

## **Brief notes on the use of colour in contemporary art**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The poster presentation considers the use of colour in contemporary art by presenting the work of three major artists. This paper expands the poster's analysis by framing their works within the current debate in the art world. After an explanation of the difference between modern and contemporary art, it discusses how Damien Hirst, Mariko Mori and Matthew Barney have been instrumental in altering our perception of how colour works in contemporary art. Hirst was the first to bring together paint and organic material. Mori has been instrumental in bringing advanced technology into the art world realm to enhance the colours of her artworks. Barney opens possible new interpretations of colours by bringing together organic and non-organic materials for his sculptures, photographs, drawings and films.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This discussion on colour should be preceded by a definition of contemporary art and by an explanation of the difference between the terms modern and contemporary as they are used in the art world. In any other instance, the English language allows for "modern" and "contemporary" to be swapped at will. The art world, however, has its own very clear, separate definition for each of these words. The label "Modern" refers exclusively to works produced from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the late 1960s. Conversely, the label "Contemporary" is used solely for works being created today and the art of, roughly, the past three decades. Let us look a bit closer at these definitions:

**Modern Art** is a general term, used for most of the artistic production created in the approximate period that goes from the Impressionist movement to the onset of Pop Art, or circa 1870 to circa 1970. As a term, it refers to a new approach to art, where it was no longer important to literally represent a subject through painting or sculpture. The arrival of photography had quite quickly rendered obsolete this function of art. Liberated from the duty of representing "reality", artists began experimenting with new ways of seeing, which in turn allowed them to develop new ideas about the nature, materials and functions of art. This often caused moves towards further abstraction.

Equally, the term **Contemporary Art** is a general one. It encompasses all art being done now. There are nuances in understanding this "now": an art historian considers "contemporary" the art from the 1960s or 1970s through the present. A gallerist or a curator calls "contemporary" work done in the last five years. For an artist, contemporary is frequently only the work done in the last few months.

Within these subtle differences, however, it is very clear that "contemporary" art is strikingly different from its predecessor "modern" art. Broadly speaking, the main difference is that Contemporary art is often focused on the conceptual, whereas in the past the form (aesthetic) of a piece was often more important than the content (concept). Because of this, contemporary art is sometimes hard to decipher and is often criticized for "not being art". Another very important difference between modern and contemporary art is that today art continues to use traditional forms, materials and techniques but, confusingly, these are often used in ways that challenge or complicate traditional definitions of particular art forms. The intent is to push the boundaries of people's perception. Often, things that people consider immoral or taboo or "non-art" are frequently used. In fact, contemporary artists can, and have, made art from anything – from body fluids, or their own bodies, to elephant dung to high technology. A significant number of contemporary artworks incorporate, or are made with, materials and techniques borrowed from everyday life or other areas of artistic or human activity including science, music, and engineering. Artists have taken advantage of modern technology and specific media, and have invented media art, electronic

and Internet Art. While many contemporary artists still work in painting and "pure" (i.e. traditional) sculpture, many more have begun to merge media to create hybrid art forms.

To sum up, contemporary art captures the emotion, the narrative, and the essence of NOW through a process of hybridization. The traditional, distinct boundaries governing media in art, such as painting, sculpture, film, performance, architecture and dance are blurred. This cross-fertilization between genres has expanded the possibilities for contemporary art and created exciting new possibilities.

Given this scenario, let us consider what has happened to colour and its meanings.

## 2. METHOD

Damien Hirst, Mariko Mori and Matthew Barney are the three contemporary artists discussed here because their practice has been the most influential in altering public perception on the use and scope of colour.

