

**Text of a speech given by Mark Gisbourne on the occasion of the launch
of a new exhibition of works by Sybille Berger, 18 March 2007.**

SOME THOUGHTS ON COLOUR IN THE WORK OF SYBILLE BERGER

Colour is sensational, both as an experience and as metaphor. The paintings of Sybille Berger are about sensations, but these sensations are not in the first instance intellectual or even psychological (though they may be instinctual), but about the immediacy of compulsive feelings we have about colour experiences. This is to say the primary feeling of 'feelings' of as regards a sense of colour. What Antonio Damasio has called 'the feeling of what happens', the compulsive feeling of feelings, prior to its rationalist or psychologically perceptual-ised extension of the sensation into a conscious thought. Put crudely, it is the 'wham factor' of an emerging core consciousness, before higher levels of consciousness take over and articulate or mediate a sense of comprehension. And, though I have written at greater length (Newlyn Art Gallery catalogue) about Berger's colour aesthetics, and the recent modern concerns of neuro-physiology *apropos* the re-assertion of ideas around synaesthesia, this is probably not the place to take the scientific arguments further at the moment.

Yes, colour is sensational, but it is also wondrous, and the aesthetics of wonder are usually represented by the rainbow. Like a child who first sees a rainbow we all still retain of sense of its wondrous capacities regardless of the fact that science can easily explain the phenomena. A rainbow somehow retains its sense of wonder throughout our entire life. It is been then both an irony and a calumny through the last two hundred years since the advent of Romanticism (when not discoursing on Scientific Optics) that so many concerns about colour have been cast under the pessimistic concerns of the sublime. One might think of this perpetuated attitudes in Robert Rosenblum's famous book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (first published in 1977). Colour has been shifted progressively towards primarily tonal rather than colouristic concerns, and in doing so concepts of tone linked to mood have dictated our responses to colour. **One is clearly reminded of the Rothko room at Tate Modern in this respect, to be frank it can hardly be said to exude and joyful delight, for all the facts that it might suggest a source of dark beauty. And, of course the works are always linked to mood, and tone, shaped in retrospect by the later suicide of Rothko.** Whether speaking of either Burke or Kant there is some consonance on the downside. The sublime as Burke would have it,

"Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure."

Or, Kant,

"the mind feels itself set in motion in representation of the sublime in nature; this movement, especially in its inception, may be compared with a vibration with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction produced by one and the same Object. The point of excess for the imagination is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself."

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Both in turn are interpretations from (and developments) from the classical Roman writer Longinus,

“For, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard.”

The sublime is that which defeats every effort of sense and imagination to picture it. It is that whose presence reduces all else to nothingness. It can be defined and described only in symbolic terms, which ironically defies the pictorial arts to sketch it. It remains only for the art of the metaphorical language of poetry to give the suggestion of the sublime.

You will note in all these cases, they are intellectual descriptions and distillations of what is primarily sensation, framing it in terms of either frustration, ‘awe’, ‘amazement’ and ‘astonishment’, that take on a decidedly unhappy bent.

Sybille Berger’s concerns with colour then, to me at least, has little or nothing to do with the sublime. Her paintings it seems (to me) simply celebrate colour, and are not in pursuit of the vaunting melancholy that the sublime invariably contains. Conversely, they pursue the wonder of colour, its capacities for both inward elation and joyful expression. Indeed, Aristotle thought that philosophy began with wonder, and initiated the train of thought that might be said to create a materialist strain of the wondrous. The fruits of which have been born not only in philosophy and aesthetics, but also in the far reaches of human scientific development.ⁱ Thus not surprisingly, Descartes at the beginning(s) of modern philosophy and the proto-Enlightenment, thought exactly the same, claiming that what preceded the five passions has to be ‘wonder as the sudden surprise of the mind (or soul)’.ⁱⁱ Einstein thought in a similar vein, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Wonder in Berger’s paintings presents colour as saturation, an intensity of colour content that can just as readily be seen as joyful as against the despondent. Another word for it might be ***jouissance*** meaning enjoyment as contrasted with pleasure. Something that gives the subject (the viewer) a way out of normative subjectivity, an excess as opposed to utility. Bersani considers *jouissance* as intrinsically self-shattering, disruptive of a ‘coherent self’. Though in the light of today’s neuroscience these forces are described as the inner remnants of that which preceded the formation of core consciousness and the coherent self.

For Roland Barthes (1977, p.9) *plaisir* is, “a pleasure...linked to cultural enjoyment and identity, to the cultural enjoyment of identity, to a homogenising movement of the ego.” As Richard Middleton puts it, “*Plaisir* results, then, from the operation of the structures of signification through which the subject knows himself or herself; ***jouissance*** fractures these structures.” This might be read as a reference to the extraordinary state of shock that the intense use of colour may impose upon us.

