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Gallery Hours:
Thursday to Saturday 1 – 5pm
(02) 9690 2601
agebers@gmail.com
<http://peloton.net.au>

Colourism
Mark Titmarsh (Editor)
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Colourism

Mark Titmarsh

$$r + y + b = p^1$$

COLOUR

Colour is one peculiar item. I know it when I see it but when it comes to speaking or writing colour, something else happens, that is neither colour nor language. The more we talk about colour the more we talk about language and its limitation at the phenomenal edge of perception. Because of this, as David Batchelor demonstrates in his book *Chromophobia*², we tend to live in a world of colour prejudices, most of which fall on the side of deeply ingrained cultural taboos against colour, that align good taste and cultural sophistication with a severe restriction on the use of colours. As such the West is inherently chromophobic, equating taste and sophistication with clothes, houses and paintings that are black, white, grey, brown, navy blue and olive green. This is to be contrasted with chromophilia³, a wantonness of colour which erupts in the excessiveness of the feminine, primitive, infantile, vulgar, queer or pathological. This apartheid of colour is also reinforced by the ancient argument between colour and line, dating back to Aristotle who had it that the “repository of thought in art is line, the rest is ornament.”⁴

Ever since then colour has been understood as superficial, an ephemeral occurrence on the surface of things, whereas line and the non-coloured is deep, permanent, structural and meaningful.

Despite some of the prohibitions against immodesty in colour, the meaning of the most basic term in this discussion, namely ‘colour’ itself, is poorly understood. As Umberto Eco claims colour is “one of the worst muddles in the history of science.”⁵ To put it even more clearly in its obscurity, John Lyons argues that “colour is real but colours are not.”⁶ By this he means that the experience of colour is verifiable, it surrounds us at all times, but the words we use to divide the spectrum of colour into functional divisions is quite arbitrary and untranslatable between different cultures and ages. The Inuit have a vast language for the colours we call white, the French use brown and purple as interchangeable in certain situations, Russians see two colours where

we just see blue, and Hindus don’t differentiate red and orange. The word ‘red’, or any colour term in any language, has no inherent chromatic value and is only an arbitrary signifier vulnerable to cultural and historical differences. Colour is there, but it continually slips through the grasp of linguistic possession.

Batchelor cites Plotinus⁷ to show us why. In short, there is an incommensurability between colour and language because colour is indivisible, there are no breaks in the rainbow, while language is based on divisions and conceptual units that contradict colour’s natural tendency to “spread, flow, bleed, stain, soak, seep, and merge.”⁸

Footnotes: 1. $r(ed) + y(ellow) + b(lue) = p(ainting)$. If $r + y + b = p$, then $p + np = ep$, when $r = red$, $y = yellow$, $b = blue$, $p = painting$, $np = not\ painting$ and $ep = expanded\ painting$. In long form, if $red + yellow + blue = painting$, then $painting + not\ painting = expanded\ painting$. Therefore, $p + np = ep$. / 2. *Reaktion Books, 2000* / 3. Batchelor, *ibid*, p 21 / 4. *Ibid* p29 / 5. Umberto Eco, “How Culture conditions the Colours we See”, in David Batchelor (Ed), *Colour, Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2008*, p 178 / 6. Paraphrasing his quote in Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, p90 / 7. *Ibid* pp 85–6 / 8. *Ibid* p 86

COLOUR IS



Colour is, but has not yet been named⁹ since it is essentially resistant to nomination.¹⁰ Colour rains down from the sky in the warmth of the sun and erupts up out of the earth as raw pigment and the hues of nature. Colour is awesome in its presence, it is in everything, on everything, everything is shot through with colour, colour shines out from a world of things, and in its shining brings a world into existence. Colour emerges from the obscure ground of things, from everything, it is all around like air. We are so immersed in it, that it is taken as granted, becoming unthought, a background phenomenon, until a sunset or a painting reminds us of its uncanny way of being surprising, awesome, astounding. “Colours are all at once the ground, ‘the secret soul of what is below’, the surface, and what sublimates the surface, ‘the ideas’, substance, figure, and ‘general harmony’, ‘the life of God’.”¹¹ Colour is the beginning of an experience at the tip of my body that keeps on travelling through me, it goes from sensation to perception, to affect, to my sense of being in the world. In this movement from perception to affect and being, “colour cracks open the form-spectacle.”¹²

Colour is not a spectacle or an element of form, but a necessary precondition to both. I try to express my feeling for colour in all sorts of allusions, it is luscious, exquisite, intense, but colour is more than my sensory experience, it moves me to a place of ecstatic embeddedness. One way of remembering the forgotten of colour is through painting. In this state, touching colour as a maker, or being touched by colour as a viewer, is much the same thing. It begins with seeing colour, then really seeing colour, then touching colour, then feeling colour, then knowing colour, then being in colour, then in colour, being.

9. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago, 1987, p.169 / 10. Stephen Melville, “Color Has Not Yet Been Named: Objectivity in Deconstruction,” in Brunette and Wills (Eds), *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge Uni Press, 1994, pp 33–48 / 11. Michel Haar, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Northwestern University Press, 1993, p 185 / 12. *Ibid* 188

COLOURIST

In the battle between idea and percept, idea will win out, as exemplified in the dominance of Conceptual art over Op art. Even in the way Andy Warhol’s work generates lots of discussion about media and popular culture but not as much about his sensual use of colour, particularly industrial colours. Colourist artists are usually those associated with a kind of anti-realism, breaking with the natural colours of things, to make colour an expressive, affective or formal element as in impressionism, fauvism, abstraction, and colour field.

The nature of colour for a colourist changes with time and according to the presence of pigments and how they are harnessed. In the early 20th century colour came from earthy pigments captured in a tube, later on synthetic colours were produced in tins and made from laboratory concoctions, now colour is largely pixel based. The demand for colour in various non-art situations, house paint and industrial surfaces, pushed the nature of art making away from the accurate representation of flesh to the seductive presentation of colour that might compete with the spectacular materials of the modern world. To be a colourist today, well after Warhol and Judd, means thinking colour anew, specifically in terms of the ubiquity of coloured plastics and the plasticity of colour on an electronic screen. As Batchelor points out the difference between colour then and colour now is symbolised by the difference between the colour wheel and the colour chart.

The colour wheel is historically steeped and scientifically justified in its hierarchies of colour, that rationalise the visible and makes it ready for representation. Whereas the colour chart is a “disposable list of readymade colour” in a “grammarless accumulation of colour units”¹³ that strips colour free from colour theory and places it in an entirely autonomous zone.

To find another concrete practice for colour requires another kind of making and thinking, that is on both counts, neologistic. Ultimately it involves refiguring the presence of paint and the object of painting itself. Thinking colour and making colour in an expanded form involves a radical refiguring of the presence of

the painted image and the object based nature of painting. Riffing on painting, mixing colour in different painted materials, I leave things out and introduce new things that are not nameable as painting but nevertheless originate within the differential field of colour. While many aspects of painting fall away in the act of forming hybrid connections, one primary component continues to hold it together, namely colour. The medium of painting however deconstructed or expanded, has become the entity to ‘whom’ the work of colour is addressed.

13. Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, pp104–105 / **Images:** (front) Mark Titmarsh, *Library of Congress*, 2011, installation view, mixed media / (inside panel) Mark Titmarsh, *Ralph Lauren*, 2011, acrylic on paper (slip jacket) / (centre page) Mark Titmarsh, *Book of Light*, 2011, acrylic paint on acrylic glass / All photos by Arthur Georgeson