

Three Notes for *Trichromacy* Essay by Clare Patrick

On seeing and knowing color

Before I got to know Alex Puz, through a year-long residency, I worked with a curator who is colorblind. Having just deinstalled a major Bridget Riley survey, we were working on a new exhibition. Color is critical to any curator's work. To think through picking wall paint without the shared (re)cognition of colors, we discussed the nuance of tones within a palette. The looking was involved and yet necessarily intuitive. 'Greyish-blue' wouldn't suffice. "Would that be closer to the color of grass or the color of the sunlight?" I was asked. The enthusiasm for color and its linguistic description took our thinking through new routes and associations. The question of knowing color was central to our working together, and has reshaped my thinking about looking since.

Alex Puz (b. 1989) predominantly works in painting, on canvas and paper. As rich in color as they are in intellectual rigor, Puz's compositions meditate on the study of color, optical perception and linear abstraction to articulate, through form, a relationship between cognitive visualization and emotive response. In *Trichromacy*, through a process of painting that is physically repetitive, Puz layers carefully considered gradients to form densely charged chromatic puzzles that focus into shapes like spheres, folds, waves, as they are viewed. Also included in this exhibition are a few works on paper—diagrams illustrating Puz's research in color theory and cognitive science. These works map out thinking, grappling and imagining with science and color, offering a personal inflection to the paintings they informed.

Sanford Wurmfeld, former chair of Hunter College's Art Department, is one of many scholars whose work Puz has referenced in thinking through this exhibition. On the importance of color, Wurmfeld remarks, "for the last hundred years, some artists' intentional selection of color in painting has been crucial to formulating expression." Wurmfeld is regarded as an instigator of the 'Hunter Color School' alongside Gabriel Evertz and Robert Swain, with whom Puz worked during and following his own studies at Hunter. "Bob," Puz divulges, "has been a great mentor to me and is someone who introduced ideas that are very active in my studio to this day, particularly the suggestion that color carries a subtle but perceptible energy, affecting the viewer."

Triads appear and recur throughout this exhibition and its conception. In the paintings and their colorings; in the scholars and their insights; and critically—in the exhibition's title.

Trichromacy is both the title of the exhibition and the term describing the human ability to see three distinct color channels conveyed as information from the eye to the brain. It is an evolutionary adaptation that enables us to comprehend light waves in ways that translate into color. Puz notes "trichromatic vision is a lens for understanding a

perspective of the world. I have read research that suggests this development occurred once humans started looking at each other, a way of reading emotion in each other's faces." Following Wurmfeld's assertion that "particular color choices by the discerning artist give rise to various pictorial structures of space," the idea of color as subject resonates in this exhibition and across Puz's burgeoning oeuvre. More specifically, Puz uses the ambiguity of color perception to explore emotion and consciousness.

Color remains slippery, but space can still usually be established by relationality. On the one hand, color is a puzzle to articulate and compare through associative agreement, on the other, color is a prompt from which to provoke or consolidate receptor responses. Regarding conceptions of space, Henri Lefebvre's queries are evergreen: "the question is what intervenes, what occupies the interstices between representations of space?" In Puz's construction of shape through color relations, viewing functions as a spatio-temporal encounter. Stepping back, the work is made up of sequences of lines, curving according to their color and tone. The lines begin to waver in their solidity, as eyes comprehend them, and the brain takes its shot at making sense of them. The patterning is at once arresting and vibrational.

The push and pull of attempting to describe Puz's work in text parallels the interplay of cognition and perception when viewing his work. In many studio visits, I've sat before his paintings blinking, as though I've been looking at the sun too long. My eyes haze, troubling the viewing process. Exploring perception, Puz presents a series of different color combinations—each a proposition or a hypothesis for how color is perceived and associated. The paintings encourage viewers to think with their eyes, (and maybe, at a stretch—if they're open to it—feel with their brains). *Trichromacy (Red - Green)*, a center point of the show, illustrates this. The piece gestures, in its title, to the human ability to perceive, with trichromacy, color in blood flow to the face. A flushed face represents certain emotional interactions; similarly, a pale or greenish face infers a different encounter. The canvas holds red and green gradients meeting through inverting and convex ellipses. Within the constraint of a single surface, the colors sit in dialogue. From afar, the lines amass a network of delicate stripes that intersect at slanting angles. Up close, the colors show their gradations and genesis: here, subtly squeezing past a memory of masking tape applied in the making; there, a blur of color from a brush reminds the viewer of a human hand.

