

Colouring *Jouissance*: The Art of Judith Cain

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Judith Cain's work, for me, is *jouissance*: a pure joy that holds within it an unsettling awareness that disallows a passive response to seeing nature. The key to evoking these somewhat contradictory factors is, I think, the stunning use of colour, lightness of touch, and depth of research. In exotic forms, the floral colours pool. The strangeness melts into beauty with a lightness of touch that belies the microscopic observation of botany. The artist travels extensively. Latour-Marliac, for example, is the source for the water lilies: a source that, interestingly, Monet used. But these paintings are of a different nature: same inspiration, different take. Whereas Monet took delight in the mingling of subject and background on the picture plane, these contemporary works maintain the distinction through contrast. Fundamental to Judith Cain's art is the ground below the surface. Translucent layers built up over time are continually sanded-back until the ground of spectacular depth emerges, paint on paint. Nature experimentally and experientially is challenged by a geometric reflection of South American architecture or tessellation, in squares of water, or of glass, perhaps. And above it all the flowers and tendrils are lightly placed, enticing the viewer to wonder – and enjoy.

I wrote the above paragraph as an introduction to Judith Cain's recent show at the Thackeray Gallery, London, and since then I have been dwelling on the choice of the concept '*jouissance*', enjoyment, in association with my reading of her work. What follows is the exploration of the concept, *jouissance*, as it travels between the field of psychoanalysis and that of art history and cultural analysis. Undoubtedly the power, if one could call it that, of these artworks, is pleasure. I wanted to know how that pleasure is approached to (almost) capture and (almost) achieve in the paintings. Such pleasure is always 'beyond', as we shall see.

Walking in the Yorkshire Dales with Judith Cain it is apparent that the basis for the paintings is a botanical knowledge that goes beyond naming and identification to an appreciation of form and expression of colour. In her presence I began to experience colour in a field of marsh marigolds quite intently. Her photograph of them did justice to nature. The field of marsh marigolds flowed out from near distance to the horizon, framed in a long shot with a stone barn perched on the blue skyline. She noticed the occasional white rim on the yellow flower; she noticed the way the whorls of leaves joined the hollow stem. Then, moving from hot sun to the shade of the woods, I was shown wild violets, wood anemones, leaf and stem formations, the way the grass and the moss grew, the sharp form of wild garlic; 'We can eat that – and the brand new dandelion leaves!' Climbing up a dried out gorge, we saw, deep in the dark, dank crevices, delicate long-stemmed primroses, ferns and even more violets. I noticed on the fells some different yellow flowers, a wild pansy. It seemed that yellow flowers were more than the 'yellow' of my language limitations; they had taken on an intensity of colour, specificity, that I had not paid attention to before. We observed the green forms and yellows in different lights, at dawn and at dusk. And then the purple wild orchids! One, already suffering from the rasp of slugs, was rescued from its flat death, taken back to the house to join a group of lilies in a jug of water. Her domestic environment is a studio/home full of arrangements of flowers, twigs, sometimes fruits and vegetables. To describe these as *still-lives* would deny the vibrancy of form and colour. Then there are exquisitely fine bleached skeletons and bones found on the fells, collected for their aesthetic qualities, their inherent beauty. Everything has a quality

exploited and banked with an artist's eye. The flower, the orchid in the country jug of lilies, was photographed framed in the mullioned window – and I saw the natural beauty – not sentimental, just a quality of colour and light observed without judgement.

Now I wonder what the reader's response to this personal account will be! It is certainly not an intellectual passage of the sort to be expected in an academic journal. It is, however, a deliberate ploy because I wish to call attention to the persistent hierarchies of art-thinking, and to the unresolved struggle to contain and describe, both in image and in word, the representation of nature while at the same time being within its presence. The joy of seeing the beauty in nature has been thought of as secondary to the intellectual or conceptual approaches of contemporary art practice: a Cartesian male/female culture/nature binary, where the 'feminine' comes off worst.

As we know, Freud never really worked out the sexuality of woman, so the theories of *jouissance*, a term coined by Lacan in the 1950s, are subject to a phallic order. Lacan works beyond Freud's (un)pleasure principle. *Jouissance* is most aptly translated from the French as (orgasmic) joy. In English 'enjoyment' loses its sexual connotations, hence the retention of the French word. *Jouissance* for Lacan 'begins with a tickle and ends in a blaze of petrol'. Colourful image! Later Lacan adds an ethical dimension to the concept where *jouissance* becomes opposed to pleasure. Or, rather, moves beyond pleasure into the realm where excess pleasure turns to pain. There is something rather immoral about it! [1].

