of colour rhythms. Patterns of light emerge and dissolve, suggesting something at once static and in flux, making me particularly receptive and responsive to the subtle interplays of the light in which we dwell. In these drawings there is an attempt to unify drawing and colour in such a way that the image is constructed through drawn points of colour in patterned formations. The tendency of colour to appear to spread, float and open out on the eye is enhanced by the overall patterning of the composition. Colour in this instance forms, and appears to transcend, its formal structure. Constructing drawings from points of colour pencil through ordered structures, I believe, creates an ambiguous pictorial space in which simplicity and complexity can co-exist.

Tempo Giusto

Much of what I do is very deliberate, with many decisions taken at the outset. However, one never really knows what the visual effect will be. For me, making a drawing is a balancing act between planned procedure and intuitive response. During the making of the work I am concerned with

articulating the surface in such a way that the marks act upon each other so that there is a build up of energy, like a woven fabric of marks that holds everything in equilibrium. The drawings involve simple, rudimentary counting, which helps provide evenness to the number of drawn marks, as well as allowing me to make intuitive responses to the work as it evolves, it also allows for me to retrace my steps if I happen to wander. The drawings do take a long time to make, with each piece normally being worked over a period of several days, sometimes weeks. Marking the surface again and again with points of colour the size of pinheads demands a certain discipline and precision, in which there is a tension between the immediacy of each drawn mark and their accumulation over the duration of the drawing.

For me the process of drawing is a contemplative act, so finding the *tempo giusto*, the right speed for the work is crucial. The drawings seem to demand a certain pace, an even tenor that falls apart if made too quickly. I believe there is also a direct relationship between the time it takes to make the work and the time it takes for the work to be perceived. The eyes of the viewer need time to adapt to the slow modulated points of colour and a decelerated examination of the surface produces patterns of light that oscillate and vibrate. The ocular effect is one of wavering between the actual, objective stillness of the image and a perceptual reading of the work, in which the structure may appear to expand and contract.

The works described in this essay are about colour, perception, light, silence and time. These works are concerned to make manifest my concern about how the drawing is made and my interest in how we perceive. When I am drawing, or when I look at drawings, I often think about how vulnerable and psychologically charged the act of drawing is - how fragile and ephemeral the nature of the mark is and how, like light and colour, it ultimately speaks of a direct experience. In my drawings I aim to test thresholds of perception, indeterminacy and visual liminality. The physical effect is a slower, decelerated looking, where seeing becomes uncertain, and in so doing, perhaps, heightens an awareness of the act of seeing itself.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay I used the metaphor of a journey to describe the changes that have taken place in my practice. This journey is one of finding and seeking, where there may be no actual point of arrival, but only a continual flow. Through making these drawings I have become increasingly interested in the colour as silence, as something intangible and immanent, and in colour as it is perceived between eye and mind, which of course is also subject to the ambient changing conditions of light. I would like to think that the drawings make a space, which invites a slowing down of perception, gathering in and drawing light.

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