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THINKING IN COLOUR

Emily Crossen

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## THINKING IN COLOUR

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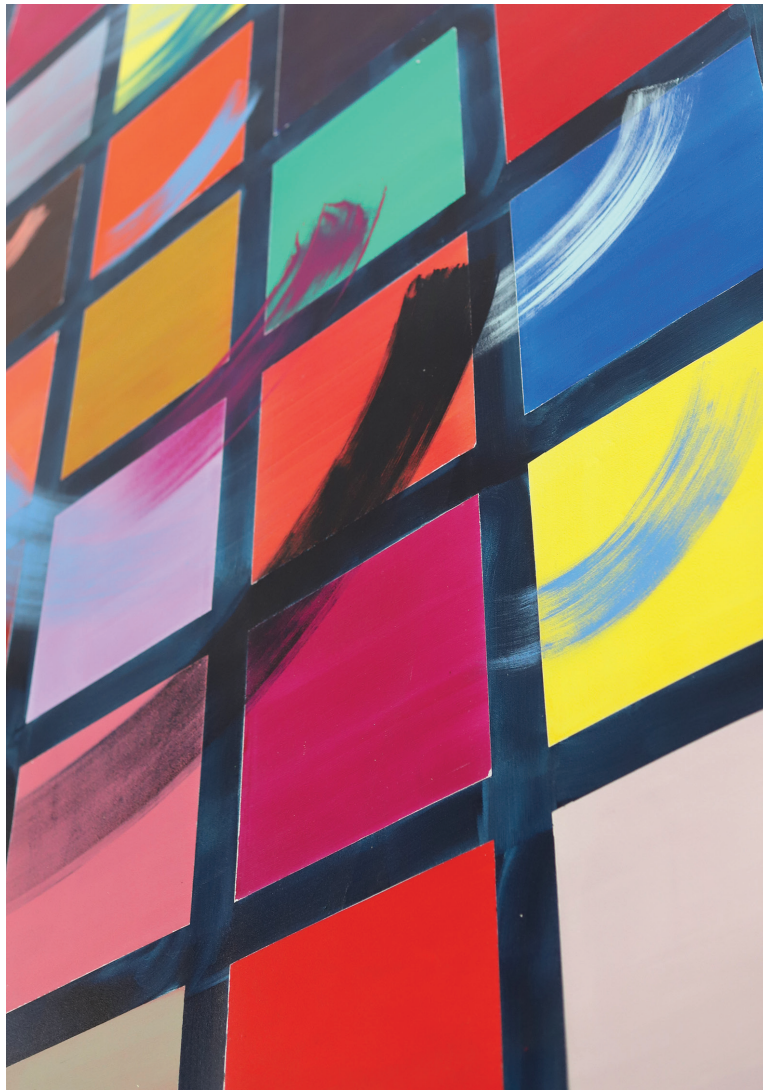


Figure 1. Emily Crossen, 48x, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 5200x1820mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

I am increasingly obsessed with magenta. Transparent but vibrant. Layers and layers of it. And with the addition of violet it turns a deeper, richer colour. Paler versions, a pink that reminds me of cooling calamine lotion, smothered over sunburnt legs. Three pinks in a row. Put all the theory about colour to one side. There is so much you don't understand about colour until you paint it.

I realise that I think in colour combinations of three. My paintings are built in three layers: a background colour and two colours which weave over the top of each other. I thought about the paintings on the floor of the studio. I mixed chemical-sounding quinacridone magenta with glazing liquid and used it everywhere.

David Reed writes that "colour can seem to be from the future, the immediate future, perhaps a week or a few hours from now."<sup>1</sup> All those colour combinations that I haven't yet imagined. Maybe this is what he means. It's like overhearing small snippets of conversations whilst I sit in the museum café. A painting the colour of a cup of freshly stirred coffee, creamy white against the reflective black cup. How do you describe the beige/brown? Is it latte? Is that the colour of the twenty-first century? David Reed again: "There are new colours and colour relationships in the world that don't yet have emotional connotations and we as painters can create them."<sup>2</sup>

Lunch arrives ... painting in a warm bowl of carrot orange soup, threaded through with jewel-like pieces of green parsley.

