



School: **Fine Art & Media**
BA Fine Art: **Studio Site and Context**
Level 5

Essay: **Personal Research Project**

Student Name: **David Phillips**
Student Number: **P152088/1551647**

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Module Leads: **Holly Slingsby, Paul Duerinckx**

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The task:

Building on your knowledge of the traditional essay structure, you will write an 'upside down' essay, which rather than starting from an essay question, leads you, via engagement with three keywords, to construct your own research question.

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INTRODUCTION

I see myself as an abstract artist, one with little interest in the directly figurative or representational. I am primarily interested in, indeed fascinated by, colour and, necessarily, by light (without which colour does not exist), and in exploring the relationship between, and reaction to, each other. We cannot see light, but we cannot see colour without it.

Research in quantum and particle physics into the constituents and existence of light are deeply intriguing. Current scientific thinking holds that light probably exists forever, and hence so must colour. But as colour only exists in its perception, its 'existence' depends upon its being seen: in our universe, someone must be there to see it. And that conjunction is correlative with the relationship between the artist/artwork and the viewer.

But how do we 'see' and what do we 'see'? And what effect does what we see, have on our emotions, and how we see and understand the world in which we live? And how does, or should, this influence how we produce art?

I shall examine these issues through discussion of three key headings: Light/Colour, Seeing, and Meditation.

LIGHT/COLOUR

Light is a thing that cannot be reproduced but must be represented by something else – by colour. (Paul Cezanne)

Light is the basis of human sight. Scientifically, 'Light', or more specifically, 'Visible Light', is that part of the intergalactic stream of waves of electromagnetic radiation emitted by photons, detectable by the human eye. Colour is not seen directly, only by reflection.

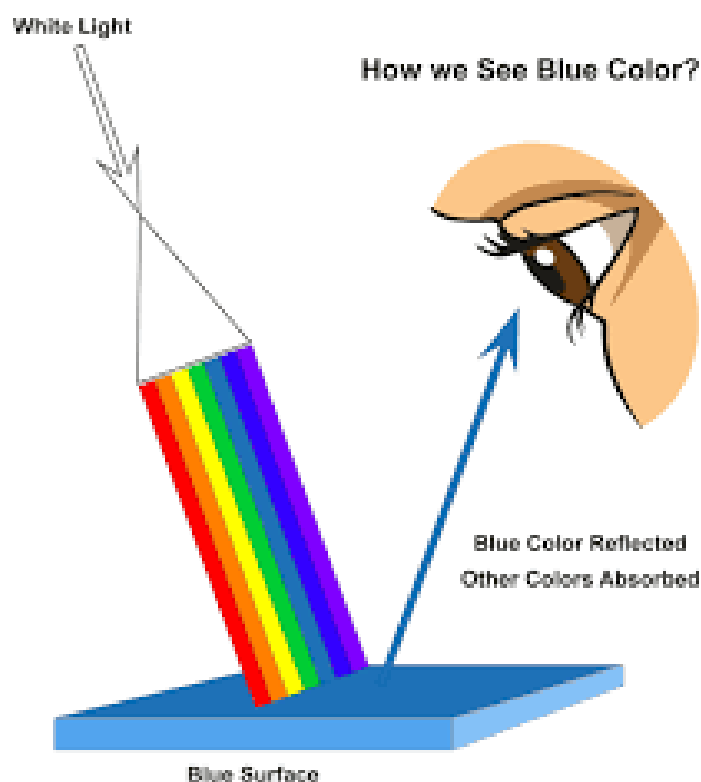


Fig 1

When light (the stream of electromagnetic radiation) hits an object, some streams bounce off, whilst others are absorbed by it. Human eyes can only 'see' a small part of the stream that bounces off, which they register as colour, according to their different wavelengths - the 'visible spectrum'. We can 'see' in dim light, but not in colour. In total darkness we would see nothing at all. Indeed, it has been suggested that colour is not an inherent property of an object, but a property of the visual system of the organism that perceives it. (Endler 1978). In other words, colour has no physical existence. It is literally 'imagined', created by our visual arrangements, which leads to a Berkelian solipsistic paradoxical proof: that because 'colour' is reflected light, and without light it cannot be seen, and if it cannot be seen, it therefore does not exist.

