

Serial imagery: the continuing capacity of painting to reveal the colours of the world

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a process of colour analysis using methods of perceptual painting and reports on findings made through this inquiry. Specific landscape sites have been painted multiple times over many days and the range of colour variation revealed through this process is very large. Presenting these paintings together in serial formats attempts to make clear the continual change of colour that occurs in and because of natural phenomena. These variations may not be so clear without the mechanisms of simultaneous appraisal and comparison that serial imagery provides.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study follows from two previous investigations of colour in landscape. The first of these attempted to objectively analyse the colour of clear blue skies (Smith 2007), the second, colour at the interface between sea and sky (Smith 2011). Both of these studies revealed the range and variation of colour in natural phenomena so common that they are often ignored, overlooked or simply taken for granted. Both of these studies have stimulated and informed my method of making sets of paintings of the same landscape subject from the same location at different times of the day and year. These multiple images continue a tradition of serial painting that has added significantly to the awareness and knowledge of colour in the natural world.

Serial painting has its origins in the Western tradition at around the turn of the nineteenth century with the increasing practice of painters to create landscape imagery outdoors and within the location that was their subject rather than indoors in a studio working from visual studies, memory and imagination. The first extant examples of serial paintings appear to have been made by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819) and are studies of architectural and natural forms made in and around Rome from 1782-84. These led, in the nineteenth century, to the most well-known sets of serial paintings made by Claude Monet (1840-1926). His series of paintings of; *Haystacks*, *Poplars*, *Waterlilies* and especially *Rouen Cathedral*, are exemplary examples of the genre and powerfully demonstrate the diversity of colour in the natural world created by changing lighting and atmospheric conditions.

While this type of investigation and manner of pictorial construction became much less common during much of the twentieth century and beyond it has continued to attract artists interested in landscape. David Hockney's (1937-) recently completed sets of landscape images in a variety of media, and particularly his series of paintings of *Woldgate Woods*, (2006) are notable examples of the persistence of this tradition. Serial painting is an almost

inevitable consequence of the type of visual analysis that landscape painting engenders, for it is impossible not to be aware of colour change when working with this subject, especially when these paintings are largely made outdoors, in-situ and in a landscape of constant transformation.

2. METHOD

The research process for this ongoing project is direct and empirical, that is, paintings made on-site and outside in a range of landscape locations from the immediate environment where the author resides. The whole project is premised on the understanding that making painted images in response to an external stimulus; that is painted from life or *en plein air*, is still a useful tool for visual investigation. The process of image making described here has evolved in response to the variability of atmospheric conditions and lighting, and as a consequence the colour that is experienced in these locations. The aim always has been to be as objective as possible in the analysis and transcription of this colour. While challenged by photography, and increasingly so by this medium's advancing technical sophistication, the direct and immediate connection between sensate experience and recording gesture that painting offers still makes it a valuable research method for visual discovery.

At the core of this particular painting process is the mixing of coloured paint to attempt to match perceived colour phenomena in the studied landscape locations. The human visual system can discern an extraordinarily large number of colour variations; possibly in the order of two million subtle gradations of spectral and non-spectral colours (Pointer and Attridge 1998: 52-54). The character and quality of modern pigments, if well chosen to make an effective palette of mixing colours, gives the contemporary painter the opportunity to achieve something of this order of magnitude in discernible variations. This level of mixing ability does require time and persistence to achieve the necessary subtlety of judgement, both in evaluating colour in the visible world and then matching it in a pictorial organization.

