The Colour of Words

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Benjamin Hannavy Cousen makes paintings about books, or more precisely, about his experience of reading books. His titles correspond to major works of fiction and political manifestos, from Alice in Wonderland to Mein Kampf. Laden with wiry lines and scraped areas of paint, his canvases showcase a vast array of colours, some layered so thick that they take on a sculptural quality. This is not an accident, for they are doppelgangers of a sort. Their rich tactile surfaces are produced through the application of acrylic paint with a syringe, the artist methodically tracking thin lines across the canvas so that they accumulate on its surface. A colour is added each time it appears within a text, either as a 'colour word' (i.e. red, green, blue, etc.) or a word that evokes a colour response, such as 'brassy' or 'rainbow'. The resulting compositions, which can be 'read' in the way that a barcode might be scanned, capture both the colour information of a text and the sensory or emotional reaction of the reader (in this case the artist). Produced at the intersection of literary and material expression, each painting can be understood as a conversation between the artist and author.

When beginning a new piece, Hannavy Cousen establishes rules that determine the way the book will be rendered or transcribed in colour. His paintings are contingent on two interrelated variables: 1) the number and order of colours found in each book and 2) the way in which paint is applied to canvas. Grids are added to the long and short edge of a canvas to indicate where colours will start and finish. In The Great Gatsby #1, colours are added in accordance with their page and line number in the artist's edition of the book, applied in thin vertical cords starting on the left and gradually filling in the horizontal frame. In The Waves #1, the length of the canvas is divided equally by the total number of colours appearing in Woolf's book, with paint then applied at the start of each section and scraped across with a squeegee. The spectrums have an independent logic, with concentrations and dispersals of pigment mirroring the narrative flow of their respective texts.

In the works made entirely with a syringe, colours are so many and so varied that the surface takes on a neutralised tone, a uniform surface that hides its sedimentary layers. As each new colour is added and extended across the surface (from left to right) it almost completely obscures the preceding one. As the painting builds up the earlier traces of reading/painting are repressed, sometimes glimpsed through the skein of lines and scrapes. The artist likens this process of erasure to the simultaneous remembering and forgetting that unavoidably occurs when reading a novel. New developments and features replace earlier ones, along with the feelings or images they evoked. Hannavy Cousen's paintings remind us that a book contains a separate temporal reality that we enter into as individual readers. As a narrative unfolds it casts shadows on its own history and characters, and our memories of them.

Reading a novel is an immersive act – indeed, pace is often determined by how 'absorbed' we become – and yet it is also an act of letting go, of selective retention. Stories are consumed and digested, leaving behind impressions of characters and events, and a residue of how it made us think or feel. Hannavy Cousen attempts to represent this process through the extraction and layering of these fragments, but only those that operate on a level of colour. In Crime and Punishment, yellow signifies the card carried by Sonya (a prostitute who befriends Dostoevsky's protagonist), while Alyona Ivanovna's murder is transmuted through the multiple, consecutive occurrence of red. In this way the application of paint can directly reflect plot developments or aspects of a character or scene. Yet the artist's selection and arrangement of correlative colours, however precisely charted, are more than a supplement to the text. The artist recognises the impossibility (and futility) of a 'direct' translation, explaining that 'anything the viewer can read in these pictures is kind of an

accident'. Each painting operates as a unique, personalised colour index, having been filtered through the artist's experience of a particular text.

For every rule the artist makes, another is broken. Adjustments are made to tidy up or balance a particular composition, while mistakes and irregularities are allowed to remain (the syringe can be unpredictable as a painting tool). The artist takes liberties and departs with the rigidity of his own process. The result is an aesthetic that dances between the clinical and the accidental. The squeegee method produces a more painterly effect, with colours bleeding into one another as they are scraped across the surface. Another approach, as seen in Keep the Aspidistra Flying, sees injected lines of varying length stacked horizontally, some stopping short of others. Each of these stylistic variations registers a new detail, whilst leaving something behind. Crisscrossed lines in A Hero of Our Times leave gaps that reveal a layer of squeegeed colour beneath. Like a palimpsest, its layers hold experiences and temporal realities even as they are overwritten.

Hannavy Cousen's most recent work, Primo Levi, introduces a painterly grey background that frames a central square of syringed colour cords. The grey area is an acknowledgement of the space of meaning that lies beyond language, the things a reader will never know or understand about a the experience of the author – in this case a Holocaust survivor. The use of traditional underpainting is interesting in this context, for it acts as both an abstract void and a space of potential within which characters and events are given form. Demarcating the boundaries of linguistic and artistic expression, Primo Levi is a dark meditation about what can never be described in words or paint.

