

THE ENIGMA OF THE OFFING: THE REPRESENTATION OF LIGHT AND COLOUR IN SEA AND SKY

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Abstract

For artists involved with landscape, a fundamental investigative and aesthetic concern is the relationship between the forms, spaces and colours seen above and below the horizon. For image makers in particular, this horizontal division is often used as a powerful compositional construct, emphasising the separation of land and sky, or sea and sky. This paper explains a concentrated study of the visual phenomena seen by looking across sea water, and particularly the division between this water and the sky immediately above it; a place described poetically as the area of the offing, or factually as the sea level horizon. The fundamental objective of this study is to understand something of the nature of the colours seen in these phenomena and how in turn these colours can be used pictorially to evoke such encounters. Colour in this aspect of the natural environment is clearly seen to be determined by the level of sunlight intensity, but how this light is revealed is complex and the variations of its manifestations astonishing.

1. Introduction

An ongoing theme of investigation for visual artists, especially those interested in landscape imagery, is the fundamental relationship between earth and sky. This can be understood and explained as an archetypal landscape experience and pictorial imagery derived from a response to this experience often has qualities of an essential or primary visual structure. In the Western tradition of landscape imagery the recognition of this archetypal form, and a confidence to find pictorial equivalents to express it, probably begins most clearly in the Romantic era with painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774 - 1840) and J. M. W. Turner (1775 - 1851). Almost contemporaneously the new process of photography was significantly advanced both technically and aesthetically by the boldly simplified monochromatic images of sea and sky by the French photographer Gustave Le Grey (1820 – 1882). The later paintings of Claude Monet (1840 - 1926) especially his *Haystacks*, *Poplars* and *Waterlilies* series extended an understanding of how the phenomena of colour in landscape could be represented through repeated primary pictorial forms. Twentieth century Modernism and especially the development of forms of Minimalism continue to have a significant stimulating effect on this type of imagery. The characteristic paintings of Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970) with their reduction of pictorial form to divisions of coloured horizontal bands, while not overtly descriptive of landscape are at times difficult not to associate with this subject. Other and subsequent artists have used this same pictorial structure with landscape references clearly intended. L.S. Lowry (1887 - 1976) made hauntingly evocative paintings of just sea and sky in his characteristic muted palette at various times throughout his career. Brice Marden (1938 -) has explored the connection between paintings constructed of primary visual structures and place association in their titles (*Adriatic* 1972-73, *Sea Painting* 1973-74). As well, the Japanese, American, English and Australian photographers; Hiroshi Sugimoto (1948 -), Richard Misrach (1949 -), Gary Fabian Miller (1957 -) and Murray Fredericks (1970 -) have all explored ways of framing and

presenting minimal landscape imagery that stresses this archetypal relationship between the horizontal division of land and sky, or sea and sky. Such images represent the clearest and most simple expression of landscape as prospect (Appleton, 1996), but do so by attempting to reconcile the fundamental conundrum of representing three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface with the availability of few markers to indicate spatial recession.

2. The Project

This paper explains my investigation, through the medium of painting, to find ways of representing the experience of looking at primary landscape structures and specifically that of the powerful compositional division of the horizon when looking across sea and through sky and the realization that this is critically a question of how colour is perceived and represented.

For a number of years I have made paintings in response to the experience of looking at the horizon from across water. These images have been created by a variety of painting processes and techniques and until recently were made in a studio context using source drawings, studies, notes and memory. Over the last few years this study of light and colour has been focussed on images made completely on-site and so in direct and continuous connection with their source subject. These images are painted in the full light of day on the edge of an area of sea outside Melbourne, Australia. They are made in a variety of atmospheric conditions and at varying times of the day without reference to photographic images but with the complete sensory experience of being in association with the phenomena of space, air, water, light and colour.

These painted images are made over longer periods of time than most photographs, typically over a number of hours and so locate time differently. They are not instances of time but rather extended durations of it, they distil time rather than record it. With this subject, time and colour are inextricably linked, for colour over sea and in sky is the result of varying sunlight intensities at different times of the day and changing atmospheric conditions created by physical forces through time. The procedures involved in making these images on-site, develop and extend principles and practices discovered in a previous investigative project (Smith, 2007). This enquiry attempted to analyse and describe the empirical experience of looking at the colours of clear blue skies. The range of effective pigments discovered during this earlier project has been used as the starting point for this enlarged study. As in the previous study an attempt has been made to be as objective as possible to the actual colours perceived in the observed phenomena. This has been done while being mindful of the procedural paradoxes of, on occasions, being in an intensely lit and coloured environment for extended periods of time and the perceptual shifts in colour recognition that these experiences can induce. However not all of the images have been painted in conditions of full sunlight on a summer's day. Many were made under cloudy or overcast skies where levels of light intensity can be considerably lower. Colour in these sea/sky spaces then becomes much more subtle and is often made up of variations of warm (yellow, orange, pink and violet) and cool (green, turquoise and blue) greys.

