

Colour and colourlessness: the chromatic discourse of impressionism

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This paper takes a claim by Michael Fried that Impressionism had 'rewired the human sensorium' as a starting point for a rapid history of the problematic relationship between painting and colour. While acknowledging the revolutionary importance of the Impressionist palette, it points out ambivalent attitudes towards the polychromatic and the persistence of 'colourless' spatial strategies within works that nevertheless seem to emphasise colour. The mechanics of these strategies in paintings by Matisse, Hofmann and Newman are explored. While the use of thin, stained colour in Frankenthaler and Louis eliminates colourlessness in the production of pictorial space, the paper argues that, perversely, the colour in these paintings becomes something 'looked through', not 'looked at'. The experience of 'looking at' colour outside painting, in sculpture and collage, is outlined but the essay nevertheless concludes that as colour becomes more commonplace and unremarkable, its place inside painting remains complex and interesting.

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Introduction

There should be a natural place within painting for colour, whereas in the European tradition from the Renaissance to Henry Moore, sculpture and colour are not supposed to go together. Yet, it could be argued that sculptor Anthony Caro's *Early One Morning*¹ (1962) and especially *Prairie* (1967), exploit the power of colour more successfully than many paintings of that time. On the other hand, Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), an exemplary work to say the least, is virtually colourless, mainly black, or near black, with shades of grey, from cool to warm, and smallish areas of pinky cream. It would appear the relationship between painting, the most visual art form, and colour, its most visual asset, may be rather problematic.

¹ *Early One Morning*, 1962, painted steel and aluminium sculpture, 289.6x619.8x335.3 cm – <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=1994> [last accessed 9th December 2011]

The legacy of impressionism

Michael Fried has claimed that Impressionism was responsible for ‘rewiring the human sensorium as far as the experience of paintings is concerned’, implying that these pictures, with their white ground luminosity and bright, artificial pigments, have made us irreversibly sensitised to light and colour [1]. This realignment of our perceptual apparatus suggests we see chromatic material more emphatically, but it also must make us more aware of colour’s absence within the visual field. In respect of the art of painting, colourlessness can be positive, but under the influence of Impressionism, when we look back at works based on an earlier palette, we might find some new deficits. After Impressionism, Rembrandt seems too brown, to me anyway. The candle-lit warmth of his creams and ochres seems to smother optical interplay, whereas Velasquez not only holds up, he may even appear more visible from our current viewpoint, his mineral blacks and greys enlivening the play of tinted neutrals and flesh tones.

The colourlessness of Velasquez appeals to our post-Monet sensibility because painting’s withdrawal from, as well as its embrace of, colour has been a key part of its complex response to the radical challenge posed by Impressionist practice. At their most revolutionary, the Impressionists employed a chromatic range sensationally incompatible with the standard, small group of earth colours of earlier landscape pictures, and they selected high visibility pigments, applied in small, separate dabs, to produce not only retinal excitation, but an agitated paint surface. Although underpinned by the *en plein air* observation of the motif, the Impressionist colour system is, as the famous blue shadows suggest, significantly estranged from the common sense world. The system has a full spectrum at its disposal, and within it can find sufficient difference in colour to achieve an equivalent contrast to that brought about by tonal modelling. Rather like Saussurian linguistics, it can supply a complete range of inter-chromatic values adequate to describing, but not imitating, the complexity of perceived phenomena.

Polychromophobia

The extremism of Impressionism de-stabilised painting, which had perhaps over-invested in the restricted palette and in the idea that colour should be determined by the local hue of depicted objects, influenced by the play of light and dark and intermediate tones. The response of painting after Impressionism might be seen as a bad case of ‘polychromophobia’, as it tried restrictive measures like Cézanne’s emphasis on blues and greens, or van Gogh’s short range of yellows and oranges [2]. The issue was not fear of colour’s power, but anxieties caused by having too many colours in the painting. Fauvism relied on very strong colour statements and increased visual impact, extending the pigment to cover far more ground than the Impressionist dab. Yet, although it releases colour from the naturalist obligations of tonality, and structures it around its varying wavelengths as they appear on the colour wheel, it confines chromatic activity by limiting it to the relatively predictable interactions of one or two pairs of complementary colours.

