

Powder and Puff

Much of modern and postmodern art history and criticism would then be a kind of collective hysteria about pictures, brought on by the fact that pictures do not speak and do not mean anything aside from their trappings of legible signs. The simplicity and irreducible nature of visual meaninglessness would make pictures even more exasperating for minds bent on understanding. Images, I think, elicit a kind of attention that returns again and again to an ordinary non-linguistic ground, where articulable meaning seems conclusively inaccessible.¹

Although aimed at art historians and theorists Elkin's critique can equally apply to any attempt to articulate the specificities of, in particular, abstract art. Like modernist abstraction, contemporary abstract art remains perplexing to those viewers seeking a revelation of an image's content expressible in descriptive linguistic signifiers. Artists whose practices extend, elaborate or reconceptualise the use of abstract forms and colour, whether in geometric or expressionistic mode, are often pressed to 'explain' their work in ways not similarly applicable to figurative works in which the content is often assumed to be a visual narrative. That the visual phenomena created by juxtaposed coloured forms are essentially experiential and exist in a cognitive realm which is only slightly expressible in language is, as Elkins observes, the source of clumsily reductive attempts to convey a soothing reassurance to viewers unaccustomed or unwilling to pay attention to visual manifestations.

Texts on how colour is used in art, or descriptions on the perceptual anomalies exploitable through combinations of particular colours can be particularly tedious to read. More than any other formal element that constitutes pictures, the materiality of colour needs to be experienced in actuality. Unsurprisingly it seems that the use of colour itself has been problematic in the art of western cultures. David Batchelor has argued that since antiquity colour has been the Cinderella of art, subservient to drawing (its superior masculine companion) and that this prejudice masks a 'fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable'. Colour has frequently been associated with the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological: it is superficial, supplementary, inessential or cosmetic and is therefore '...dangerous, or it is trivial or it is both'².

Batchelor could not, at the time of writing, have foreseen that screen technologies would transform apprehensions associated with colour usage into the fearlessness with which it is applied today. Ironically, it can be argued that colour is used for the very same reasons that we previously avoided it: we prefer our reflected world to look exotic, foreign, theatrical or just plain different from 'the ordinary'.

In an era when 'contemporary color' means a David Byrne extravaganza of color guard performance, and restaurants anxiously plan the colour coordination of dishes to make them desirable for food snappers to Instagram, colour may still be deemed

¹ J. Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?* Routledge, New York & London, 1999, p 16.

² Batchelor, D., *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books Ltd. London, 2000

superficial, if not trivial.

Despite the fact that bodies too are now sites for decorative embellishment, (although tattoos in colour are not yet as prevalent as monochromatic ones), black, white, navy, grey and neutral colours are still preferred for bodily attire – one needs only to scan this seasons' fashion magazines or clothes outlets for confirmation. Colour is fashionable - as long as we can slavishly follow the dictates of trend forecasters.

Artists, on the other hand, select and mix colours solely or in combinations to create particular desired effects and sensations. Artists experience colour directly and intimately - in the past through powder pigments transformed into oil or acrylic paint – now in a variety of media. That colour can be illusive, unstable, create inexplicable perceptual paradoxes and be breathtakingly seductive is surely inarguable. Bridget Riley informs us that:

I saw that the basis of colour is its instability. Instead of searching for a firm foundation, I realised I had one in the very opposite. That was solid ground again, so to speak, and by accepting this paradox I could begin to work with the fleeting, the elusive, with those things which disappear when you actually apply your attention hard and fast – and so a whole new area of activity, of perception opened up for me.³

It is obvious from the title of this exhibition that each participating artist has used colour to communicate a range of individual ideas embodied within the work and accessible through it and that, despite any written words – either the artist's own or through an interpreter – each viewer will respond to the work through their own particular sensibility. What is obvious from viewing the works is that the mode of communication is abstract and scanning the list of artists tells us that all are women. It is neither abrogation of the artists' or the writer's responsibility nor is it wilful provocation to suggest that, in affirmation of Elkins' words above, commentary on either the collective exhibition or individual works is superfluous when the opportunity is provided to engage with the specificities of their articulation of form and colour in a creative synthesis.

Wilma Tabacco

©

May 2016

Published in conjunction with *Of Colour and Light*, Yarra Sculpture Gallery, 2016

³ R. Kudielka, (ed) Bridget Riley: *Dialogues on Art*, Zwemmer, London, 1995 p 56