Of special importance in this study is the interface between sea and sky, the area of the offing that is the most distant part of the sea at the horizon's edge. This is an area of powerful poetic association in landscape imagery and it is where colour relationships between the divisions of these two primary forms define the character of the visual experience; the level of light intensity, the time of day, the disposition of the

atmosphere. Sea water has a faint blue colour that increases with volume but its colour is also determined by the way that light from the sky reacts with it. Light is reflected from sea water's surface; scattered by particles within it; reflected from the underlying bottom surface, or by a combination of all these factors (Lynch & Livingston, 1995). Towards the horizon most of the sea's colour is from reflected sky light, including the colour of the clouds above it, for reflectivity increases as the eye's sight line across water becomes closer to the horizon. Here the division is between two different substances, air and water, gas and liquid. One is very light in weight and density, the other the opposite, one elastic and compressible, the other hardly at all, yet both are fluid and capable of mobility and of being pushed and shaped by the other. Height above sea level determines the perceived distance to the horizon, with the air above it, which is part of the encircling atmosphere extending much further back into deeper space. To see the boundary between these two substances over distance requires that there is sufficient contrast in colour or brightness between them. Generally this contrast increases as the surface texture of the water in the form of waves increases; conversely as water becomes smoother in still conditions the separation between air and water becomes less distinct. Waves on the horizon reflect more light from the higher and often darker parts of the sky and so the water at the horizon's edge is often darker than the sky immediately above it. As well, atmospheric conditions and varying levels of water vapour in air reduce visibility and soften the transition between water and sky.

3. The Process

How does the human eye perceive all this? In landscape painting when attempting to evaluate the objective nature of colour it is of considerable assistance if these colours are lit from the sun positioned behind the observer's back. This enables samples of mixed paint colour to be held up against a perceived colour in the landscape, with both actual and sample colour then in the full illumination of the sun's light, the sample can be thus evaluated and adjusted in relation to this light. If when doing this the light level on the mixed colour sample changes, through for instance cloud shadow, then the colour relationship between this and the perceived colour in the landscape changes so dramatically that it becomes very difficult to believe that one colour is an objective representation of the other. A similar difficulty arises in a landscape context when looking into the light, that is with the sun no longer behind the observer's back, for in this context any mixed colour sample held up against areas in the landscape will be in silhouette and therefore appear darker than the perceived colour. All this clearly indicates that the most important determinant of sea/sky colour is the level of sunlight intensity. On days when variable cloud cover in the sky is constantly masking or revealing the sun and therefore changing its local light intensity, sea colour similarly changes in response, becoming, alternately less or more saturated in hue and lighter or darker in tonal contrast. On such days when there is some cloud cover; sky colour appears lighter, than on days when there is no cloud at all. However logic would indicate that this colour shift is more subjective than actual for above the cloud layer sunlight intensity would be at the same or very similar level of intensity than on completely cloudless days. There is an apparent change in colour on days of high sunlight intensity and specifically the shifting of the perceptual recognition of colour further into the small wavelength area of the visible spectrum with the essentially blue colours of the sea/sky interface appearing to be darker in tone and more violet in hue. This hue change is in line with the description Bezold-Brücke effect. Studies of this phenomenon all indicate that as light intensity increases, the perceived shift in the

perception of hues in the blue region of the visible spectrum is further into the short wavelength zone, so blues do appear more violet (Hurvich, 1982; Pridmore, 2004).

Colour and light in sea and sky are therefore inextricably linked in a complex and interactive process; light creates colour in sky and this colour is in continuous dialogue with the sea, which itself has colour that is created and revealed through the agency of the same light. Both of the substances in these spaces; air and water, are by their nature reflective, transparent and mutable, the only constant in this interface is the variability across it. Recognition of this phenomenon of endless atmospheric and colour variation experienced in such maritime environments has stimulated a manner of image production and presentation that acknowledges dissimilarity. This investigation has consciously avoided the extreme variations of colour experienced at the beginning and end of the day, but rather has sort to explore the subtleties of colour variation observed in a restricted span of time throughout the day, specifically between 900 and 1200 hours, when the position of the sun in the sky offers the greatest possibility of full illumination of the colour mixing and evaluation process that is at the basis of all on-site or *en plein-air* painting. All the paintings created through this process were made at a height of only a few metres above sea level; the distance to the area of the offing at this height is therefore approximately five kilometers.

4. Summary

The increasing awareness within this area of investigation of the complexity of the observed colour variations and the procedural difficulties in recording them accurately has lead to the paintings made on-site being presented as a series of multiple images that attempt to record colour and disclose its continual change. The observed colour changes even within the narrow parameters of this test environment are many for the constantly changing combinations of all the variables in sea and sky produce endlessly modified permutations of their colours below and above the horizon line, and these chromatic connections are never quite the same on different or even proceeding days. Therefore a presentation made up of many images, made on many days, seems to be a more honest description of the essentially fugitive and transient character of the observed phenomena. These multi-part images are intended as a positive affirmation of the complexity of colour in the natural world, its continual fascination for artists, and as a way of making all this more evident, especially when revealed through imagery that is reduced back to its most essential.

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