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Can you love a place because of its colours? Be homesick for the colours of the place where you grew up? I remember the bluebell woods, moss green on oak trees, blackberries which bled a deep rich purple red as they dripped into a jam. On my last visit to England, through the train windows all I saw was field after field of yellow rapeseed. Our relationship with colour is intertwined with emotion and associations. Tessa Laird says, "Red has never existed as an entity outside of things,"<sup>3</sup> and Robert Motherwell, "any red is rooted in blood, glass, wine, and a thousand other concrete phenomena."<sup>4</sup>

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I watch Derek Jarman's movie *Blue*, written whilst he is dying from Aids.<sup>5</sup> If dying is blue to him, then my grief lies in the colours of autumn. Chestnut brown conkers litter the ground, their shiny skins reflecting the fallen decaying leaves, green to yellow, red to brown. Meanwhile, my mother lies in a bed, unable to stare at the garden full of the colours that she so loved. The season turns from verdant green to a barren brown, autumn always grief-struck now. Emotions and colour again.

Gretchen Albrecht painted deep grey/purple, near black, after her father's death. I imagine a slow, sadder sweep of her arm as it traces the familiar curve of the hemisphere.<sup>6</sup> There is comfort in that. I know how that feels. The link between body and movement on the canvas. I take my shoes off and walk on the cold concrete floor; across the smooth surface of the canvas. Magenta is mixed and ready to go. I've done this before, but it takes courage and bravery every time. David Reed likens the experience of painting his abstract works to "losing the boundaries of your body."<sup>7</sup> Judy Millar talks about painting to bring together the two realms or dual existence of being human, the physical (physicality) and the mental (creativity). "You want to be so close ... to put your whole body in there."<sup>8</sup>

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Figure 2. Emily Crossen, *In Colour*, Installation view, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, August 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

Some colours have surprised me. I got intrigued by yellow. It is not a colour that I ever seem to plan on using, but I like the way it keeps peeking out from underneath the layers of one of the paintings. Even though I know that blue and yellow make green, there is a sense of wonder when the blue glaze sails over the top of the previous layers and makes green. This is what I am enjoying about the process of glazing, all these unanticipated colours that mix themselves on the painting.

I mix a yellow, maybe you would call it lemon yellow, although that could be misleading. New Zealand lemons are bright, almost artificial in their colour. This is a stark contrast to the insipid, pale lemons that you buy in England. I remember the colour choices I was offered to paint my childhood bedroom: Apple White, Apricot White, Barley White, Lemon White. It didn't feel like much of a choice. It was a colour chart of pallid whites, nothing inspiring other than the allusion to English orchards and the appeal of the small rectangular colour swatches. I craved a bright sunny yellow, maybe an antidote to the relentless grey skies of my childhood.

When does yellow become brown? Is there a point when it's neither yellow nor brown? Years later I fly over the dry, dusty, browned earth of Australia; those subtle English colours wouldn't survive out here. One of my paintings unintentionally ends up brown. I scrub the surface of it, hunting back through its layers in search of the yellow. The masking-taped edges show the evidence of all these layers of colour; violet, yellow, magenta, all the colours that somehow got me to brown.

Derek Jarman's chapter on yellow is titled "The Perils of Yellow."<sup>9</sup> I think this could describe how I feel when I use yellow. Somehow it does feel perilous: "if you mix paints, you will be unable to mix yellow."<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3. Emily Crossen, 9<sup>2</sup>, panel 2 (detail), 2021, acrylic on canvas, 3300x1800mm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Emily Crossen, 9<sup>2</sup>, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 3300x1800mm (each panel). Image courtesy of the artist.

