

Book Review

Basic Colour: A Practical Handbook, by Jane de Sausmarez (London: Herbert Press Ltd, 2008) 166pp; ISBN 978 0713675177

This book contains a series of practical activities designed to develop the reader's knowledge of mixing colours and the associated vocabulary based on the author's extensive teaching experience. The opening section contains a list of materials that are required for the exercises and introduces some specialist vocabulary. The subsequent chapters detail three main colour mixing exercises through which the reader is led step-by-step, followed by three further activities.

The introduction opens with an examination of the use of colour by various artists and questions the validity of any rules associated with the ways in which colours are utilised or combined. This is followed by a list of equipment and materials that are required to carry out the exercises in the book, together with recommendations regarding suppliers. The second chapter describes different sets of primary and secondary colours together with an explanation of complementary colours. This section also contains the hue, chroma, tone and temperature model for evaluating a colour and an explanation of some of the more common terms that are used when describing colours. The chapter rounds off with an exploration of the way colours interact when placed next to each other – simultaneous contrast – and when viewed for extended periods – successive contrast. The third chapter consists of a set of 'conversion tables' for artists who prefer to work in watercolour, acrylic or oils rather than gouache which the author recommends. This enables the reader to identify the equivalent colour in the media of their choice.

Practical exercises

The first exercise is described in the fourth chapter and involves creating a basic colour wheel using primary and secondary colours. The template is drawn out first; sizes and drawing methods are given. Primary colours are placed appropriately in the circle and then these are mixed to produce a secondary that is half way between the primaries. This is then followed by further mixing and painting to produce colours that are halfway again between a primary and a secondary. Gradually one ring on the colour wheel is completed. The outer ring is then completed in a similar way but using ready made secondary colours in place of mixed. This highlights the difference between mixed paints and their ready made equivalents.

The second exercise is to create a temperature colour wheel. Once again detailed description is given to enable the reader to plan and draw a template – different this time – and mix and apply paints to complete the task. The temperature colour wheel is made up of a hot and cold of each primary, with the tint varied by adding different amounts of white towards the centre. These colours are then mixed to produce secondary colours from both the hot and cold primaries.

The final colour wheel is detailed in the sixth chapter and is the complementary opposite colour wheel. This uses the hot and cold primaries from the previous chapter, together with ready mixed secondary colours. This time though the primaries are mixed in different amounts with their opposite – complementary – secondary. This wheel is made up of 21 segments and is the most complex of the three.

The activity in the seventh chapter makes use of all of the previous colours that have been described in the preceding chapters. Samples of these colours are cut out and applied to a grid to produce a tonal chart. A scale of grey tones is included as a reference point. Detailed information is given describing how to set out and draw the grid for the chart then how to place each of the sample colours within the grid. The eighth chapter describes a similar activity using complementary colours. This time the reader is given more general guidelines to produce the colours and apply them as the colours relate back to the complementary colour wheel described in the sixth chapter.

The final chapter examines the work of Johannes Itten and Josef Albers and revisits some of the ideas from the opening section on simultaneous contrast under the heading of colour phenomena. The book also includes a glossary of terms which is a reproduction from Sydney Harry's book *Colour Terminology*.

In summary, the book provides clear and extensive instructions (to the point of telling the reader when to wash their brush) on the production of a number of artistic tools, colour wheels and tonal charts. The activities are very well described and easy to follow. It contains some useful information on colours and their interaction and has some interesting analyses of artworks. The result is a basic guide to mixing colours that will certainly be of use to those painters, textile artists and students who wish to develop their understanding of this area.

Richard Ashworth