**Damien Hirst** has been the first to mix traditional paint with organic material and his work has been extremely influential. Born in Bristol (UK) in 1965, he is most notorious as the artist who "pickles" whole animals in formaldehyde, such as a shark, cows and lambs. In addition he has always worked with painting, producing images that have quickly become iconic. His canvasses display a keen and exhilarating sense of colour, as well as tremendous freedom from tradition. His Dot Paintings were first exhibited in 1989. Made with ordinary house paints and not fine arts pigments, they are large, eye-catching, randomly organized, colour-spotted



**Figure 1:** Damien Hirst, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, 2000.



**Figure 2:** Damien Hirst, Beautiful, galactic, exploding screenprint", 2001.



**Figure 3:** Damien Hirst, In and Out of Love, 1991.

canvases with titles that refer to pharmaceutical chemicals and prescription drugs. Hirst's assistants have made more than 300 of these Spot paintings during the 1990's and there still is a good business line of replicas produced on every conceivable object. Hirst was also asked to create a special Dot painting to send into space for the Beagle II mission to Mars in 2003<sup>1</sup>. Another example of his innovative approach to colour is offered by his Spin paintings. Very brightly coloured canvasses, first exhibited in 1994, these works are the result of the extremely basic idea of pouring house paint onto a circular support laid flat on a motorized table. The works are 'painted' on a spinning table, so that each individual piece is created through centrifugal force. When exhibited, they are equipped with a mechanism that makes them revolve on the wall. This creates astonishing visual effects.

Here I want to single out the works of the installation called *In and Out of Love*, first exhibited in London in 1991. The critic Julian Stallabrass describes it as "one of Hirst's most striking pieces. Canvases were hung with chrysalises in a closed room; the butterflies, hatched, fed off sugared water, flew, bred and died - some squashed by art lovers. In a separate room, their bodies were painted into the bright colours of other canvases." *In and Out of Love* was symptomatic of many of the recent developments on the British art scene in that "non-art objects, or beings, are brought into contact with traditional fine-art materials and modes of display - the gallery and, more important, the vernissage. Titles are flip, often borrowed from films or songs. Such works face Janus-like in two directions at once, but each face looks out upon a different world. They are both easily affecting and coolly ironic, approaching the viewer with a knowing grin, and commenting simultaneously on the world from which their objects are taken and the art world's deadly, money-spinning appropriation of these objects<sup>2</sup>." These works enjoyed immediate, enormous popularity and were instrumental in changing public perceptions regarding traditional notions of colour in paintings. Hirst has recently expanded on this theme by presenting large mandala works made with butterflies' wings stuck on canvas at his retrospective held in Naples in January 2005.



**Figure 4:** Damien Hirst, The Unbearable Likeness of Being, 2003.

**Mariko Mori** is discussed here because her work was instrumental for the acceptance of technologically manipulated colour within the realms of



Figure 6: Mariko Mori, *Burning Desire*, 1996-98.



Figure 8: Mariko Mori, *Birth of a star*, 1995.



Figure 9: Mariko Mori, *Birth of a star*, 1995.



Figure 10: Mariko Mori, *Miko No Inori*, 1996.

enhancing of colour through digital techniques. The role of colour is essential in all her images and installations that merge aspects of the present and future with spiritual traditions of the past. She manipulates colour masterly to create otherworldly, suspended atmospheres (as in her *Dream Temple* 1999) or, conversely, glossy or futuristic environments (as in her image *Birth of a Star*, 1995 or her video *Miko No Inori*, 1996.

Born in 1967, the American **Matthew Barney** is one of the most important and influential contemporary artists working today. He has exhibited in museum all over the world and his work is extremely influential. An ex-athlete and model, he studied medicine and then art at Yale. His most famous work is the *Cremaster* film cycle, a series of five visually extravagant works created out of sequence (*Cremaster 4* began the cycle in 1994, followed by *Cremaster 1* in 1996, etc., until *Cremaster 3*, 2002). "The films generally feature Barney in myriad roles, including characters as diverse as a satyr, a magician, a ram, Harry Houdini, and even the infamous murderer Gary Gilmore. The title of the films refers to the muscle that raises and lowers the male reproductive system according to temperature,

fine arts. Born in Tokyo in 1967, she has become extremely well known thanks to her large photographs and video installations. These works "present futuristic scenes that meditate on the profusion of artifice in contemporary culture and extract elements of Eastern spiritual thought and art to express optimism for life in the next millennium<sup>3</sup>." All Mori's work reflects



Figure 5: Mariko Mori, *Nirvana*, 1996.