Bridget Riley maintains that it is only by working with colour that you can see how colours act with each other: she writes, "well I'll just see what yellow can do."<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein asks that it is hard to imagine a hot grey, so can you have a cold yellow?<sup>12</sup> I start to take pleasure in applying yellow. Diaphanous, barely-there yellow, radiant, vivid yellow, buttery sun-bleached yellow. What about less pleasant yellows? Utterly dirty yellow, battered yellow. I mix a lot more yellow, more of a lime green, phthalo green goes in there. I apply it in great big strokes over the top of the dark blue painting. The brush mark stutters as it pulls across the surface of the painting.

In 1890 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, suffering from post-partum psychosis, is confined, by her doctor and husband, to a room with yellow wallpaper. The yellow wallpaper compounds her mental state and imprisons her further. She decides that the room itself has an unpleasant "yellow smell" emitting from the wallpaper; "a smouldering, unclean yellow" with a "sickly sulphur tint."<sup>13</sup> What a contrast to Goethe's colour theory where yellow "is the colour nearest the light ... [it] carries with it the nature of brightness, a serene, softly exciting character ... a warm, agreeable impression."<sup>14</sup> Wassily Kandinsky 'hears' colour; for him yellow is "hard and sharp ... trumpets are yellow."<sup>15</sup> Maybe any colour in too much intensity can send you a little mad, locked in a room with it.<sup>16</sup>

Wittgenstein again: "if there were a theory of colour harmony, perhaps it would begin by dividing the colours into groups and forbidding certain mixtures or combinations and allowing others. And, as in harmony, its rules would be given no justification."<sup>17</sup> I quite like the idea of finding a colour combination that is "forbidden." No neon yellow to be put in the vicinity of faded pink. I've always taken absolute delight in colour charts, paint chips and multi-hued fan decks. All those possibilities of colour systematically laid out.<sup>18</sup>

Returning the following day, I am still thinking about yellow and pink. I apply another layer over the top of the painting, magenta pink. Now I can see something is happening: the pink is activating both the blue and yellow layers. Hesitation and doubt are followed by action and the unexpected. I remember where my interest in yellow and pink stems from. I was given a box, one Christmas. A metal box. It was the 1980s and it had a geometric pattern on it, lots of pink and yellow. I loved the box and I wanted it to be full of equally delicious coloured pencils in every shade imaginable. Instead, I opened it to find it filled with make-up. A complete disappointment to my 11-year-old self. The make-up went in the bin, and I filled the tin with my favourite coloured pencils. I still have both the tin and the pencils, and I never did buy any more make-up.

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"Colour deceives constantly," writes Josef Albers.<sup>19</sup> Is that what he's thinking about as he sets out on his serial mission to "tame" colour?<sup>20</sup> Michael Taussig discusses the dual states of colour; both authentic and deceitful: "colour is another world, a splurging thing, an unmanageable thing, like a prancing horse or a run in a stocking ... this thing, this formless thing that we need to fence in with lines or marks."<sup>21</sup>

Katharina Grosse likes the "anarchical potential of colour," applying paint by spray gun to cover vast surfaces of fabric hung from walls and draped across the floor of the gallery.<sup>22</sup> An explosion of colour; allowed to spread out wildly, taking pleasure in its excess. Grosse uses colour freely and intuitively, leaving what she calls a "history" of the paint laid bare. Green is made from a yellow as it crosses over blue. She doesn't like yellow. She still uses it.<sup>23</sup>

I thought I wasn't particularly inspired by colours from nature and yet every day the sky seen from our deck throws out the most surprising of colours. An artificial-looking yellow light appears only for a few seconds. Goethe writes: "People experience a great delight in colour generally. The eye requires it as much as it requires light."<sup>24</sup> I can see why Albrecht felt she only had to look out the window or go into her garden for inspiration.

It isn't a particular colour that I am attracted to, but I am drawn to vibrant, high-contrast colours. Today, though, I mix Burnt Sienna, Burnt Umber, Nickel Azo Gold. Their earthiness surprises me. I had almost forgotten about this palette of colours.

