

Word count: 1510

Ways of perceiving: curation essay for the Mission gallery

For this exhibition called “Colour” I have decided to focus on the interaction between colours, their relationship to emotions and their reaction to light. I have chosen four artists that each worked closely with colour and all have different theories and views about it.

We all have different perceptions of colour. Depending on our sight, brain, culture and lifestyle colours have various meanings and affect us in different ways. When looking at an object the first thing we see before any details of shape, size or material is its colour. From a very young age we are taught that objects or things have colours attached to them: traffic lights turn green to indicate “go” and red for “stop”; tap water is blue for cold and red for hot etc. Some people are also born with synaesthesia: when you experience one of your senses by means of another one. For example, if you hear a word and see a colour or read a word and taste a flavour.

In his *Theory of Colours* (1810), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German writer, scientist and amateur artist, considers that light, shade and colours are elements constructing the visible world. He refutes Newton’s book *Opticks* (1704) based on the physics of colour. Goethe is one of the first to have studied and researched how the eye sees and interprets colours. In his book, he classified colours into two different categories: the “positive colours”, yellow, red-yellow (orange), yellow-red (vermeil) supposed to create arousal, liveliness and ambition, and the “negative colours”, blue, blue-red and red-blue considered to provoke restlessness, productive energy and longing. “He explored every aspect of colour and its reactions, including the role of complementary colours in creating shadows, simultaneous contrast, successive contrast, the effect of cast light on an object, and proportional colour use.” (Feisner, Colour: How to Use Colour in Art and Design, 2006)

Furthermore, colour in art has always been used as a symbol in various culture. For instance, during the Renaissance in Europe, lapis lazuli pigment, because of its rarity and cost, was only

employed for artworks by the richest such as the Medici, and in China the colour red is often used for festivities and symbolises happiness and good luck.

Through this exhibition I want people to feel emotions, to discover the different perspectives and different theories about colour and its evolution over time. I also hope to make them understand how important colour is when looking at a piece of art, an object or a thing.

I intend to position the artworks chronologically, such that they complement and resonate with one another and the ideas of the artists. The first artworks you would see when entering the gallery would be Kasimir Malevich's (1879-1935) square paintings.



Figure 1

The first one, Black Square (1913), is the result of Malevich's wish to abandon representational art and the beginning of his depiction of a new world of shapes and forms. He had the desire to "free art from the dead weight of the real world" (Malevich, The Non-Objective World, 1927) and declared making a painting "consisting of nothing more than a black square on a white field". This work is the first painting of the Suprematism movement, consisting of using simple geometric shapes and a limited range of colours to focus on the painting only and not be distracted by the figure or the subject represented.

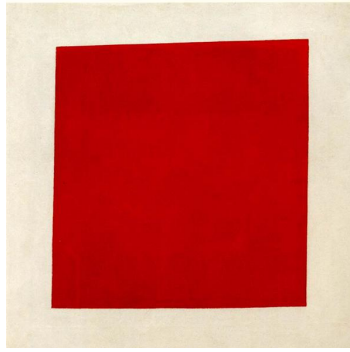


Figure 2

The second canvas is *Red Square* (1915). Malevich was inclined in using themes related to religion and spirituality and creating symbols with his paintings. In Russia, red usually evokes traditional icon paintings so choosing a simple form like a square, leaves it up to the viewer to connect the concept to the image. He believed that red and white showed all the colours of the spectrum so by putting them together he showed every colour.

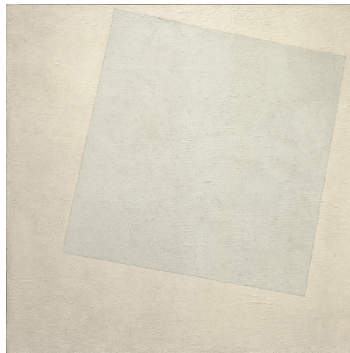
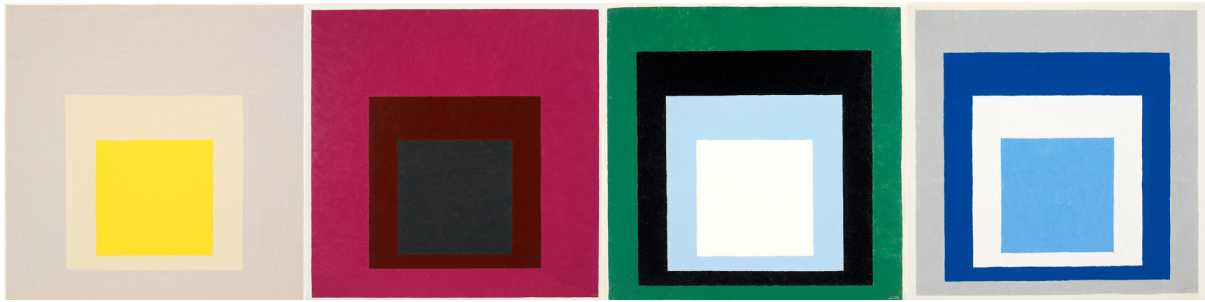