As involvement with this investigation has developed it has become increasingly apparent that single images may not be the most effective way to reveal the constant variability that is intrinsic to the experience of landscape. Colour changes so much over time that that it is hard to do justice to its plenitude. Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes was certainly aware of this when in 1800 he stated:

It is well to paint the same view from different hours of the day in order to observe the differences that light produces in the forms. The changes are so apparent and so astonishing that one scarcely recognizes the same objects. (Taylor 1987: 256)

The most obvious changes in landscape colour are in atmosphere, through diurnal change of the sun's position in the sky and through variability of air temperature and pressure that result from this. Many of the landscape sites observed throughout this study are in a coastal region and so involve expanses of sea water and the interplay between these and atmospheric change further extends colour variation. Expanses of water reflect changes in sky colour and are a powerful multiplier of colour transformation in landscape. Increasingly serial imagery has seemed to be the most logical way to attempt to pictorially represent the diversity of these phenomena. Sets of images have been painted from exactly the same physical locations, in formats of exactly the same size, and often during the same

times of the day to make clear that it is the colour that changes most in these locations over time.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Procedural difficulties

Throughout this study I have taken as my reference point the actively analytical form of looking that painting directly from a subject can encourage. This being said it is important to acknowledge that there are procedural anomalies associated with this approach to image making as well as presentation questions that have to be addressed in order to make the whole process of this investigation comprehensible to a viewer.

3.2 Adaptation

I have discussed in the two previously cited studies the aberrations caused to colour matching procedures by changing levels of illumination. Associated with illumination are mechanisms of adaptation; involuntary adjustments of the iris to accommodate changing light levels and retinal adaptation, the diminishing response to stimuli (especially colour) after long exposure to it. The complexities with this are, as with illumination, beyond the scope of this study, I am a painter and can only report on what I see, but my speculation is that the process of intense scrutiny of the contextual relationship of colour that painting can involve does seem to support current theories of colour vision (Purves and Lotto 2011). The making of frequent comparisons between colours in a scene and so evaluating their hue, saturation and lightness levels by association may diminish the influence of adaptive processes but at the same time reveal the breadth of change that colour in the natural domain can exhibit.

3.3 Constancy.

The cognitive stabilization of continually varying visual stimuli experienced in the world and especially those caused by changing levels and colour of illuminating light are known as lightness and colour constancy. These are important in; ameliorating or buffering fluctuations of perceptions that could be confusing, and facilitating a functional existence. While the exact mechanisms that create the experience of constancy are still debated (Foster 2003, Foley & Matlin 2010) what this discourse highlights, and seems to agree on, is that light and colour perception are dependent on an awareness of "... reflectance relationships among objects in our field of vision." (Foley & Matlin 2010: 209). Or in other words, that we see the visible world by comparative analysis between adjacent visual stimuli. This process of comparative analysis is certainly what painters do when attempting to match and record perceived colour. They are very conscious of the visual scanning that this energetic form of looking engages. So while I can only speculate, and have no means to do other than this, it may be that as in other aspects of vision one learns to see by experience (Lotto and Purves 2011), so the nature of the colour inquiry engaged by this project may train the perceptual system to be more alert and less influenced by the agency of colour constancy. Colour constancy may then be a necessary, but somewhat lazy mechanism in perception.

3.4 Presentation problems

Having made many images from specific field sites the next question has been to decide how best to present these to a viewing audience in a manner that demonstrates the range of perceived and mixed colours that they reveal. The key consideration has been to resolve

the arrangement and distance between many respective paintings in a set, maintaining the compositional and experiential integrity of each, but also creating a unified ensemble. Distance between images is the most important concern, too close and they may visually fuse into an ambiguous amalgam, too far apart and their identity as a series becomes lost and the viewers' ability to see the fully represented range of colours compromised. This is the fate that has befallen Monet's respective series which, after their creation and initial exhibition, have been dispersed and spread across numerous locations around the globe so making it difficult to fully appreciate their creative achievement.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Painting's close connection between perceiving and making sharpens perceptions and maximizes self-reflective acuity, and it may be able to do this more powerfully than other visual media. The range of colour revealed by the painting process used to analyse the specific landscapes of this study is very large, much larger than imagined. As colour is best understood by its context, so serial painting's method of creating multiple images can make colour difference clear through comparative association. Ultimately this project is a balance between analytical evaluation and poetic evocation, using the remarkable capacity of the human visual system to discern diverse and subtle qualities of colour.

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