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Is this city too grey, too brown or even too green? Le Corbusier wanted to whitewash the city: "a coat of whitewash would be ... a manifestation of high morality, the sign of a great people ... it is honest and dependable."<sup>25</sup> In India I visited the city of Chandigarh. No whitewash here, only Le Corbusier's monolithic grey concrete buildings with their polite panels of ordered colour.<sup>26</sup> It seemed so out of place given the rest of my experience of India, where even the ordinary is made extraordinary by the visual delight and chaos of brilliant, saturated colours under an intense sky. Howard Hodgkin's ravishing palette was influenced by his love affair with India.<sup>27</sup>

We eat breakfast on a rooftop, warm porridge sprinkled with cinnamon and nutmeg. The sun is already strong. The buildings cast deep shadows onto the streets below. Colour walks here. The street is filled with bright fabrics. Women gather in groups, forming colour combinations that would be hard to imagine. Sunburst yellow, shocking fuchsia pink, scarlet red threaded through with delicate strands of gold. Colours are saturated and intense. We visit pink cities, faded blue cities, floating white palaces and red forts. Whole cities that are stained through with colour: It seeps out of rocks and doorways, gets ingrained in your skin and falls as a magical, multi-coloured dust from your shoes at the end of a day.

We visit Dhobi Ghat, a huge outdoor laundry, where washing is done by hand in vast stone tubs. Six washing lines are strung with teal-coloured sheets, some faded by the bright sun. Brilliant whites, which blind with their whiteness, occupy row after row. When we first send out our washing to be done in a hotel in Kerala, our clothes come back in shades of pink. A bright red shirt has tinted our wardrobe for the rest of the trip.

That is how the colours of India remain with me. Energetic, intense, keyed-up colours. Colour that still fills my imagination and finds its way into the paintings.

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Figure 5. Emily Crossen, 92, Installation view, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, August 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

There are 44 squares on the walls of my studio. There has been a shift in my thought process. I am seeing them less as individual paintings and more as a serial enterprise, multiple squares together on one canvas, a single painting. For days I have been adding colour to them. Layers of colours glazed on each other. I like this repetitive action, this daily ritual. I add a gestural sweep of other colours. I begin to think of these like "stitches."<sup>28</sup> I find enjoyment in the idea that they are trying to be like each other, but each time they show their differences. I become fascinated by the layers of colour that appear on the neatly masking-taped edges. Small traces left behind of each layer of the process.

I am thinking about decision-making, and the speed of making those decisions, in relation to these 44 squares in front of me. The multiple decisions that it takes to complete each of these squares. I have ten pots of paint. How many colours can I make from these? How many ways are there of 'arriving' at green? On the first canvas I paint four blue, four red and four yellow. I know that I can make greens, but how many and what kind of greens? Muddy green, lime green? I start in a systematic way, writing down all the combinations of colours in a manner that resembles a mathematical equation.

How much control over the colour choice for the next square? The 'logic' of the grid seems to allow more and more freedom. Stanley Whitney refers to "call and response."<sup>29</sup> He begins painting in the top corner and, like writing, works his way across the page. I prefer to put a layer down in all the squares, to fill the white spaces, like colouring as a child. Some colours arrive fully formed; others develop slowly but I don't judge them. All colours equal. Gerhard Richter used a roll of the dice to decide which colour went to which square in his *Colour Charts* (1966-72).

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Today I crave to escape the confines of the studio. The alchemy of mixing colour and applying to canvas feels restrictive. No colour seems enough, not brilliant or brave enough, unexpected or surprising enough. I leave the studio and walk. All those colour combinations, muted under the autumnal sky. A woman hurries by, her peach-pink scarf flapping in the wind. I pass the lime green of a rampant plant in an overgrown garden and the blue of a water pipe as it exits a building. I am like a magpie for colour, stealthily stealing colours.<sup>30</sup>

**Emily Crossen** has lived and studied in Dunedin, where she has built a painting practice, since 2012. She previously worked as an architect and has a Master's in Architecture from the University of London. She graduated from the Dunedin School of Art with a Bachelor of Visual Arts in 2018 and a Master of Fine Arts in 2022.