However, this said, these words take us far from the looking, that we have here in our immediate situation, etc. It has been of great prejudice to Sybille Berger, that the reproduction of her works never truly allows for the sensations I have described. And, this is a striking aspect of immediate colour experiences, namely that they are immediate and that they must be present. The reproduction of images of colour are so often in a state of apology for the things seen and experienced contextually.

Let's look at the paintings around us!

It is self-evident that the works of Sybille Berger deals with issues of colour juxtaposition, and the colour relationships that flow from it. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that her work is about theoretical (there's a Freudian slip, when first writing this is used the word 'theatrical') relationships in the terms of harmonics. She does not pursue the therapeutic and dialectical contents of colour, but rather optical potential of chromatics – the testing of colour relations and the extent to which they are able to generate visual interactivity over that of an overt psychological manipulation. In a real sense Berger's paintings are about the optical elasticity of both borders and field. It is in this manner that they feed into the issues of sensation, and a feeling of sensational intensity.

Another consideration is the just off square aspect of the surface, the shape of the support. Although, the surface size inevitably carries forward certain formal implications, Berger's use of the support is an attempt at creating the generic and to some extent neutralising effect. Since they are all exactly the same size they afford the deliberate commonplace of repetition, which far from diminishing their importance takes forward the Kierkegaard-ian idea

“But he who does not comprehend that life is a repetition, and that this is the beauty of life, he has condemned himself and deserves nothing better than what is sure to befall him, namely, to perish.”

Indeed, repetition is a central trope of modernism, and it is this that primarily connects the work of Sybille Berger to Minimalism, not in the systemic sense but as a form of equalizing the surface's painted object and presentation status. Within this though all the works are the same size the visual experience is intensely different in each case. Asymmetrical or different sized surfaces would emphasis an object difference in terms of volume and scale, as opposed to the surface difference that creates a sense of an optical colour mass. Equally since each painting is autonomous and they should be viewed alone, and in this respect Berger also departs from a minimalist sense of serialization. Their being viewed alone should no lead one to think of Berger's paintings in terms of a passive contemplation, colour also having to power to stimulate and invigorate.

The use of different band widths of colour, has evolved over a recent period from four several years ago to a current three. Though the artist argues that this creates a calmer and quieter experience of the works, it is less theatrical and baroque (and by baroque I mean I suppose less polychrome), and allows for an expansion of field intensity creating a more coherent visual interactivity between the centre field colour and the operative modalities of juxtaposition as found in the differentiated bands at the top an bottom of the painting.

This being said it brings us to the most significant aspects, namely the intense colour saturation of the paint application running through many slowly built up layers of acrylic paint. This process is the consequence of intense studio experimentation, a sort of tasting juxtaposition, her little rollers, and often small colour maquettes or sketches as experimental preliminaries. It is this that impacts upon one when looking as Berger's paintings.

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When I wrote Sybille's essay for The Newlyn Art Gallery, I entitled it 'The Candour of Colour', and I like and believe there is a candid content in this artist's use of colour. Though it is always somewhat vain to quote oneself, I still think my opening paragraph was and is still to the point "Let us make no bones about it and come straight to the point, where it concerns our immediate experience of colour, it pleases, it thrills, it can repel, and sometimes it can even create intermittent anxiety. The sense of pleasure or anxiety, no matter whether it is aesthetically argued, or not, can provoke many different things. Unquestionably, therefore, in a number of not immediately predictable ways, it creates a range of human affects, a series of mental and emotional experiences, and that we are in some way – no matter how the outcome is subsequently defined – changed by it." I hope therefore that this is not in any sense a sublime affirmation, but a statement as to the astonishing and wondrous effects (and affects) brought about by this artist's use of colours.

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ⁱ Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Part II, "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters."

ⁱⁱ Rene Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Eng. trans., Stephen H. Voss, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co, Inc., 1989, 52 "When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be, this makes us wonder and be astonished at it. And since this can happen before we know in the least whether this object is suitable to us or not, it seems to me that Wonder is the first of all the passions. It has no opposite, because if the object presented has nothing in it that surprises us, we are not in the least moved by it and we regard it without passion."

ⁱⁱⁱ Albert Einstein, *My Credo*. Speech to the German League of Human Rights, Berlin (Autumn 1932); as published in *Einstein: A Life in Science* (1994) by Michael White and John R. Gribbin, p. 262 This repeats or revises some statements and ideas of *Mein Weltbild* (1931).