On moving and layering dimension

Since at least 2016, Puz has been developing a process-based practice that transitioned into his current style sometime in 2021. "I returned to painting after trying many different mixed media, sculpture, even performance work, when I got a studio in Queens 2016," Puz reminds me. Building the paintings in layers, lines of color are applied in a back to front flow. Line by line, layer by layer, gradients are mixed and set across the plane in sequences of changing hue, value, and saturation. Each piece bears careful planning and

working, with just a sleight of hand left to chance. When viewed from a distance, the lines meet and diverge to produce patterns not dissimilar from audio waves and digital noise

A generation of artists from the Casablanca Art School of the 1950s and 1960s undertook similarly committed investigations into the relations of color. With flat picture planes offering bold palettes, schematic shapes both geometric and concurrently fluid—their style is affirmed and assertive. The artist, Mohamed Melehi, for example, speaks of the influence of cybernetics and waves—of sound, of technology, of color and light. In a statement for his 1965 solo exhibition, the motif of waves is articulated as, “music, movement. It is vibration and it is also communication in space. It represents continuity.” The repetitive wave infers motion for Melehi, who continued to incorporate this imagery throughout his career. Art historian Holiday Powers describes how, in Melehi’s optic abstractions, the brushstrokes and movements of the paintbrush are not visible, but the consistency of the shape and its recurrence demonstrates “a meditative action, linked to transcendence and prayer.”

Calling on the Casablanca Art School’s stalwarts, I intentionally pull Puz’s practice beyond its current remit. In contemplating his process of layering, of movement, of meditative planning and executing, I seek out connections beyond the ontology of his influences. Of course, links can also be made, to Albers and the tradition of Color Study at Yale to Puz—not least in their shared pedagogical genealogy. Yet by drawing parallels beyond geographies across formal and conceptual lines, I wonder what might surface in relating Melehi and Puz’s modalities of approach. For Puz, lines become waves – moving across the surface of the canvas in layered paint pigments, graduated in tone and relation to the next color. For Melehi, form makes movement through contrasting relations of color and specific shapes and lines, which infer waves. The paintings ebb and flow through color, emoting and mimicking somatic responses: breath, vibration, feeling, visceral movement.

Trichromacy impels involved viewing. The paintings present fields to be figured out and untangled. “This process of viewing, to me,” notes Puz, “provides clarity and satisfaction, like an emotional release; in some ways, my paintings seek to express a combination of neural processing and emotional recognition.” The paintings offer a mode of engaging from different perspectives—a gathering of colors in lines—as generative of reconsidering our experiences of space, time, body, and mind.

On finding meaning in color and surface

I’m sitting at a dining table in Paris, laptop open and angled for a video call. Throughout the call, I’m transfixed by a painting, smooth in painterly application and yet vibrant with energy, behind the wonderful person I’m meeting with. The call nears its end, so I rush to mention the piece: “I really love your Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi—the painting behind you,” I say, foolishly, as though the person I’m talking with might not know the artist I’m referring to.

Using color and flat planes, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's paintings depict scenes from grand sports events, with series titles like *Stadium*. Applied flush and matte, the paint sits as though rolled onto the canvas like a pastry chef rolls fondant icing onto a wedding cake. The shapes, and how they meet and separate, define relations of distance and perspective through color. On constructing space, she reflects: "Architecture is about physical structures—planes and angles, etc.—but it is also about the less tangible structures created through our perceptions and ideas." As such, shapes and color come together to reflect the intricacies of social nuance, understood through association and context.

Weeks later, Puz and I are on a video call, and he walks me around his new studio. The studio is immediately recognizable because of the carefully arranged jars of pigment, mixed and ready to use. When I visited his studio, seeing those jars brought a sense of stability—something about their precision was reassuring. I see them only fleetingly, but they quickly assert that this studio is his. Next, he balances his phone somewhere, angled to show me a wall he will bring his paintings to. Arms stretched across the canvas bars; he moves with the new piece into the camera's frame.

It's a funny thing to contend with these works via a screen—through a webcam, at that. Puz, Melehi and Nkosi's works use paint in a flat and smooth manner, whereas other painters might apply thickly slathered paint in lavish impasto. They share a treatment of the canvas as a space for measured and mediated interaction.

Each color, applied with poise and consideration, and each tone and contrast, specifically calculated and executed. Although the camera on my laptop can't portray the humanness of their touch, of their hand—just as color can be deferred or rearticulated through association, I know it is there without seeing it directly.

Considering conceptions of space, color and perception in the vibrations of *Trichromacy*, I am reminded of Lefebvre's assertion that: "representations of space have a practical impact, they intervene in and modify spatial textures which are informed by effective knowledge and ideology. Representations of space must therefore have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space." In *Trichromacy*, Puz affirms color through a dedicated presentation of tonal combinations. In seeing and perceiving, blurring and muddling and distinguishing, patterns form, and spaces are constructed.

Bibliography

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