- 1 David Reed, "Colour Game," in *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2008), 226.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 227.
- 3 Tessa Laird, *A Rainbow Reader* (Auckland: Clouds, 2013), 20-21. Tessa Laird's thesis is both a creative and academic piece of writing. It deals with the personal, emotive and political nature of colour and draws broadly on philosophy and art historical and literary sources. Here she explores the idea that it is hard to separate our cultural conditioning regarding 'red' (red reminding us of "things") and its emotive associations, even when used in monochromatic non-representational painting.
- 4 Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: The Invention of Colour* (London: Viking, 2001), 375-6. See, for example, Motherwell's *Red Open #3* (1973). Motherwell retained a belief in the emotive and socially engaged political context of his abstract works. His *Elegies* series, from 1948 on, encompassed the tragedies of the Spanish Civil War. In contrast, the paintings of the *Open Series* (1967-80) were optimistic and forward-looking, drawing on his love for Matisse and the window motif as a metaphor for inner meaning/outer world. Motherwell also refers to Matisse's use of an all-pervading colour – for example, red in *Harmony in Red* (1908). For a discussion of Motherwell's lean towards symbolism and the indirect "effect of the object," such as Motherwell's assertion that "red is rooted in blood," see Mary Ann Caws, *Robert Motherwell with Pen and Brush* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 37.
- 5 Art Fund UK, *Blue: Derek Jarman's First Soundtrack Demo with Simon Fisher Turner*, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc5np6-sEG0> (accessed 21 March 2020).
- 6 Luke Smythe, *Gretchen Albrecht, Between Gesture and Geometry* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2019). See, for example, *Black Portal for Dad* (1996) and *In Memory of my Father (Ashes)* (1996) from her "Hemispheres" series (1996-98).
- 7 David Reed, "Studio Visit with David Reed: Gorky's Granddaughter," <http://www.gorkysgranddaughter.com/2016/06/david-reed-at-peter-blum-gallery-june.html> (accessed 20 March 2019).
- 8 Bob Chaundy, "Judy Millar Interview: The View from Nowhere," *Considering Art*, <https://consideringart.com/2018/09/15/judy-millar-interview-the-view-from-nowhere/> (accessed 3 March 2018).
- 9 Derek Jarman, *Chroma* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1995), 89-94. Like his extended ode to blue, Jarman's book *Chroma* consists of ballads to colour. It is part poetry, part autobiography, with historical excerpts on colour.
- 10 Jarman, *Chroma*, 93.
- 11 Robert Kudielka, "The Colour Connection – In Conversation with Robert Kudielka," in *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley Collected Writings 1965-2009*, ed. Robert Kudielka, 2nd ed. (London: Ridinghouse, 2009), 146.
- 12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. GEM Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 46e. Wittgenstein writes about colour from a philosophical viewpoint, based on observations of how colour functions and the its cultural and linguistic implications. He explores colour theories including those of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, about whom he is particularly scathing.
- 13 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1952/1952-h/1952-h.htm>.
- 14 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 168-169. Goethe was a German poet and writer. Goethe's theory or doctrine of colours is essentially two parts. His scientific experiments on colours of the prismatic spectrum and refraction put him in opposition to Isaac Newton's *Opticks*, 1704. This part of Goethe's theory has long been dismissed as having no scientific basis. However; his observational and subjective responses to colour, such as his theory of chromatic harmony, proved useful to painters and were taken up by later theorists, such as Adolf Hoetzel and the Bauhaus teachers. See also John Gage, *Colour and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 201-3.
- 15 Frank Whitford, *Bauhaus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 111. Kandinsky played a key role in the emergence of abstract art and the idea that a work of art could express an inner state of mind or meaning without having a subject matter. Kandinsky claimed to possess synaesthesia, where one sense reacts when another is stimulated. He taught the preliminary course at the Bauhaus, focusing on colour and form. Distinctions of colours were based on their "temperatures," with yellow at the warm end of the scale and blue as cold at the opposite. These theories came via Goethe and Rudolf Steiner. Colour and form were intrinsically linked to "inner meaning" and emotional states and therefore had qualities arising from these elements. Although his findings were highly subjective, Kandinsky wanted to establish "universal laws" of colour.
- 16 Interestingly, Goethe remarks that in order to fully experience the effect of a colour on the mind, the observer should be in a room of just one colour (*Theory of Colours*, 168).
- 17 Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, 12e.
- 18 Briony Fer, "Color Manual," in *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today*, ed. Ann Temkin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 28-38. Fer discusses the impact of mass-produced colour and the commercial colour chart and its influence on a shift to "matter-of-fact" colour in art making from the 1950s on.
- 19 Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 1.



