

SURFACE. SPACE. COLOUR.

Jessica Ritchie



Figure 1. Jessica Ritchie, *Who's Afraid of Hot Pink?*, 2017, acrylic, oil, spray paint, glitter on aluminium, 122 x 122 cm.

This article represents an overview of my MFA project. My dissertation was titled *Beyond the Surface*; my final exhibition, *Surface.Space.Colour*, was exhibited at the Dunedin School of Art Gallery in September 2017.

In my studio research, I have developed a painting practice reflecting on the art of painting itself: abstract, drawing from colour, light and music. My work is concerned with process, with the exploration of the formal qualities of painting, and of the infinite possibilities of touch with paint. Located within the context of the field of abstract painting, the term 'abstraction' is used in a questioning and provisional sense, rather than as a categorising or labelling term; considering complexity rather than reduction. The paintings aim to show the potential of abstract painting to communicate light and space. Important influences include abstract expressionism, colour field painting and the

relationship between colour and music. The expressive force of painting resides in the materiality of colour; light, surface, space and luminosity.

I began this project by re-examining my previous practice, questioning why it was painting that I was drawn to. The earliest known paintings exist on cave walls. From the prehistoric era people have known the relationship between mark-making, colour, light and time. Painting is an example of a primitive contact with the world that embodied experience promotes. It is an exploration of visibility that does not depend on language. In fact, the creation and experiencing of paintings is a type of making sense of the world that linguistic description and analysis do not capture fully.

I am engaged with painting not only for its self-referential properties – it operates as itself, with its own materials. The elements don't have to refer to or rely on external motifs or objects. Abstract painting has the ability to fully engage the act of seeing and being. In my painting, the marks and gestures are signs of *an* image, rather than *the* image. The fragments create a dialogue with each other in movement; large shapes float, drips descend, some skim across the surface, others are static or frozen. Movement is that of the hand, arm, brush and paint. If shapes are unidentifiable, they do not fix and define the space around them. Shifts in scale indicate complex spatial relations, areas fracture, melt or separate. Painting attests to a process of change and improvisation, where some things are concealed, reinstated and then covered over again.

The fundamental life of any material I use is concretized in that material's gesture: gesticulation, gestation – source of compression (measure of tension and expansion), resistance – developing force of visual action. Manifest in space, any particular gesture acts on the eye as a unit of time. Performers or glass, fabric, wood ... all are potent as variable gesture units: color; light and sound will contrast or enforce the quality of a particular gesture's area of action and its emotional texture.¹



Figure 2. Jessica Ritchie, *Unashamedly Improvised*, 2017, acrylic, spray paint and flashe paint on aluminium, 40 x 40 cm.

Large brush strokes are a way in and out of the work; they articulate space in a particular way. Physical involvement is evident as a felt response to the world. Each action is representative of a specific moment, a specific action and a specific intention in time. Throughout the painting process, the artist must critically reflect, assess and evaluate the emerging piece, attending to the developing relationships between the drawn line and colour. It is these two elements that are largely responsible for negotiating the space and conjuring sensations, textures, images and memories for both artist and viewer. There is a dialogue between myself and the painting; each painting offers a provisional answer and as the work evolves it suggests other things.

By using a variety of action painting methods, from fast brush strokes to dropping, or slowly pouring paint, energy can be captured in different ways. For example, a calm and 'flowing' visual image is the result of pouring paint, the combination of opacity and transparency, and textured and smooth, the contrast between glossy and matt. There is a relationship between forms that suggests a particular reading of fluidity on the one hand and solidity on the other; the drips and washes that so vividly recall the liquid state of the paint as it leaves the brush.



Figure 3. Jessica Ritchie, *A State of Concentration*, 2017, acrylic, oil, spray paint, glitter on aluminium, 122 x 122 cm.

COLOUR

For me, the unpredictability of colour; its queerness, its silence, its decoration, its shameless excesses, its resistance to language, its elusiveness, its plasticity, the impossibility of its containment and its inherent abstraction – are the exciting potentialities and promises of colour.²

There may be a relationship between colour and emotion, but colours in themselves are not good or bad. They can have a psychological effect on the viewer which is related to perception rather than vision. Colour is compelling, seductive and emotional. Colour is one of the most important elements in my work. Responses to colour are personal and intuitive. Colour is also laden with symbolism and cultural connotation. Colour can represent and evoke emotion; it can have calming or stimulating properties. Bright or strong colours can lead the work to be associated with positive emotions – joy and happiness – or danger and warning. "Colour exists as an unbroken continuum, but the language that directs our perception breaks this continuum down into distinct areas that are red, yellow, green and so on."³

Colour can have unstable qualities, as does light; both can be ephemeral and intangible. Different lighting can alter the appearance of colour; so understanding colour can be problematic. Colours influence each other and are

influenced by each other; and colour is a vital tool for creating and evoking an emotional and meaningful experience. Light and colour play a primary role in perception that can activate thoughts and emotions. It is not only about the colour; it is the qualities of colour values that are important – saturation, hue and luminance.