Impressionism is revolutionary, yet also somehow easy, accessible and almost inartistic in its appeal. An ambivalent, critical reaction to the movement, despite or perhaps because of its success, has meant that its colour has not dominated subsequent painting practice in a direct sense. There are

not many painters who might be described as polychromophiles. Renoir, late Monet², Bonnard, are in this category, but the art they produced tends not to be taken seriously by critics, especially those in the anti-retinal division of the Duchampian tradition. However, even within painting, starting with Cézanne, there is an element of withdrawal from the chromatic extreme mapped by the Impressionists. Matisse, the most celebrated colourist of the 20th century, often retains the Fauvist restriction to pairs of complementaries. But he combines hues derived from the colour wheel with the non-chromatic pair, black and white, which summarise the tonal polarities underwriting the pre-Impressionist system of light and dark. In their essentialised form these ‘non-spectral’ colours can relate as optical counterpoints to the range of primaries and secondaries.

This tonal anchorage, along with the dark outlining of his drawing scheme, allowed Matisse to flood colour into large areas of the canvas while still strongly indicating, by the coded reference to modelling, the planar structure of interior and exterior spaces. Expanding the quantity of colour obviously multiplies its visual impact but also increases the danger of it overwhelming the depth of the painting, compromising its identity and turning it into a decorative object, dominated by its coloured surface. Colour has to be visible, as its appearance is all it has, but the more intense it is, the more it has to be levered back, away from the eye to which it appeals. This can be achieved by using figurative devices to suggest a sense of recession, as Matisse demonstrates, but it is also possible to construct a space through colour relationships alone.

Colour space and colour field

The exemplary exponent and theorist of constructing colour space through colour alone was Hans Hofmann³. His paintings typically contain a loose grid, with frontally aligned, rectangular planes embedded in, but detached from, a field of looser marks, against which the planes, singular or linked, ‘push and pull’. Hofmann uses bright, opaque, thick pigment, levelled with a knife or trowel, creating a surface that sits visibly proud of canvas weave. At first, the variations in the coloured planes seem to take on the task of spatial construction. But it may also be that his compositions are schematically reminiscent of the many naturalistic paintings in which forms are assigned a place in the foreground or middle-distance and are complete or partially obscured depending on their perspectival location. In other instances the ‘push-pull’ effect may be due to the commonplace perceptual effect associated with figure/ground distinctions. If anything, too much depth is produced by these residually figurative devices, reducing colour to the role of supporting their illusionistic function. The result is certainly polychromatic, but colour is confined to the rectangular compartments of the grid, or the smaller, more active blocks and brush-marks that constitute the ground, and only rarely do rectangles join up to make larger areas of the same value. So, while the space is predominantly determined by the optical activity of coloured areas, this is held in some tension with edge-detection and the resulting figure/ground and perspectival readings that tend to dominate our visual system.

² *Water-Lilies, after 1916, oil on canvas, 200.7×426.7 cm* – <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=21993> [last accessed 9th December 2011]

³ *Pompeii, 1959, oil on canvas, 214.0×132.7 cm* – <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=6602> [last accessed 9th December 2011]

Barnett Newman showed, with relative ease, how the quantity of colour in a painting could be expanded without converting it into a decorative object⁴. However, the version of colour space he evolved dispensed with part-to-part chromatic relationships and the wide spectrum palette favoured by Hofmann, and enlarged Hofmann's planes till they virtually filled the whole canvas. The quantitative change altered the spatial economy from one still bound to the orderly recession of forms 'inwards' as it were, from the picture plane, to one where the sheer size of the area of slightly uneven colour allowed opportunities for the eye to find its own depth where it could. At the same time, the visual impact of large areas added to the sensational power of the colour: 'more blue simply being bluer than less blue', as Clement Greenberg commented [3].

The precedent for this spatial economy was the post-Cubist space instantiated by Jackson Pollock, which features neither consistent recession nor exploits the effect of figure/ground. But this space comes out of drawing and tonality and although it produces an all-over field, with optical vibrancy, it does so with minimal recourse to colour. Hofmann's is modelled on Cubist or pre-Cubist conventions, while Newman's colour space is modelled on Pollock's colourless matrices and therefore has less use for the chromatic relationships that thrive best within a variegated and articulated compositional structure. Instead of a colour interacting with the one next to it, a single hue can monopolise the canvas from top to bottom, spreading left and right till stopped by a zip, resuming after the interruption with more of the same.

But, Newman's blue is painted, and in painting, colour is material, or at least identical with its pigment vehicle. Standing before the work, the viewer's phenomenological experience is not just of seeing pure colour, but colour mixed with the local tactile conditions produced by paint's range of physical properties. Newman used smallish brushes to cover relatively large areas. The resulting surface has imperfections, caused by slight variations in the densities of the pigment which the eye, to avoid monotony, picks up and sees as something it can experience like the shallow depth to be found in Pollock. The blue is therefore spatially mediated without the presence of other colours. However, what exaggerates the effect of space is essentially tonal, like in Pollock, because it comes from fluctuations in the darkness or lightness, not chroma, of the blue, caused by the way the pigment is rendered.

