

## Lost in translation: the nature of pigmented colour

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This paper sets out an impassioned plea for a reconnection with the significance of the coloured 'stuff' of painting. This arises out of frustrations the artist had with what he perceived as the limitations of manufactured paints and the journey this led him on into making his own paints. His red paintings explore what is for him the underlying 'form' and quality of each colour. A concern with the limitations of reproduction gives rise to a proposal for the use of a series of prints to accompany exhibition catalogues.

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### Introduction

Artists have an insight into colour that is often overlooked. It is a practical knowledge inspired by their experience and use of colour. They can work from intuitive and sub-conscious inclinations and feelings that seem to have nothing to do with science or physics, yet for the Neurologist Semir Zeki, artists are 'neurologists in disguise' [1]. One of the insights that artists can bring to the discussion of colour is its nature as 'stuff'. For the artist, the quality of the materiality of colour as a substance can change the possibilities of both the direction and substance of their work. Paint allows colour to become a vehicle of expression and substance, with the idea, or concept of the painting married to the materials. The quality and physical substance of the paint can lead to the success or failure of the work's unity.

For many artists the subject of their work is colour in itself, but they approach it from a number of angles. Sometimes their starting point is based on observed colour relationships; what they see before them and then attempt to translate into paint. At other times the work is made away from the observed situation so that the artist is not intimidated or directly influenced by the relationship between what is painted and what is seen. Colour is therefore free to be used as an emotional equivalent for a place, event or happening. Then again a specific colour pigment can be the subject of the work to be made, so colour in itself can be the muse of the artist. Where this is so, the quality of the paint's actual manufacture will affect what the artist can do.

## The qualities of manufactured paint

My journey with colour started at art college when my anticipation of a colour was frequently disappointed because of the poor qualities of the manufactured paint. It was only when I brought artist quality paint that had no binders or extenders or other pigments added into the mixture that the colour of the paint stuff came near to what I expected to come out of the tube and what it should do for me.

From around the mid 1970's until about 2003/04 I used 'artist quality' manufactured oil paint of the 'highest quality'. However, I grew increasingly frustrated with the experience. I didn't feel that manufacturers took into account the fact that each pigment needs a different ratio of binder to pigment. They use an excessive amount of linseed oil and add other substances like fillers (chalk) and extenders which corrupt the pigment creating a patchy look or causing it to dry with a wet and shiny surface. My growing frustration with the manufacturers' paint reached a peak whilst painting the 'Colour Grammar Series' between 2002 and 2005. I now source all my own pigments and make them into oil paint myself. I grind up the pigment into a dry (as opposed to an oily) mix with cold pressed linseed oil. By making sure that the pigment is 'dry' and not dominated by oil, I can then experience the colour in all its intensity. I have found that my horizon has shifted, opening up extraordinary possibilities and inspiring me to source pigments from all around the world. The past also provides inspiration. I am inspired by the colours found in Roman, Egyptian, or eighteenth century paintings. Colours like smalt, verdigris and red lead, which are still available, allow me to explore and play with the colour possibilities they offer. Other pigments, however, are now simply unobtainable; like real emerald green, which is made from neat arsenic. Sometimes, when you want to use a pigment to cover a six and a half foot square canvas it is simply too expensive to use it, even in its raw state! Obtaining the original source of the pigment is a cheaper option but its use is then fraught with other problems. I was once fortunate enough to purchase two large lumps of Lapis. Each was over two kilos in weight and one was almost violet in intensity. But in this raw state it is as hard as Iron. To change this lump of rock into a beautiful colour requires a long laborious process akin to alchemy. I follow the preparation of lapis described by the artist Benevento Cellini in his book of 1562. But the colour that is produced by this process is worth all the hard work and time; there is no other blue that comes close to it in complexity and atmosphere. It has a truly 'other' quality about it.

One result of making my own paints is that I have noticed that each pigment has its own unique texture – some are sandy, some crystallised, some lumpy, some elastic, some like liver, and some are just very runny. The bought paint seems to have had its essence removed. It seems to be missing the 'dirt' quality of the pigment – it is as though its soul is missing.

## The colour red

The 'Colour grammar' series of 2002-5; developed into the 22 sculptural 'Colour Forms' of 2005-7. This has now progressed into a series of work exploring the nature of colour and sound with the composer Alexandra Harwood [2]. The first part of this series, which is now completed, is about red. The series is based on my personal, intuitive, synaesthetic response to actual colour, and is informed by my physical, practical involvement with the pigments and the creation of the paint.