For each individual, colour can mean a different thing. In her essay "Colour for the Painter," Bridget Riley (b. 1931) makes the connection between seeing the colour of things and how a painter sees colour: The painter sees "the pigments spread out on a palette and there, quite uniquely, they are simply and solely colour."⁴ The painter has two systems for processing colour – perceptual colour; as in our everyday individual experience of colour; and pictorial colour; the colour necessary to make a painting. Colour as it is perceived in the world is our primary experience of colour.⁵ Both ways of seeing colour are present in the work of a painter.

In his book *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor talks about how colour has been perceived by artists, architects and philosophers. He points out that colour has been both a source of fascination and of fear and loathing in Western culture.⁶ He explores the concept of chromophobia as colour has often been treated as corrupting, foreign or superficial.⁷ He argues that as an object of prejudice in Western culture, colour has been marginalised, reviled, diminished and degraded.⁸ Chromophobia is described as the fear of corruption through colour. There are two ways of purging colour. One is to consider colour as the property of some foreign body. Besides defining colour as dangerous, the second is the idea of colour as being in the realm of the superficial, the excessive, the cosmetic and the inessential.

In his 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime," Adolf Loos (1870-1933) declared that ornamentation is amoral and degenerate and an unnecessary hindrance to the advancement of society. Excessive waste and the triviality of ornamentation should be suppressed. For Loos, ornamentation and colour was a superficial burden borne by the oppressed sectors of society; it should be purged and eliminated in order to make way for a social purity, one without "cultural and class baggage."⁹ Favouring the intrinsic beauty of function, during a time when Art Nouveau was at the forefront of design, his opposition to ornament extended to anything that could not be justified in terms of what he considered its rational function. Loos insisted that

the urge to ornament one's face and everything within reach is the start of a plastic art. It is the baby talk of painting. All art is erotic. ... The first ornament that was born, the cross, was erotic in origin. The first work of art, the first artistic act which the first artist, in order to rid himself of his surplus energy, smeared on the wall. ... But the man of our day who, in response to an inner urge, smears the walls with erotic symbols is a criminal or a degenerate.¹⁰

Loos described the act of ornamenting and decorating as superfluous, excessive. Suspicion of colour is reinforced by the *other* or *unknown* being associated with the feminine, vulgar, oriental and primitive.¹¹ In this case, colour is treated as something foreign or 'alien,' so that it is considered dangerous. "Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour; to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity."¹²

French art critic Charles Blanc (1813-82) identified colour with the 'feminine' in art and as something that cannot be detached from life. More than that, he considered colour as a permanent internal threat. As a result, he came up with the idea of either completely ignoring colour or controlling it in order to prevent it from ruining everything by contaminating it. For Blanc, colour is secondary and dangerous and can fall into degeneracy and excess.

According to Batchelor, in contemporary culture the fall from grace is not unlike the fall into drugs. The relationship between drugs and colour goes as far back as Aristotle, who called colour a drug and, before that, to Plato, for whom a painter was merely "a grinder and mixer of multi-colour drugs."¹³ In the 1960s, drugs were associated with a distortion of form and intensification of colour: "Think of psychedelia; think of the album covers, the posters."¹⁴ Roland Barthes described colour as a kind of bliss, "*jouissance* ... ecstasy." Overtly eroticising colour; as Blanc did, also gives it the power to overwhelm and annihilate. "For colour is like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell."¹⁵

Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret 1887-1965), a Swiss-born architect, wrote the purist manifesto *Towards a New Architecture*, which contained his plan for the 'whitewashing' of architecture. He called it the *Law of Ripolin*.¹⁶ "Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wall-papers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white Ripolin. His home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. ... Then comes *inner* cleanliness ... no action before thought."¹⁷ Le Corbusier insisted that after eradicating all forms of decoration and reminders of the past, people would achieve "inner cleanliness."¹⁸ It was a quest to enlighten and inspire. The quest for "purity" leaves no room for the individual.¹⁹ This perception also results in colour being used only for decorative purposes in architecture, and therefore as a secondary quality of experience. "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that, in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. ... As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable."²⁰



Figure 4. Jessica Ritchie, *Necessary Distraction/Abstraction*, 2017, oil and acrylic on aluminium, 122 x 122 cm.

Most of my works centre on colour, texture and how they interact; for example, how colour follows form. When it comes to some of the colours I use, they are often polarising. Whether people love or hate it, either way a saturated 'hit' has immediate impact and emotional charge, and expresses it through the movement of marks – either from pouring or brush strokes. The colour palette also influences the level of emotions captured in an artwork. Colours laid down in certain places can be used to lead the viewer's eye around the picture by creating a path for the eye to follow, and can keep a viewer engaged in an artwork, emphasising the relationships between different aspects of the painting. Colours can be a path moving in space. Colour can equally carry weight as well as lightness, describing a form or an edge, and create new pictorial spaces. The movement may be fast or slow and lyrical, expressing a sense of energy and give movement to a work. The use of metallic paints, as well as glass and glitter, creates a place for light to bounce off so as to bring a quality to a work that could not be painted, because it is using real light, not implied light. These materials also reassert the nature of a painting's flat surface.