Why we might be persuaded to tolerate, even enjoy, a large area of one colour can be explained by referring back to Fried's claim for Impressionism's affect on our perceptual apparatus. This might also account for our appreciation of low-key colour experiences, like the sort provided by late Rothko paintings. In these works, even with the intensity turned right down, and in low ambient lighting, minute traces of colour lurking within one area will be revealed when related to similarly small amounts of colour lying in another, and vice versa, though if seen in isolation, the areas may look chromatically inert.

Newman's eye-slowng, tactile surfaces contrast with those constructed by the residues of Rothko's glazes, which mostly disappear into the weave of the canvas, like a dye leaving a stain. Staining, but with dilute acrylic pigment soaking into un-primed, bleached cotton duck, rather than oil into darker linen, was famously used as a method by Helen Frankenthaler, then by Morris Louis, and is seen as a major technical breakthrough in the story of pictorial colour, reliving the retinal triumph of Impressionism. The technique dispenses with tonality, modelling and drawing, and privileges the interest of chromatic activity in the creation of depth. Under these conditions this 'dyed' colour space can appear so highly illusionistic that the eye is drawn immediately into the picture's interior without

⁴ *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51, oil on canvas, 242.2x541.7 cm – http://www.moma.org/modernteachers/large_image.php?id=186 [last accessed 9th December 2011]

pausing at its surface. But in doing so, it fails to take in the colour, looking *through* or *into* it, but, paradoxically, not *at* it.

'Looked at' colour

In this context, the experience of looking *at* colour in Caro's sculpture is significant. The uniform paint finish is applied to discrete, connected physical elements, which are distributed in a three-dimensional field. When encountering the work, the viewer's spatial and chromatic perceptions are simultaneously addressed even though only one colour is used. 'Hard-edge' painting also provides clear boundaries and shaped areas in which flat colour can be installed, but something has to go on between differing colours to convincingly suggest pictorial depth, that active property without which a painting becomes a slim, wall-hung, frontal sculpture. Ellsworth Kelly's work, while not exactly flat sculpture, is dominated by 'looked at' colour, but like Frank Stella's, it often moves away from the pictorial and gets very close to the problematic condition of the relief. Matisse's *L'Escargot*, (1953) admittedly a collage, showed how spatial activity in two dimensions can be compatible with the experience of 'beholding' strong colour, but *L'Escargot* is an exceptional case⁵. More modestly, of the Colour Field painters of the sixties, Kenneth Noland got closest to solving this problem [4]. In place of Stella's arbitrary, almost pop, juxtapositions, Noland used a modified form of aerial perspective, a traditional way of ordering the chromatic contents of a painting, gathering colours together under a common 'light' or 'temperature' to enhance the effect of pictorial identity.

This rapid, (and obviously Modernist), history implies that painting's relationship with colour has been far from straightforward. The Impressionists presented colour as a revolutionary, supremely pictorial resource, but using it proved difficult because it seems at odds with painting's broader historical preoccupations. Painters' underlying scepticism about the polychromatic persisted, as they held on to drawing and tone, and a restricted palette. When drawing and tone were eliminated, a non-decorative colour space eventually emerged in American modernist painting, but unfortunately, in these instances, the experience of colour gets lost in the experience of depth. Perversely, 'looked-at' colour seems to find a more secure place in the quasi-relief of Kelly and Stella, the paper collage of Matisse, and the sculpture of Caro; in short, outside rather than inside painting.

Conclusion

Impressionism's popularity lends support to Fried's assertion that it has rewired the human sensorium, although the chromatic discourse it initiated is not wholly congruent with the interests of painting, despite that art form's dedication to visibility. Less optically inclined 'avant-garde' art has been even more resistant. Its founding object, Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' (1917), is of course black and white, and 'conceptual art' prefers the serious, mid-grey tone of text, associating the polychromatic with triviality. In recent times perhaps the sensorium has undergone further rewiring under the influence of technology, which delivers the fully coloured world faithfully represented in the

⁵ *The snail*, 1953, gouache on paper, cut and pasted on paper mounted on canvas, 286.4x287.0 cm – <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=9396> [last accessed 9th December 2011]

chromatic verisimilitude of printed or screen-based pictures. Against this photographic paradigm, the blue shadows of Impressionism seem slightly artificial, like the blue hair assigned to the brunette movie star by the Technicolor process that contrasts with the naturalistic look achieved by Eastmancolor. Compared to forty years ago, colour's presence in our mediated lives is now commonplace, even routine. In painting, and in dreaming, its operation was then, and remains, a complex and interesting issue.

References

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