During the Middle Ages, light itself was used as a metaphor for divine light,

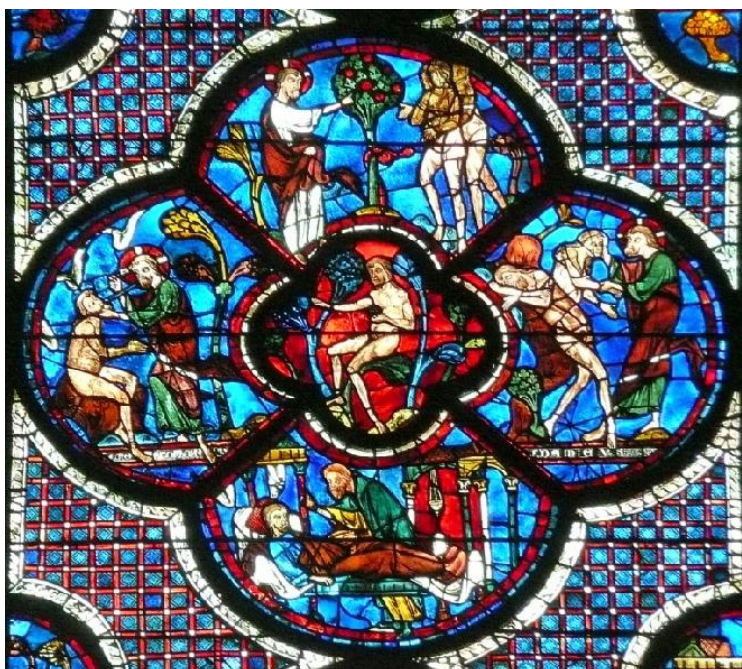


Fig 2: Chartres

which was best realised through the seemingly miraculous behaviour of light and colour in stained glass windows, the 'cinema' of the Mediaeval, largely illiterate, population. The beauty and theophanic potentialities of such glimpses into the Kingdom of Heaven, such as in Chartres Cathedral, have reduced many people, including me, to tears.

Unsurprisingly, Josef Albers, colour's principal modern-day theorist, was originally a stained-glass artist.

Light is essential to building a sense of perspective, light and shadow giving a painting depth. Caravaggio most famously used 'chiaroscuro' to create a sense of volume and mass, using a single light source to focus on the human form and give a sense of drama.



Fig 3: Judith beheading Holofernes

COLOUR

‘Colour provokes a psychic vibration’. (Wassily Kandinsky)

The development of colour-sightedness in humans evolved because of the obvious advantages it provided in recognising danger, foraging, and finding a mate. As hominid intelligence evolved, colour-sightedness also developed an aesthetic dimension. The earliest known cave paintings incorporate colour.



Fig 4: Oldest known cave painting in the world in Sulawesi

We all ‘know’ what colour is, we see it everywhere, every day. But looking at the same-coloured object, we will not all see the same colour. Albers reminds us that in understanding colour, we must recognise that colour is unstable, relative, and continually deceives, it is rarely seen as it really is. (Albers,J. 2013)

Colour is a Kantian visual phenomenon, with an undeniable influence on human perception and behaviour. That influence on both the artist and the viewer is dictated, not only by genetic significance, but also by cultural determinism. It seems that genetically, humans have an emotional visual bias towards red.

However, the connoted significance of red to a western European male



Fig 5: Mary Stuart in mourning white

is anger, aggression and dominance, whereas to a Chinese male it is luck and prosperity. Research has shown that, not unrelated to either connotation, in sport, red is associated with a greater probability of winning (Hill and Barton 2005).

The cultural reading of colour can change over time. In Western cultures, white is now often associated with purity, innocence, and peace.

But until the 16th Century it symbolized mourning and death, as it still does in many Eastern cultures, such as Japan. Other colours had a more direct iconographic signifier: purple/deep blue for royalty and the Virgin Mary, and red for Christ, colours which derive not only from Gospel accounts but from economics, as these were expensive pigments to obtain.

The use and development of the aesthetic value of colour has played a leading role in shaping artistic expression and practice, especially as technological and scientific development provided access to a much wider palette of usable pigment. This led artists to seek verisimilitude, using the power of colour to capture 'light,' to fool the eye, to render truth by illusion.



Fig 6: Horse Bath

In Joaquin Sorolla's *Horse Bath*, for example (fig 6 above), the young boy's body is perceived as clearly wholly wet from the sea, yet that effect is achieved with only a few quick brush strokes of pure white on his arm and leg.

Artists also used colour to add to a picture's narrative power by stimulating the viewer's emotions. The emotional influence of colour is now deeply embedded in human psychology, with each colour carrying its own set of associations and meanings. For example, in returning to the darker hues of his earlier career, Van Gogh's 'The Starry Night' reflects the mental weight of his returning depression.