The artist explains his work in phenomenological terms: each painting evolves directly in response to the books he is reading and how they affect him as a reader. The colours that find their way onto the canvas belong both to the writers who conceived them and to the artist who interprets them. The notion of 'experience' as explored by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and other preeminent phenomenologists, is such that our subjective selves can only exist and be understood in relation to other people and things in the world. The perception of colour exemplifies this logic, as there is no objective or singular reading of the word blue; it can conjure an infinite number of shades or tonalities, and trigger a range of different emotional or sensory responses in the reader. Moreover, 'blue' cannot exist without our interpretation of it. A phenomenological approach rejects the idea of an isolated or individuated state of being. We all interpret our environments differently, through specific encounters that shape our individual consciousness and, at the same time, the world around us.

Hannavy Cousen explores the slippery but generative potential of intersubjectivity in his attempt to match paint with the colour words and associations he encounters in books. The artist is quick to point out that these colours belong, first and foremost, to the authors. Yet through the painting process they also become his, received and interpreted through his subjective lens. Sometimes he comes across haptic or descriptive words or phrases that are not colours in a literal sense, such as 'glistens' or 'colour of the sea', which also denote a surface quality or tone. Nouns such as 'dawn' or 'fire' present the artist with the challenge of finding an appropriate palette equivalent. The result is not conclusive or scientific; each is only one among a number of possible solutions. In this way we might understand Hannavy Cousen's process as alchemic: colours are produced when the reader's consciousness comes in contact with a writer's vision, an experience that is then recalibrated through the medium of paint.

The key role of materials – of paint and canvas – is perhaps most evident in laborious, meditative pieces such as All Quiet on the Western Front #2 and Things Fall Apart #2, in which injected lines accumulate into a thick wedge which abruptly drops off at the right end of the canvas. Such works are dense embodiments of colour as invoked through the written word. Other pieces are characterised by their efficient use of paint. All Quiet on the Western Front #1 shows a much

shallower application, its lines injected and then squeegeed from left to right, in places exposing a white undercoat. A Hero of Our Time combines both scrapes and crisscrossed cords of colour, encouraging the eye to toggle between them, and to move back and forth across the composition as a whole.

The measured organisation of colour adds a playfully ironic empiricism to Hannavy Cousen's works. The Waves #1 and The Waves #2 contain 154 colours, with each allotted an equal section divided along the horizontal side of the canvas. In arriving at this precise number the artist seems to hint at a latent 'colour code' through which works of fiction can be 'cracked' and subsequently compared on visual terms. Taken as a body of work, the paintings in the exhibition share common denominators (colour words and chronology) but each are produced using a different formula (number of colours and painting technique). Beneath this over-determined equation is the malleable content it attempts to capture, and the ultimate futility of trying to give solid form to the ephemeral experience of reading a book. Faced with these vibrant, tangled expressions, we are left pondering the extent of their legibility. Do they succeed in telling us something about the books that inspired them? As readers, would our colour coding be the same? In what ways would ours differ?

Ultimately, these works explore the creative potential of intertextuality, and what it means to have a sustained encounter with worlds imagined by others. At the same, they are about paint and colour, and the double performance of reading/painting. Insofar as his work relies on these materials and processes as a form of expression, Hannavy Cousen follows in the footsteps of the Abstract Expressionists: Jackson Pollock's drips, Barnett Newman's zips, and perhaps something of Mark Rothko's colour fields are echoed in his experiments with colour. On the other hand, the reductionism and repetition that characterise his process chime with a Minimalist sensibility: Frank Stella's use of tape to control his edges, Eva Hesse's projecting canvases – works that explore the human condition by methodically testing the expressive boundaries of materials and processes. Whilst drawing on these formalist and conceptualist legacies, Hannavy Cousen also departs from them through a total reliance on secondary sources as the basis for content. He demonstrates that words written by others may just be words, but they are more than that, too. The philosophies and worldviews contained in the literary and political texts that he transcribes in colour give us glimpses into the past, into the minds of the individuals who wrote them. Revisited and refracted through the artistic process they are attributed new meaning, revealing the rich potential of the written word to affect change in the reader, and subsequently the viewer, across and through time.

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