Figure 3

The third and last work on this wall is *White on White* (1918). For this painting Malevich wanted to create a sense of floating and transcendence (MoMA Highlights, 2019). Because the smaller square is set at an angle this painting has more of a dynamic feel than the *Black Square*. This painting is the ultimate abstract painting since it is painted in only two shades of white. Malevich focused more on the shapes than the colours. After he painted his *White on White*, he gave up abstract painting and turned essentially to teaching and writing. With those square paintings, Malevich shows how a reduced use of colour can simply emphasize the forms or ideas you want to propagate.



Figures 4, 5, 6, 7

On the wall parallel to Malevich's works, I have decided to present four of Josef Albers' (1888-1976) paintings from his series *Homage to the Square* that he began in 1949. This series consists of around 2,000 paintings each composed of three or four squares set inside one another and in various colours. He favoured square shapes because it best dissociated the work of art from nature, seemingly emphasizing its man-made quality. The colours of each canvas were chosen to demonstrate their tendency to expand or shrink, advance or recede, in interaction with each other. In 1963, Josef Albers published Interaction of Colour, a book about his research in that area. In this book, he demonstrates how a colour is never really how we see it, it always depends of its environment and what it is next to. A colour will look brighter on a darker background and darker on a lighter one. This phenomenon, explains Albers, is created by the gap between factual and feeling; between the physiological perception of a phenomenon and how our brain interprets it. His series *Homage to the square* looks at all the variations and combinations of colours and serves as a study on colours.



Figure 8



Figure 9

Finally, in the first room, I would place these two paintings by Mark Rothko (1903-1970) on the last wall. In 1947 he began to develop his own style: large, vertical and juxtaposed rectangles of colour. The edges of the rectangles are softly uneven, giving a hazy, pulsating quality and making them look as if they are floating over the canvas. His paintings are very large, and inspire calm and contemplation, but Rothko considers them as being emotionally a big effort. He wasn't looking to create aesthetic paintings, he just wanted to make the viewer feel certain emotions: "I am not an abstract artist... I am not interested in the relationship of colour or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate these basic human emotions... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience as I had when I painted them." (Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists, fourth edition 2009) Paintings from the beginning of his career are often to be found brighter and more colourful but he was diagnosed with depression and from the 1950s his work became progressively more sombre and with darker colours such as blacks, reds, blues. This shift in the use of colour shows how you can transmit your emotions through them and how they can also affect how you feel.

