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Patricia Van Dalen and color fragmentation

Through six of her recent works, done specially for Color fragmentado (Fragmented Color), Patricia Van Dalen reveals different ways of approaching color, in which the chromatic factor becomes self-sufficient, creating abstract-geometrical proposals that invite to a sort of ludic space where light refracts color, fragmenting it in shapes that repeat themselves in succession without exhausting its infinite possibilities.

Amongst all the attributes of the object we are able to see, there is one that is totally subjective, color. It could be asserted that the concept of color integrates three other concepts: the amount of incident light, tone, and saturation. The amount of incident light is related to clarity: to a greater amount of light, there will be greater clarity and a greater capacity to distinguish colors; tone is what allows us to say that an object is of a particular color-this attribute is related to incident light's wavelength-, and saturation refers to the different proportions in which a color may appear. The fact that the eye can observe any form or object is due to the stimulus exerted by light on the retina. What we are able to see depends as much on the spectral composition of light that illuminates a form as in the nature of the same form.

Isaac Newton used an optical prism when exposing his theory on colors. According to this, a white light beam is formed by the superposition of seven different colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. He demonstrated that if a white light beam is passed through an optical prism, there occurs the chromatic dispersion phenomenon; that is to say, the beam is divided in a spectrum composed by seven colors, each deviating in different ways as a consequence of refraction, given that each color presents a different level of diffraction.

In her present work, Van Dalen has assumed this basic theory of color, creating a series of works that immobilize and detain colors and make autonomous primary forms such as the circle or the square, as well as endless lines without horizons that escape defying all limits. In them, the chromatical factor is fragmented, allowing the viewer to freely reinvent visually those geometries full of radiant energy.

Miguel Miguel

Patricia Van Dalen: Color, Fragment, and Mediation

“Look at light and admire its beauty. Close your eyes and look: what you have seen before is there no more; what you should see after, is still not there...”

Leonardo Da Vinci
Of Color. Treatise on Painting ¹

But how to say colors?

Colors can be looked straight. We can perceive myriad colors; sense them. Paint colors. We can produce a colored object or re-produce a colored surface. Replicate a hue. Gradate a shade.

We can dream in colors, or in a particular one. We can even long –by intuition- for a color that never existed.

But to render a color straight, in words, cannot be done. It cannot be described unerringly. It cannot be told to someone, who was not there in the instant of the experience, how the nature of that color was that forever moved us (so we settle for being able to relate our shock).

And so to each his own: Patricia Van Dalen to create the party of color; the TAC Gallery to show the exhibit; Miguel Miguel to organize its curatorship, studying the recurring and the changeful in these works to thus propose for them a structure. And I, through this text, to assume the motion around the visible that is the writer’s lot when confronted with the unlimited fields presented to our sight by color.

Bringing the life inside colors to concepts is an uneasy pleasure, once we have realized how impossible it is for texts to tell them truly, to tell their truth. Once we have ascertained that, due to colors indescribably sensorial nature, any intent to write about them is doomed to be colorblind. From this mismatch between the written and the visual –from that “desperate discourse”, according to Louis Marin’s words- much has been said in the histories and theories about the vision of color.

Of the Fascination and Contempt for Color

Color would soon be credited as a participant in the original explanations of life processes; from the fiery terra-cottas of our planets’ furnaces, to the yellows that bespoke the ripeness of a fruit, to the changes that heralded the mating rituals of birds and fishes.

Empedocles valued and praised colors as the “soul and roots of the existing world (Earth, Air, Fire, Water: yellow, black, red, white)”. ² But despite the links between nature, color, and meaning, among philosophers also grew a critical vision that deemed color as being but our

world’s deceptive wrappings. To color they would thus attribute obscure half-truths that served them well in ruthless analogies, comparing the colors that seduced our sight to the “colored” discourses of the Sophists.

For many scientists and philosophers, colors were nothing more than mere exponents of the laws of mutation, seduction, and non-truth; and as such bearers of an ephemeral destiny (“Eros” is born from “Iris”, M. Brussatin skeptically reminded us.³) Goethe would say that philosophers saw “red” whenever color was mentioned.

To Galileo, color (together with smell and taste) based its reality on the subjective appreciation of the perceiver, and as such only held a scientifically secondary value, as when compared to the “objective facts” provided by form, movement and number.

