

Seeing in Colour

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The human eye can distinguish around 10 million different colours of the apparent 16 million in existence. Our understanding of colour is determined not just by the refraction of light on a surface but by a cacophony of other factors: natural perception, memory, language and cultural associations all influence our visual acuity and comprehension of different shades and tones.

Over the centuries, colours have taken on a host of symbolic meanings, which have shifted and altered diametrically according to time and place. Colour has entered our vernacular in the guise of descriptors for human behaviour and emotion, from 'tickled pink' and 'seeing red' to 'green with envy'. It has likewise acted as a means by which to convey a sentiment; in Victorian England, a yellow flower was a symbol of love, but in France a flower of the same shade represents jealousy. Historically, the symbolic value of certain shades was often directly linked to the pigment's monetary worth. For many classical civilisations, from the Phoenicians to the Romans, the expensive, reddish-violet of Tyrian purple – made from sea snails – signified great status. For the painters of Renaissance Europe, however, it was the ultramarine pigment made from precious lapis lazuli that was chosen to accent the garments of the Virgin Mary.

Describing the inadequacy of the diagrams in his **Theory of Colours**, Goethe noted that: 'a physical phenomenon exhibiting its effects on all sides is not to be arrested in lines nor denoted by a section'.¹ Colour inhabits every form, structure and surface we encounter, and while its symbolism remains inseparable from the rigmarole of daily life, our over-stimulated eyes can struggle to isolate or arrest its effects. The three painters in this exhibition refocus our attention on colour in their varied celebrations of its transformative qualities. Each approaching it from a different perspective, they embrace its cultural and spiritual qualities, while simultaneously reveling in its essentially non-pictorial character. For Helen Beard, colour allows an abstraction of carnal pleasures. For Boo Saville, it is both descriptive and phenomenological. And for Sadie Laska, it assumes the improvisations of the vivacious everyday. The artists each employ the expressive use of colour to render their vision of the performed, the familiar and the profound.

The skies over Thanet are the loveliest in all Europe.

–JMW Turner in discussion with John Ruskin

Approaching one of Boo Saville's colour field paintings is much like taking in the Margate sunsets of Kent, which inspired over 100 of Turner's seascapes. Rich pinks merge into swimming pool verdigris, mint greens slide into apricot orange and pillar box reds fade into

¹ Goethe, **Theory of Colours**, trans by Charles Lock Eastlake (London; John Murray, 1840), p.xxix

greying purples. Intoxicating, all-consuming and borderless – aside from at the very edges of the canvas – they immerse the viewer in a sea of radiant colour.

After her mother's death in 2014, Saville began to see the world afresh. Where a melancholic darkness dominated her monochrome figurative paintings, Saville started to inject her practice with vibrancy, in the form of her new series of abstract canvases. Saville admitted that before this awakening: 'I was always kind of skirting around the idea of beauty. Everything was darker.' There is a clear lineage from Saville's intense monochrome biro drawings to these pillowy amorphous masses of oil paint. Aspects of her earlier obsessions – the notion of limbo space, of a portal into the unknown – carry through into her colour field paintings. Instead of staring into the black abyss, however, she presents exalting rays of fluid hues that beckon the viewer towards a momentary loss of gravity.

The once laborious layering of pen marks to create profound depth on a paper surface is replaced with the seemingly effortless accumulation of colour. For Saville, the layering of saturated pigment is an intuitive act imbued with emotion and existentialism. These rich harmonies of endless combinations explore notions of being and mortality in its abstract sense. As Saville traverses this philosophical terrain, she calls upon ancient mythology to give context to her questioning, titling her works after gods and goddesses, and the stars, planets or constellations identified by their characters. A haze of variegated hues of yellows and greens is **Jupiter** (2014), after the Roman god of the sky and thunder. A myriad of stormy blues is called **Mercury** (2014), the god of poetry, who was charged with guiding souls to the underworld. And a dusky, almost thunderous pink canvas is named **Pan** (2014), after the Greek god of the wild (who also hugely influenced the Romantic movement), a being that inhabited a world part human, part animal. In the latest iterations of the series, we encounter **Cassiopeia (The Queen)** and **Orion (The Hunter)** (both 2018) – respectively a blush of powder pink and blue, and bottomless navy – the titles of which expand to encompass entire star constellations.