Fig 7: The Starry Night

Edvard Munch's 'The Scream', conveys a sense of existential angst and despair. The tumultuous, swirling hues in both pictures reflecting the artists' inner turmoil.

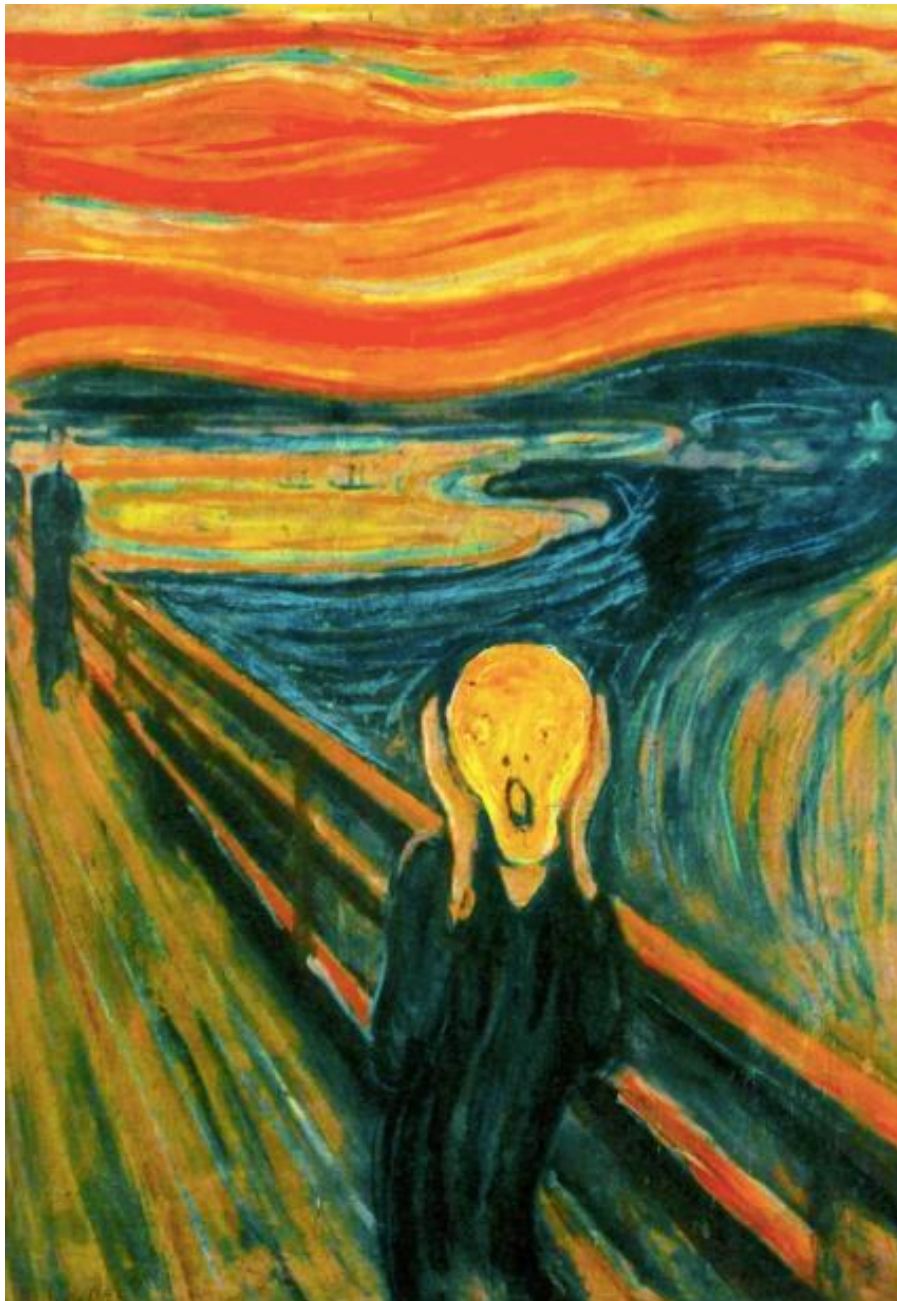


Fig 8: The Scream

SEEING

‘...We explain (the) world with words (but) ...the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled’ and what we know ‘...never quite fits the sight.’ (Berger 1972).

Is it not the business of those claiming to be artists, to see and to seek the means to render visible, what they actually see? In our modern world we are bombarded by images, drowning in a sea of constantly changing visual stimuli.