Figure 7: Mariko Mori, *Mirror of the Water*, 1996-98.

the combination of influences from Eastern and Western cultures. Consider a work like her multimedia installation called *Nirvan*: it incorporates four huge glass panel photographs, a clear acrylic, lotus-shaped sculpture outfitted with fiber-optic cable connected to a solar transmitting device, and a three-dimensional video. The entire installation conveys the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual states of enlightenment found in the writings and teachings of Buddhist philosophy and religion. The four photographs, *Entropy of Love*, (1996) *Burning Desire*, (1996-98), *Mirror of Water*, (1996-98) and *Pure Land* (1996-98), symbolize, respectively, the four natural forces in the world: air, fire, water, and earth.

Mori's belief in the potential for high technology and Far Eastern spiritual philosophy to create a more positive society for the future translates in an extraordinary



Figure 11: Mariko Mori, *Pureland*, 1996.

external stimulation, or fear. The films themselves are a grand mixture of history, autobiography, and mythology, an intensely private universe in which symbols and images are densely layered and interconnected. The resulting cosmology is both beautiful and complex<sup>4</sup>. These works are extremely complicated and this is not the place to discuss them at length. Rather, I want to focus on the fact that the CREMASTER series brings together film, photographic stills, drawings and sculptural props. These, the artist has said, constitute an essential part of his research. In fact, "the cycle unfolds not just cinematically, but also through the photographs, drawings, sculptures, and installations the artist produces in conjunction with each episode. The photographs, drawings, and sculptures radiate outward from the narrative core of each film installment. Barney's photographs—framed in plastic and often arranged in diptychs and triptychs that distill moments from the plot—often emulate classical portraiture. His graphite and Vaseline drawings represent key aspects of the project's conceptual framework. And the sculptures—constructed from the artist's signature materials, including plastic, metal, and Vaseline—are three-dimensional incarnations of the characters and settings. They exist independently from the films, but embody the same content—now expressed in space rather than time. The 35-mm films are also shown on monitors throughout the installation to foreground the fundamental interrelationship between sculpture and the moving image in Barney's practice<sup>5</sup>." It is precisely in these bizarre, thought-provoking and unsettling pieces that Barney's relationship with colour is most evident and influential. His mixing of natural substances – such as wax, tapioca, honey, etc. – with technical machinery and artificial environments points the way ahead. It is often the case, when looking at Barney's work, that one does not understand clearly what it is that he is looking at. Colour then becomes the engaging agent. Its qualities affect the type of response.

### 3. RESULTS

The works by Hirst, Mori and Barney discussed here reflect the wide range of new possibilities offered to colour by the hybridization process which characterizes contemporary art. By producing works that present colours in previously unseen combinations, materials and situations, artists are creating new ways for us to see, feel and respond to colour in contemporary art. They are opening up new horizons which expand our awareness and our perceptions.

#### References

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**Figure 12:**  
Matthew Barney,  
Cremaster 1, 1995.



**Figure 13:**  
Matthew Barney,  
The Laoughton  
Candidate,  
Cremaster 4, 1994.



**Figure 14:**  
Matthew Barney,  
Goodyear field,  
Cremaster 1, 1995



**Figure 15:** Matthew  
Barney, The Ehric  
Weiss Suite,  
Cremaster 5, 1997.



**Figure 16:** Matthew  
Barney, The Queen  
of Chain's Diva,  
Cremaster 5, 1997.



**Figure 17:**  
Matthew Barney,  
Cremaster 1, 1995.