MUSIC

Music is not painting, but it can learn from this more perceptive temperament that waits and observes the inherent mystery of its materials, as opposed to the composer's vested interest in his craft. Since music has never had a Rembrandt, we have remained nothing more than musicians.²¹

Colour has often been compared with music. Music and painting occupy space, albeit not literal space. Colour shares with music a sense of harmony and concord or dissonance. As a sequence of notes is not heard independently of the instrument, no fixed viewpoint of the image can be seen at one time. Images can echo music in the way that the fragments are pieced together; overlapped and appear to be floating in and around each other. Like sound, a painting can have rhythm the regular alternation between silent gaps and beats. The spaces – the voids are anything but empty. The colours and marks in paint can be imaginings of how sounds relate, vibrate, disappear, modulate and

rest on return to the tonic. Colours blur out of focus. The varied forms of tone mark and reveal sounds. Music also has concrete elements and pictorial conventions: pitch, rhythm, tempo, texture, timbre (tone colour), dynamics. All of these share the elements of visual art: symmetry, colour, tone, pattern, repetition, proportion.

Painting and music are not similar forms of expression, nor do musical tones mechanically correspond to certain colours or shapes or illustrate a painting. A reference to music in relation to painting is not to any direct correspondence, but implies more of an inward connection. As a musician who has also composed music, the ideas that drive me to be expressive in music can be the same ideas that inspire my painting; whether it is a physical movement, a particular sound of an instrument, a mood or a layering of particular colours. A musician manipulating the notes of the octave starts with a few forms, coloured according to the key of the impression she wishes to create, and combines and reproduces these in a variety of relations until what is produced is a harmonic composition. One could say that the same process is at play in abstract painting.

Morton Feldman (1926-87) was a musician and composer who found motivation for his compositions in painting, aligning himself with the abstract expressionist painters of the New York School. Feldman often looked to painting as an influence for many of his musical ideas. He was particularly interested in the visual arts of America in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly painters such as Philip Guston and Mark Rothko. Morton Feldman's music encourages listening strategies that extend beyond those traditionally associated with Western classical music. In instrumental music, the way we make sense of what we are hearing is to engage in listening metaphorically. Throughout the history of music, we have become enculturated to interpret various musical configurations as metaphors for emotions or states of being. The perceptual system of the listener is always busy hunting within his or her known cultural and physical environment to assign meaning to the sounds presented within a piece of music. In Feldman's piece *Piano* (for piano, 1977), some keys are depressed while others are played simultaneously; the harmonics ring out softly as the other notes have caused the depressed strings to vibrate. They are not the actual notes heard, but are buried beneath the others, like a background wash of sound. As in painting, the layers are buried.

CONCLUSION

Although my project began with visual references to the world outside the paintings, these references have slowly disappeared. The process has become more intuitive. Elements previously used, along with experiments, have slowly crept in to form a whole, little by little bringing more and more elements into the paintings. As in networks and systems, fragments came together: the paintings began referring to themselves and to one another. I am interested in an aesthetic which is not categorised by softness or delicacy, but by subversive qualities. My work has become less about image-making and more about physical process. I use exaggerated tones, with a range of different treatment of mediums. At times, painterly gestures refer to various past styles or motifs, testing the limits of the physicality of paint.

In the final exhibition, I curated the completed works to form a cohesive whole, whether in their format, colour, brushstrokes or brightness. I also came to the conclusion that these works needed a lot of space around them – I needed to edit the exhibition dramatically in order to give them that space. The paintings were selected and arranged with useful amounts of space between works, and yet retaining a relational purpose and dialogue between the works; they needed to talk to one another across the space. The exhibition comprised a series of seven paintings which between them explored the formal possibilities of the medium of painting.



Figure 5. Jessica Ritchie, *Constantly Intermittent*, 2017, acrylic and mixed media on aluminium, 40 x 40 cm.

Jessica Ritchie is a painter from Dunedin, she graduated with an MFA with distinction from the Dunedin School of Art in 2017.

- 1 Carolee Schneeman, "From More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings" (1976), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (London: University of California Press, 1996), 716.
- 2 Linda Besemer, statement for *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008), 224.
- 3 Barry Schwabsky, "A Benjamin View of Colour," in his *Words for Art: Criticism, History, Theory, Practice* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 32.
- 4 Bridget Riley, "Colour for the Painter," in *Colour: Art & Science*, eds T Lamb and J Bourriau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 31-64, at 31.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 6 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 22.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 9 Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: Saint Martin Press, 1986), 25.
- 10 Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, Calif: Ariadne Press, 1998), 19, https://www.academia.edu/22800087/Ornament_and_Crime_Adolf_Loos (accessed 2 March 2017).
- 11 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper" (1979), in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 166.
- 16 Named after an opaque white coat of paint favoured by Le Corbusier.

- 17 Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui (The Decorative Art of Today)*, trans. James I Dunnnett (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987), 188.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Morton Feldman, quoted in *The Music of Morton Feldman*, by Thomas De Lio (New York: Excelsior Music Pub., 1995), 208.