- 20 Nicholas Fox Weber; "Josef Albers," in *Josef Albers*, ed. Getulio Alviana (Milan: l'Archeditzioni, 1988), 10-11. I am thinking here of Albers' *Homages to the Square* series.
- 21 Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 17. Taussig examines the "truth or deceit" of colour through the history of colonialism, and the idea of being both attracted to and "repelled" by the nature of "bold" colour.
- 22 Art 21, Katharina Grosse: *Painting with Color | Art21 'Extended Play'*, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBfPMGS7XPo> (accessed 25 April 2019).
- 23 For an example, see *The Horse Trotted Another Couple of Metres and Then it Stopped* (2018), featured in *Carriageworks, Carriageworks: Katharina Grosse*, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHlhflZ0xk> (accessed 28 August 2018).
- 24 Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 167. The quotation is from the chapter "Effects of Colour with Reference to Moral Associations." Goethe associates colours with sensations and feelings – for example, his earlier comment about yellow.
- 25 Le Corbusier; "L'Art Decoratif d'aujourd'hui," in *Essential Le Corbusier: L'esprit Nouveau Articles* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 1998), 188-92.
- 26 For a discussion of Le Corbusier and concepts of whiteness and his use of colour in architecture, see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), <https://approachestopainting.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/163577202-chromophobia-david-batchelor.pdf>, 46-49.
- 27 The Hepworth Wakefield, *Howard Hodgkin: Painting India at The Hepworth Wakefield*, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmfJnqsP\\_Y&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmfJnqsP_Y&t=5s) (accessed 5 August 2019). I have been particularly inspired by Hodgkin's late, intensely coloured India paintings. See, for example, *Now* (2015-16), a small painting, oil on exposed plywood, composed very simply of three broad brush strokes of lively red and vibrant yellow.
- 28 Harmony Hammond, "Feminist Abstract Art: A Political Viewpoint," in *The Heroine Paint: After Frankenthaler*, ed. Katy Siegel (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2015), 156-8. Hammond was writing in 1977. She focuses on a feminist-based perspective of making abstract art that has a long history through women making domestic objects such as sewing quilts. She writes of the repetitive 'stitch' as a form of visual diary.
- 29 Alex Bacon, "Stanley Whitney: Call and Response," in his *Stanley Whitney* (London and New York: Lisson Gallery and Cornerhouse Publications, 2016), 18-19. "Call and response" is a compositional technique in music and works like a conversation, with musicians responding in an improvised manner to each other. Whitney is inspired by experimental jazz and African music. In terms of his painting technique, he is treating each coloured square as its own painting and always in relation to the adjacent colours.
- 30 I was intrigued by Michael Taussig's account, in *What Color is the Sacred?*, of William Seward Burroughs' and Brian Gysin's "color walks." These developed from their idea of the "cut up technique" where a text (or, in Gysin's case, text and colour) is "cut up" and rearranged to be read in any order. Here Taussig is referring to the idea of colour released from cultural coding – in a sense, colour, like Charles Baudelaire's flâneur, is 'walking' the city. This parallels the visual thought process in my own colour walks. Is it possible to see colour for itself first, before association with an object or thing?