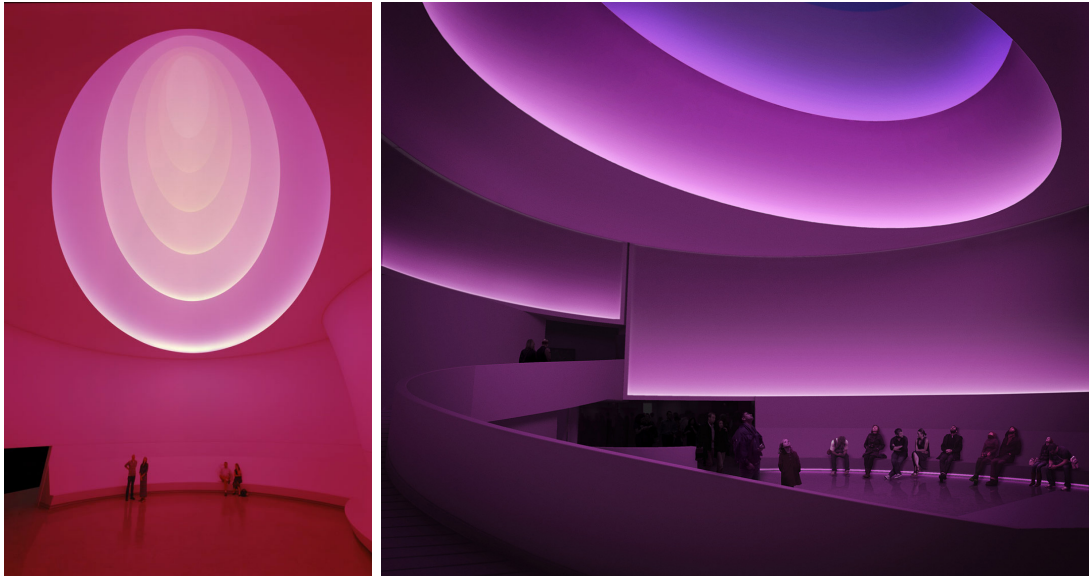


Figure 10

The last artist I have chosen for the exhibition is be James Turrell (1943-...). He is an American artist who explores the relationship between light and space. He comes from a spiritual background as his mom was a Quaker and believed that each person can experience an inner light and his dad worked as an aeronautical engineer. This background inspired his fascination for light, flying (he is a pilot) and the cosmos. He is one of the founders of the Light and Space movement that took place in California during the mid 60s and invented signature forms that intensify the experience of sight and perception. For his famous *skyspaces*, he built environments with strategic openings and hidden LED displays calculated to “bring the cosmos down” into the viewers’ space. His installations sometimes create a sense of disorientation. In 2013, at the Guggenheim museum in New York, he created a site-specific *skyspace* called *Aten Reign*. “His art encourages a state of reflexive vision that he calls “seeing yourself seeing,” wherein we become aware of the function of our own senses and of light as a tangible substance” (Guggenheim Museum, 2013).

The aim is for him to create a similar artwork for the Mission gallery, that would be displayed in the second/rounded room. That space would be separated by a thick, dark curtain to stop the light of the work entering the other room and affecting the other works of the exhibition.

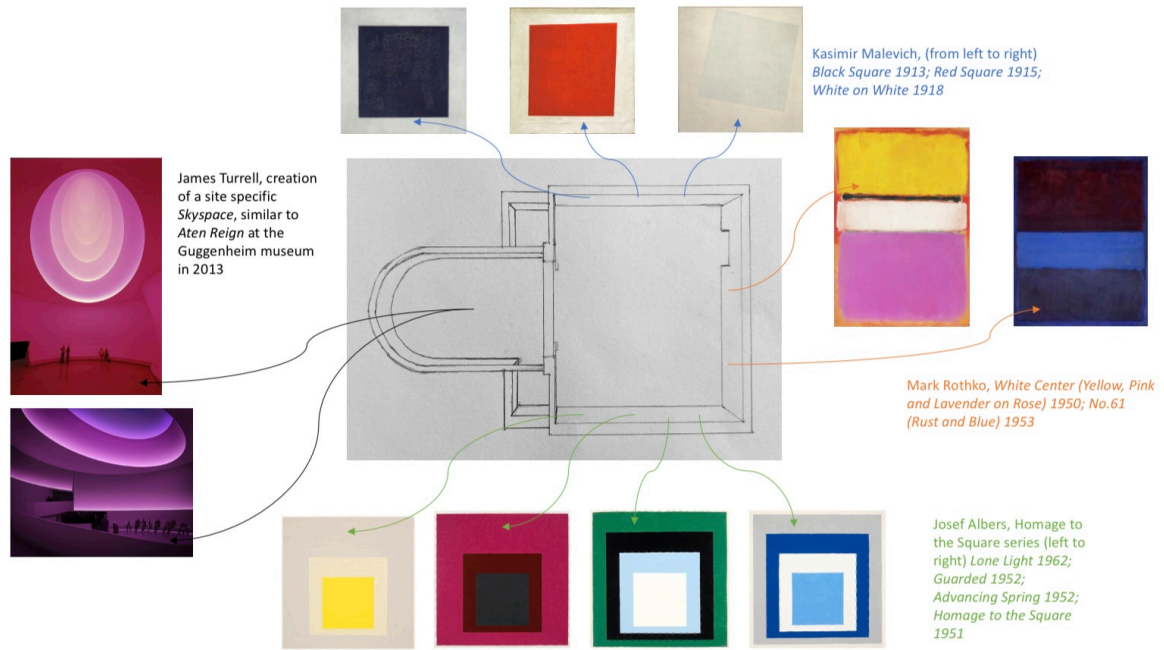


Figure 11

I chose the theme of colour because I really like bridging psychology, feelings, the human perception and art. In my practise, I like playing with colours and, just like Albers, understand how they interact with each other. I am very interested in how colours and light can affect your mood and change what you see, and I like creating different atmospheres with them.

Image references

Figure 1: K. Malevich, *Black Square*, 1913 (Tate - online)

Figure 2: K. Malevich, *Red Square*, 1915 (Wikiart - online)

Figure 3: K. Malevich, *White on White*, 1918 (MoMA - online)

Figure 4: J. Albers, *Lone Light*, 1962 (Albers Foundation - online)

Figure 5: J. Albers, *Guarded*, 1952 (Albers Foundation - online)

Figure 6: J. Albers, *Advancing Spring*, 1952 (Alber Foundation - online)

Figure 7: J. Albers, *Homage to the Square*, 1951 (Albers Foundation - online)

Figure 8: M. Rothko, *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)*, 1950 (Sothebys – online)

Figure 9: M. Rothko, *No. 61 (Rust and Blue)*, 1953 (MoCA – online)

Figure 10: J. Turrell, *Aten Reign*, 2013 (Guggenheim Museum – online)

Figure 11: Layout of the exhibition

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