Red as a family of colours is vast, therefore from the start I was required to impose an order and system on it. Quite quickly I identified reds that are different in tone, intensity, and hue and made a

line from a deeper, richer, almost violet red to an almost red-orange. I then made further distinctions, finding hot and cold variations, opaque and transparent tendencies. The benchmark I use in identifying colour position and order comes from the rainbow. It is always the same - red to violet - so that I can then match pigments by sight to follow this spectrum. I call these choices for my pigments 'spectral-like colours', regardless of where they are dug up from, or manufactured, as some are man-made and others are direct and cleaned from the earth. But in looking around the landscape I still have a vast collection of colours that I see, and have pigments to match them, but they are certainly not in the spectrum of the rainbow. For instance there is no black, white or grey and then there are also certain reds, oranges, yellows absent. Greens and violets that also are there in this world I see and inhabit but are not in the rainbow. So I call these colours 'earth-like colours' because they are of the earth and not in the colour spectrum. These two differences are how I order my sense of colour and I call it 'the double difference': Firstly the difference in order and secondly the difference in type [3] But this was only 'looking' at colour; identifying it by sight. It was not until I handled it and painted with it that its many other characteristics came into play. Sometimes, what initially promised visual beauty was found to be shallow, flat and uninteresting when used as the material of paint.

To understand the nature of a particular 'red' I limited myself to working with four pigments, which had first been selected from a larger group of similar pigments. But the problem within this task was choosing the right four pigments. I need to find the right differences and similarities between them to allow a 'play' to commence in the painting that expresses exactly what the interior world of that particular red is really about for me. In the process I am attempting to investigate the concept of colour as a language, using the idea of language games that we find in Wittgenstein's writings of the 1930's. I want to explore how colour can function as a language that does more than communicate facts [4].

These 'red' paintings were included in the exhibition 'Figuring Light' at the Djanogly Gallery in Nottingham in 2008 [5]. A fully illustrated colour catalogue was produced but something was missing from the reproduced images: the subtle variations of the pigments, the changes in texture on the surface, and the nuances of different but similar colours, in sum their physical presence. Better photography and lighting would have helped, but there was always going to be a shortfall. It was all lost in translation.

The question that the catalogue raised was: Is it possible to reproduce the experience of the colour in a painting on to a scaled down reproduction or will it always be lost in translation?

## Reproducing paintings – a proposal

When reproducing a painting, we must ask exactly what aspect we want to reproduce. If it is simply a visual scaling-down in order to get the whole composition and an approximate nod to colour relationships, then what we see in the best art book reproduction is more than adequate. But what if other aspects are equally important? For instance, the stuff of the mixed pigment/paint itself? Where are these qualities and aspects in a four-colour reproduction? Having spent so much time producing the actual paint and then achieving the right surface quality, what is lost when the stuff of paint is translated into dots by the materials of this digital era?

I began to wonder whether I could translate the qualities of the paint and the image in a scaled down, more intimate experience; a 'portable' series of prints that would offer a similar experience to

the huge abstract paintings. This would also make the physical experience of the paintings more accessible to a wider group of people.

This task is now complete. A series of 4-colour linocuts have been made using the exact same pigments as the paintings, allowing many of those properties of the paint that were inevitably missing in the standard reproductions to be transferred onto the prints.

The process first involved making a freehand drawing that scaled down each of the original seven paintings from 200cm sq. to 30cm sq. Four separate colour separations were then cut into 4 lino blocks. The pigment was then rolled onto each plate accordingly.

The results are interesting. This scaling-down works like a normal reproduction. When the paintings are hung on a wall, the viewer can fall into them. The need to view the prints close up because of their size creates an intimacy that still allows you to fall into them because they now fill your vision. And in this intimacy, there is still the fragrance of the paint, alongside the very different qualities of each pigment working against the others.

Unlike the paintings, which have over ten layers of colour in order to increase opacity, the prints have only one coat of each colour. This creates a very different quality in the prints. Each painting is made by using four different colours. The image is found loosely and then brought together by numerous layers (sometimes 10 or more) so that the depth of the pigment creates movement within the colour. It is found loosely by playing and pushing the paint around to see what 'forms' are suggested by the relationships of the colours and their synaesthetic qualities being released that I anticipate by their dialogue. Which raises the question all this work is considering: 'Has colour a form?' And 'is there an archetype of a form inherent within each colour, offering a moment of 'a priori' knowledge?' So that once this form is found in the sloppy paint, it is then solidified by layering up the paint.

In the linocut, however, this is different, because in each case there is only one printing of each colour. The steps taken to make the works are as follows:

**Step one:** The first block is a solid colour of a Red on white paper. So no white paper is left showing through. It is therefore the pitch, so to speak, of the whole image that is witnessed, as it will be under everything, a red rectangle or square against the boundary of the white paper.