With the primordial loss of the (m)other comes desire for recreating that wholeness to which the person always wishes to return. The contentment of the whole is always unobtainable yet constantly desirable. The awareness of infantile separation and entry into the symbolic comes with it the wish to return to that originary complete, for which we substitute so many worldly desires and possessions, the Maserati and the Jimmy Choos, and they never make us happy. *Jouissance* has the promise that fulfils fleetingly whilst still leaving desire unsatisfied, and wanting more. '*Jouissance*, or enjoyment, is thus linked to an impossibility and its fantasised overcoming' [2].

Kristeva thinks through what a feminine *jouissance* would be. She writes that the *jouissance* of the mother is disregarded in favour of being the bearer of children [3]:

... the Virgin impregnate by the Word'... It is thus that female specificity defines itself in patrilinear society: woman is a specialist in the unconscious, a witch, a bacchanalian, taking her *jouissance* in an anti-Apollonian, Dionysian orgy. A *jouissance* that breaks the symbolic chain, the taboo, the mastery.

Barthes delineates the point at which eroticism and knowledge coexist. *Texte de plaisir* and *texte de jouissance* touch and join, yet separate, taking different emphases, one towards pleasure as knowledge, the other unspeakable pleasure of (un)knowledge. This is the 'bliss' beyond the knowable; the (un)desirable is that which colour brings to art. Colour always evades language. Colour is the feminine 'other'. Colour, as Derrida said, has yet to be named.

As Kristeva says [3]:

Giotto's colours would be 'formal' equivalents of the burlesque, the visual precursors of the earthy laugh that Rabelais only translated into language a few centuries later. Giotto's 'joy' is the sublimated *jouissance* of a subject... chromatic joy is the indication of a deep ideological and subjective transformation; it discreetly enters the theoretical signified, distorting and doing violence to it without relinquishing it.

Guilt and entrapment abide with the womanly wiles since Eve saw that the fruit was ‘pleasant’ to the eye. Emphatically, it was beauty, rather than knowledge with which she tempted Adam. There is a moral element here – and guilt. Colour has an economy of excess. Colour/pleasure excess connotes guilt, a guilt associated with the feminine. Chromophobia acts as a protection from sinful enjoyment.

Vasari promoted *disegno* rather than *colore* in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* of 1550. This was an outright propaganda piece written for Florence and Cosimo de Medici, denigrating the Venetian colourists and Vasari’s judgemental legacy remains solid in traditional art history today. David Batchelor in his book *Chromophobia* claims this historical legacy is one of fear, fear of the excesses of colour – an innate fear of the corruptive element and contaminative properties of colour.

He writes [4]:

Roland Barthes’ remarkable description of colour as a kind of bliss. Bliss, jouissance, ecstasy... like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell... a lapse, a descent, a Fall. Intoxication, loss of consciousness, loss of self. Barthes... has overtly eroticised colour.

Thus, the *jouissance* in the reading of Judith Cain’s work, absolutely and irrevocable extends an invitation to me to *accept* the joy of colour, not as a negation of or otherness to the patriarchal power of symbolic language, nor as a light alternative to academic rational thought, nor secondary to the dominant trope of the line, but as an embracing of the bliss and ecstasy of colour that has been long denied, feared and marginalised. Rather it is a celebration of the *nature* of colour being an excess, a feminine, and in associated with a *jouissance*.

On the one hand colour seems to be ‘contained’, organised in colour wheels and charts. On the other, colour is wild, exotic, erotic, sensuous, dangerous, seductive, exceeding any attempt to contain it, and in that sense it touches the feminine, as *jouissance*.

David Batchelor expresses this well [5]:

I didn’t use colour for a long time because it seemed to me completely arbitrary. I couldn’t rationalise it. I now think that’s exactly what its value is... Colour is good for reminding me that the world is always more complex than our ability to represent it. You can only touch on things, or point in various directions. It’s about the recognition of one’s limitations, a certain kind of humility.

References

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3. Julia Kristeva, ‘Giotto’s Joy’ in *Desire in Language – A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Irrington, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980).
4. D Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000) 32.
5. D Batchelor, ‘Under the Influence’, *Artists’ Newsletter* (Apr 1995); quoted on <http://toriebegg.com/essay007.htm> (24 May 2008).