Looking at artwork, indeed looking at the world, is not merely a utilitarian function, observing passively what is before us; it is about engagement, acknowledging visual impact and emotional resonance, even when just checking whether it is safe to cross the road. But it can, and should, also be a source of aesthetic pleasure and emotional resonance, if only we allow the time and space.

Transient ephemeral images: the first bluebells amongst the fresh spring green of a leafing forest, an autumn sunset, ancient olive trees; the ordinary and the commonplace: a distant yacht caught in the moon’s reflection on a dark bay, oil and vinegar on a plate, sunlight and

shadows, an endless list that can provide images of great transcendental beauty. But only if we look to see them, to really look, not just with our eyes, but from within ourselves.



Fig 9:: Oil & Vinegar Faro

As I have shown above – it is not the eyes that see, but the brain. In a world that values the surface, style over substance, we must be open to and recognise the spiritual, the Benjaminist ‘aura’ (Benjamin. W. 1935), to give what Robert Hughes calls the ‘long look’ (Hughes R. 1990).

Although I agree with Hughes’s view, I prefer the word ‘Seeing’, as it brings with it a reading of perception, comprehension, and understanding.

Going far beyond mere observation, it involves a complex interplay of sensory input, and subjective interpretation: past experience, cultural and societal influences, and cognitive bias.

We now live in a world of incredible technological achievement. We can physically leave and return to the planet on which we live, we can look towards the farthest reaches of the universe, see the light of stars that died millions of years ago, yet our daily existence is perceived through, and circumscribed by, the lens of our camera phone. Whilst acknowledging that technology was indispensable and could not be stopped, Heidegger also presciently warned that,

‘...the power and wonder’ of technology and the admiration in which it is uncritically held results in us being ‘...’so firmly shackled to our devices that we fall into bondage to them’ (Heidegger.M 1959).



Fig 10: Smartphone bondage

Technology therefore not only presumes upon and circumscribes our ability or interest in having or developing meditative thought, but also our autochthony by engendering homogeneous critical reactivity.

We mediate our experience through the appliances in our hands, rather than by looking at the world directly. Our visual memory of happy times and sad (our lives), is no longer in our brain, available for instant recall, but has been downloaded to an SD card, which can never capture or replay (even if fully charged), that potential vedantic revelation, the spirit of that moment of seeing. 'Es war doch so schön!' - 'It was so beautiful' (Goethe. J. W. 1832).

We no longer look at art, we photograph it, perhaps (and only perhaps) to look at it later, but even then, only at the scale of the screen, never in the work's intended relativity to ourselves, missing its texture, true colours and, importantly, the memory of its 'shaping hand' (Hughes R. 1990). Rather than a real memory of the thing itself, it is only an image of an image, a simulacrum, from which the work's aura is wholly missing.



Fig 11: Guernica Selfies

Whilst I subscribe to Duchamp's (and others) position on the interconnected relationship between the artist and the viewer, that each is present in the other and that the influence of each on the other, in equal measure, creates the work (Duchamp. M. 1957), I do not take that to mean, as Marcuse does, that the artist has '...an obligation to articulate and express the interests and needs' (of the viewer) (*my gloss*) (Marcuse H. 1979). Neither do I accept Rothko's view that it is the artist's 'function...to make the spectator see the world [the artist's way] - not their way' (Rothko. M 1943).

I am more attuned to the Barthesian idea of the 'Death of the Author' (Barthes, R. 1978), that once a work is in the world, the hegemony of the artist is ended.

They can leave no explanation, instruction, or guidance, make no demands upon the viewer as to how they perceive or react to the work. The viewer is entirely on their own to make of it what they will.

MEDITATION

I think a great deal about what I intend, probably too much, which impacts completion. The meditative process, this Gelassenheit, 'letting go', is an important part of the creative act for me.

Not only the consideration of what colour should go next to which other colour and the reaction their juxtaposition creates both to each other, and the emotional response it provokes, but also the physical act of doing.

I always look to 'see' colour, light and their interaction, the search for clarity and the absence of pretension. My 'practice' is largely about exploring this area and its 'chromatic ambiguities' (Slezak & Shevell 2018) and doing so in an experiential way – 'learning by doing' or in Albers rendering, 'practice before theory' (Albers 1963), and all of that through the prism of social consciousness.

Heidegger (Heidegger, M. 1966) draws a strong distinction between 'calculative' and 'meditative' thinking. The former seeks solutions, the latter meaning. I acknowledge that in my studio I do both. But much more of the latter, which, he states, '...demands...that...we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all'.

Perception leads to conception, and conception to creation. And then to making.