**Step two:** The second block of a second red pigment will leave some of the first colour to show through but prints over the rest of the first red and introduces the first formal dynamic between the shapes of the first colour and the second.

**Step three:** The third block of a third red pigment again leaves the first red to come through, with the second red printed on the first red and the third red printed on the first and second red. The differences of red colour create even more complicated formal dynamics between the forms of red colours.

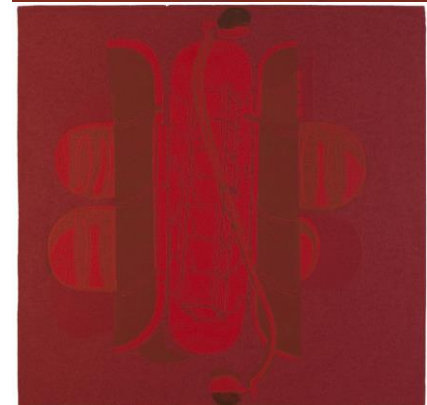
**Step four:** The final block with the fourth red pigment means all four red colours are finally reacting to each other exactly like in the painting. Red.

The result shows the extraordinary and sometimes breathtaking differences between what on the surface looks like four similar spectral dark red colours, allowing what I believe to be a reduced translation of the experience that was found in the painting.

The registration of each print was done by eye giving them a fluid, hand-drawn quality. There are now 35 unique prints of each painting, each ever so slightly different because of the slightly different over-lap that occurred as each block went onto the paper.

By getting the printed colours close to what I want by using the exact same pigments as the paintings, I believe that the viewer can experience the same dynamics and provoke the same neurological effects as when they look at the paintings. After all, paint has synaesthetic qualities and awakens associations, histories, feelings and experiences in us, with the visual brain working on five areas of form, space, movement, tone, and colour. And that's not even including the numerous other connections from our senses, emotions and intellect, as well as our personal and cultural histories that are affected by these nuances. This search for the forms of colours and their archetypes is not just simply sought by the appearance of what it 'looks like' on the canvas or sculpture but by the movement the form suggests. It is not the question of why is red like a propeller or mould shape but what is the dynamic movement constructed in the rectangle or square of the painting doing? What does it do to you as a viewer and where does it take you? It is the certain and particular movements made which are the intrinsic primary concerns of the work. Which leads to the question: 'Can shape (line making form) and movement in one colour, black on white, suggest colour, where there is no (spectral) colour? I ask this because I believe certain forms, shapes and movements anticipate the archetype of the colour.

The experience of the colour is therefore of utmost importance to painters like myself who focus on it as their subject matter. I am proposing therefore that exhibitions which focus on colour need to produce a supplement to the normal catalogue where each artist has at least one type of handmade print. This allows each artist's work to be translated into multiples so that the experience of the exhibition can live outside the gallery. Otherwise, we are left with only words and mute pictures. For any practitioner involved in colour, it is so limiting to just read about colour theory or flat, dull reproductions – we want the experience or integrity of our work to show through from beginning to end.



(top to bottom):

Figure 1: Richard Webb, *Earth Middle Red*, 4 coloured pigmented linocut, 30.5×30.5cm, 2008-9.

Figure 2: Richard Webb, *Redness*, 5 coloured pigmented linocut, 30.5×30.5 cm, 2008-9.

Figure 3: Richard Webb, *Spectral Dark Red*, 4 coloured pigmented linocut, 19×30.3 cm, 2008-9.

Figure 4: Richard Webb, *Spectral Light Red*, 4 coloured pigmented linocut, 19×30.5cm, 2008-9.

Figure 5: Richard Webb, *Spectral Middle Red*, 4 coloured pigmented linocut, 19×30.5 cm, 2008-9.

## Conclusion

I am inspired to this by the catalogue for the retrospective exhibition of Robyn Denny's work at the Tate Gallery in 1973 [6]. In it there are six specially-made silk-screens inserted in the back because the subtle colour values were impossible to reproduce in any other way. They were printed by hand, under the personal supervision of the artist. By making this beautiful equivalent of the paintings, nothing is lost in translation because the quality of the colour relationships and the flatness that the silk-screen process can be appreciated.

But this problem does not just exist for printed reproductions. Accompanying this online essay are photographs of the four colour linocuts that prompt another debate. There are some qualities that have been successfully transferred for you to appreciate but it is fairly limited (See Figures 1 to 5). Although you can make sense of the picture generally the essence of the picture has been lost. Not only is their size reduced but so is the quality of their surface, texture and colour relationships. And if one colour is wrong, so are all the others next to it. But this is another discussion.

## References

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