The duality of Saville's practice relieves the pressure of attempting to encapsulate all that she wants to communicate in just one form. The complex colour abstractions are counterbalanced by detailed, hyperreal, figurative monochrome drawings and paintings of an often macabre nature, which enable Saville to delve into her fascination of symbolism, superstition and the folkloric. No longer is there an unbridgeable tension between abstraction and the representational. Instead, the two distinctively different styles and approaches exist side by side in an ongoing dialogue, one feeding off the other. The id and the ego. The instinctive and the conscious. Meta narratives of the celestial body gently colliding with the fragility of flesh in the physical realm.

In the past, skulls have been a recurrent theme in Saville's black and white paintings. **Polycephaly** (2014), the title of which derives from the Greek for 'many heads', is not only an exquisitely rendered painting of a double-headed animal skull but also illustrates the dualism in Saville's thought process. Often smaller in scale than the colour field works, the monochrome paintings have a meticulous intensity that derives simultaneously from the replication of images from books and the Internet, and the washes of subdued, sepia-

tinged hues. They emit an inkiness, a ghostly, ethereal glow. The undercoat, almost like a primer wash, allows a translucent layering of colour.

Saville's latest figurative works are much larger, greyscale paintings of disparate subjects. Giant hands pinch the neck of a clay vase on a moving potter's wheel in **Pot** (2018). A slightly out of focus woman's face is caught in mid weep, eyes closed, nose scrunched and mouth open in anguish in **Cry** (2018). A portly middle-aged man on a sofa caresses his erection in **Man Admiring Penis** (2018). And a delicate, synthetic flower rests on a surface in **Paper Flower** (2018). These images present as suspensions of time, split seconds of action during which Saville has pressed pause. A flicker of a second later and the scenes might be changed or lost, imbued with different associative references or emotions. This fascination with the transience of existence invites a consciousness of the moment, and how little attention it is given – how decisions, movements, and interactions are fleeting.

Saville regards herself as a 'conduit' in the creation process, merely bringing together these various components and visual triggers. And although the evidence of her hand is reduced to an absolute minimum, she feels metaphysically present in the minutiae of every hidden brushstroke or captured scene.

Why do two colours, put next to the other, sing? Can one really explain this? No.

– Pablo Picasso

A quotidian chaos bursts from the restrictive frame of the canvas in Sadie Laska's exuberant paintings. Oblique geometric shapes in primary-based colours wrestle for surface space in Tetris-tight compositions. Organic forms are interspersed over abrasive grounds. Cut canvases from previously discarded works are pasted atop and among new formations. Paint, applied with a feverish uncertainty, jostles against unexpected intrusions, such as an earbud.

Laska's paintings are as multifarious as her wider practice. The Brooklyn-based painter is also a musician in bands I.U.D. (with Lizzi Bougatsos of Gang Gang Dance) and Growing. She listens to music when she paints, although prefers the radio to avoid the distraction of decision making.² Visually, her work evokes changing radio channels, dashing and bouncing between style and subject like fluctuating wavelengths.

Primarily grounded in abstraction, Laska creates configurations that tussle for the viewer's attention in their gesticulating expressiveness and applied form. **Untitled** (2017) is a flushed-pink stained canvas in which glimpses of two red figures can be deciphered under overlaid blue line drawings of another couple. It conjures the sensation of looking through a frosted window, the beings inside distorted by sunlight and reflections, a voyeuristic observation of an intimate moment. This weightless layering of both subject and material stands in stark contrast to **Untitled (Pepsi Shape)** (2017), a life-size painting that boldly

² Sadie Laska, **ARTNews**, 21 October 2015. As accessed at:
<http://www.artnews.com/2015/10/21/consumer-reports-sadie-laska/>

references the Pepsi logo. Laska contorts the shape, her use of abstraction feeling like cells under a microscope. Within these two works, executed in the same year, Laska's decisive rebelliousness is made boundlessly apparent.

There is an aspect of chance mark-making in the artist's work. She happily embraces the accidental moments of, say, stepping on a wet canvas lying on her Williamsburg studio floor, which are then incorporated into the final piece. But this haphazard frivolity is always counterbalanced by considered and precise applications. Here, the disjunction between the rational and foolish mind are at play. In recent works, Laska demonstrates this in her incorporation of sections of torn canvases from previous paintings, repurposing marks and paint formations made in one state of mind or moment into an entirely unrelated new configuration. This recycling of her own practice, as it were, allows Laska to control, and in turn be controlled by, the limitlessness of painting.