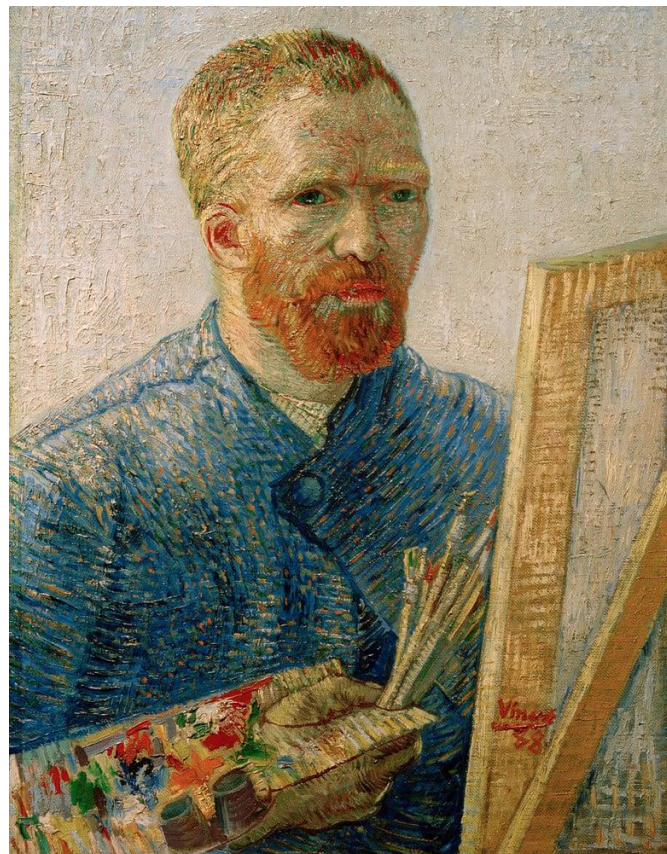


Fig 12: Self portrait at easel

I enjoy making things, the meditation of involvement, the translation of my 'thinking' into effective 'doing'. Most animals make things, although in humans this goes beyond the strictly utilitarian. Humans 'make' because they can, and because they can, they do.

But what they make beyond the strictly utilitarian (and even then, when through superb craftsmanship, the utilitarian achieves beauty), becomes invested with something approaching the spiritual.

I believe that there is an existential and spiritual difference between 'creation,' which is always original, and making, which can be repetition, although the latter can only derive from the former. However, I must acknowledge from my own experience that simply making can be a meditative, spiritual act in itself.

I 'live' in my head, and I often lose myself in this creative process, falling into the gap between what I know and what I do not, between what I understand and what I am trying to find out. To solve a problem, we first need to identify the problem. The more difficult the problem, the greater the creativity sparked.

'Meditation' therefore encompasses the entire process of stimulus, thinking/apperception, and making. Artwork could be seen as a form of individual creative inquiry, investigating what works and what does not.

And this process, the meditative looking to 'see,' does not end with me (the artist), it continues after the work has left my hands and is before the eyes of the viewer.

Ranci re (echoing Abrams) asserts that '...viewing actively transforms and ...translates the image offered' ...into an 'alien entity that the artist and spectator verify together' (Ranci re. J. 2009).

Conclusion

'Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is'. (Jackson Pollock).

The objective of my creative process is not necessarily the production of artwork, and certainly not the production of work for exhibition. That is not to say that I refuse to exhibit; however, I am much more interested in the *process* of creating and making art; the thinking, the experimentation, the resolution and consequent solution; the failures as well as the successes, than I am in the finished work. The work, when complete, is done with, it has a separate existence.

Clearly, this individual creative enquiry, this search for truth, is a form of artistic research, a journey of self-discovery and expression and experimentation. A process very similar to religious meditation, the search for understanding.

Tibetan Buddhist monks use art as a form of meditation, by creating painstaking mandalas from coloured grains of sand, dropped one grain at a time, which take weeks to lay out, and are then erased in a ritual ceremony, with the sand returned to Nature. I was privileged to be able to see this in the *Now the Hero* event in the Brangwyn Hall. The sand was returned to the sea, a monk wading into Swansea Bay to the sound of Dung-chens being blown.



Fig 13: Mandala

So, my independent research project is to continue this journey. My guiding question is 'Art as Inquiry: How does individual studio-based research influence practice and thinking beyond the walls of the studio?'

In examining that question, consideration will need to be given to the following sub-sets:

- What constitutes knowledge?
- Can individual studio-based research be understood as academic research? And does it matter?
- How does this sit within the protocols of an academic institution? Could it be compromised in pursuit of institutional recognition and funding?

2533 Words

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