Laska's quotidian materials amount to remnants of her every day, which symbolise a contemporaneous existence. She mishmashes these together in a manner reminiscent of anti-aesthetic assemblages, which followed a Dadaist approach to collage with a post-Abstract Expressionist eye. Detritus is no longer throwaway and is instead loaded with new potential. In turn, this gives the plane of her paintings a materiality, a physicality. The functional and prosaic blue paper towel, recognisable from countless restaurant toilets, is reimagined and romanticised beneath rubbings of magenta, yellow and orange paint. Residual tape is purposefully left on a canvas' edge, turning tool into media. Daily utility apparatus such as headphone wires, a bikini string, or a plastic bag are incorporated to delineate space and craft raw, paired back textures. Here, brutally stapled or glued to the surface, twenty-first-century technology, consumerist symbols and pollutants are reduced to their material qualities and subsequently elevated to unexpected heights. This scavenged matter becomes a series of witty yet pertinent additions to Laska's unapologetic abstractions.

While Titian was mixing rose madder,
His model reclined on a ladder.
Her position to Titian
Suggested coition,
So he leapt up the ladder and had 'er.

– Anonymous

Limbs spread apart. Hands grip flesh. Bum cheeks clench. Tongues touch. Nipples erect. Explicit acts unfold in vibrant hues through Helen Beard's painted canvases. Sometimes overtly pornographic and in other instances merely suggestive, moments of risqué intimacy undergo a sensual abstraction.

In Beard's hands, imagery appropriated from the Internet and magazines undergoes a process of metamorphosis. From digital pixel renders and process printed photographs,

the erotic scenes emerge as a sequence of abstracted, brightly coloured forms, devoid of personality or individualism and with no decipherable trace of their former incarnations or origins.

Block application of a highly sophisticated colour palette tantalizes the eye: malachite green legs lead to a pelvis rendered in Naples yellow; snatches of mauve buttocks are glimpsed behind a vermillion-hued penis; pert peach breasts sit atop an olive green torso. It is this spectrum of unexpected, unintuitive colour that gives the paintings their character, their eroticism, rather than the brazenly explicit close-ups of genitalia that the hues combine to form. Any lewd connotations transmute into wonderfully sensuous, kaleidoscopic explorations of bodies and touch. Beard's bold and exceptionally graphic colour scheme distils the intensity of writhing, interlocking figures stimulating one another; the representation is, for once, rendered as electric as the acts themselves.

At first glance, Beard's compositions appear flat. The fragmented formations of vibrant shapes sit on the canvas surface. But then texture reveals itself – Beard's application of oils leaving a glistening residue, the visible brushstrokes an impression of human flesh. Here, sensual pleasure is given a material quality that manifests outside of the realms of fantasy, performance or distant, voyeuristic ritual. In turn, Beard's painterly quality heightens the physicality of her subjects. Her choice of colours and fine impasto paint animates the naked bodies, transforming her 2D scenes into glimpsed moments of vivacious, sometimes frenzied activity.

While many of the paintings suggest blatant moments of penetration, Beard's more abstract, earlier paintings invite intrigue, perhaps a knowing giggle, and are delightfully open to individual readings. Two works from 2010, brilliantly titled **What Men Want** and **What Women Want** place the subject of gender in the frame in a humorous and arguably accusatorial way. The bulbous forms, lines and openings reduce the desires of men and women into distinctly differing camps. Yet whose opinions are these? Who unanimously decided it was this way? Who, if anyone, is Beard pointing her finger at? The only assurance is that the artist's intention is to confront a worldview, long dominated by a male perspective.

In an age of oversharing and hyperreality, it is remarkable that we still stigmatise the act of sex and confine its representation to the top shelf of a newsagent or adult-only website, preventing it from entering the mainstream consciousness in all its real-life nuances. The art gallery, therefore, feels like an apt and ideal platform to confront this curious social taboo, particularly as the female form in all its posturing and nakedness has been on perpetual and – until recently – unquestioning display. As colour replaces associative identity, the work heightens our awareness and invites questions concerning how we view and consider sex. Is it lovemaking or intercourse? Are the two mutually exclusive? Is pornography always degrading to women? Are the works an expression of female empowerment simply because a woman painted them? For all the latent psychosexual analysis we could subject Beard's work to, this painter has given primal desire a new visual syntax.