Science has frequently viewed colors as being differential signs –pointing to the appearance of things, to hues literally- with no positive form, and hence to the adjectival, non-substantive conditions of life and the world of nature.

From such a stern point of view, artists and craftsmen alike soon fell under the disparaging term “sophist”, since they all shared the play with words, their discourses, pure suggestion, the shades and light’s changing scintillations; and were foreign, according to that perception, to social life’s ethics and the exactness of its rigors.

Still wider spread insensibility deemed the visual arts as advocates of appearance and deceptive apparitions, and imputed to them the dangers of an excessive libertarianism –ambiguity, looks, play, conspicuous seduction. And yet when compared to the other elements of the plastic language, such as the drawing outlines or the concept of form, it was upon color that the stigma more reiteratively fell. A parentage, traceable to a certain rationality of judgment, historically preserved line and form for a higher destiny.

If color suffered the explicit contempt of scholars throughout history, a fascination with color, felt among artists, also played a part in reducing its significance to their representational function: in classic art, color was at the service of the general tonality and narration. Under its reign, an accent of color was one of intentionality (a local color that, according to the work’s theme, “localized” garments and objects). It was later, with the coming of the Baroque, that the positioning –the localizations- of color opened and multiplied into the paintings’ different areas, paving the way for greater freedom to use them, as painters found new pleasures in the shifting of accents and distributions (Heinrich Wölfflin says that the Baroque proper began when color was released from its obligation to be the illustrator and interpreter of objects).

The old demands for an objective use of color gradually waned: reds were no longer expected to solely concentrate on a skirt or mantle, but instead were found distributed in seemingly arbitrary patterns that, thus spread, weaved relations perceptual rather than thematic; structural rather than referential; formal rather than narrative.

Wölfflin says: “Classic coloration is a solid harmony of singular colors; in the baroque, it is always a movement of color, coupled, in addition, with the impression of transformations (...). Color does not pre-exist, made and ready, but it constitutes itself in a process”. ⁴ These modes of a color that progressively unbinds, both from the trivializing stigmas as from its subjection

to realism and narrative, cleared a new path for the making of works, as we will later see in Impressionism and, more radically so, in modern avant-gardes. From the 19th century on, the arts would steadily claim color's nature, until, with the coming of modern abstractionists such as Albers, Herbin, Vasarely, Agam, Carlos Cruz-Diez, color came into its own. It took color a slow process of creation/perception/contemplation to finally reveal its being.

Color as Celebration of Vision

Patricia Van Dalen's exhibition, "Fragmented Color", is at once a joyous event for the eyes, a celebration of life and nature, and a space of rationality and structure. An artist is what he makes, what he is able to objectify: the work that, coming from the artist's hands, transcends him. Moreover, there is no artist without produced work, some achieved form of materialization (regardless of how conceptual its origin and how immaterial its density). No one earns the name of painter until the proof is in the canvas.

But even before that, an artist is also what from always has happened to him: his memories and passion, his obsessions, his elective decisions. And so it is also true that there is no painting without a painter (without his spiritual depth, the joy he takes from his senses as he faces the universe around him).

In the words of the artist: "I work with the intent of generating joy through playful works, manipulating color and its combinatorial possibilities as fundamental elements of the visual alphabet".⁵

But she was carrying those colors in her eyes since childhood.

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Colors

Essential to her work is its relationship with nature, with the changes in light and color, yet not only as the base of reality from which abstract forms will follow, but as motive of delectation and field of promises in an ever changing quest.

For the artist, colors have been primary two-fold, since yellows and reds were lively known to her through the flowers –those primary images of her childhood- that imbued her feelings –also primary- for the Dutch meadows, mark of her initial stages in life. Primary blue was also there. Van Dalen says: "The two regions where I spent my first seven years of life were Maracaibo and the Netherlands, and they both are full of blue: the lake and the channels, rivers, and those immense skies of Maracaibo and the Netherlands shaped for me the trinity of blue, yellow, and red."

In her more recent works, the colors have changed. Even when keeping the presence of same reds and yellows, her ultramarine blue and the vivacious, familiar secondary like the cadmium orange or phtalo green that appeared in her works, she now employs magentas and purples bright and dark; violet-blues and lime-greens. The artist prepares many of her new colors herself, producing grass greens, or absolute dark greens, wine-dark reds or cerulean blues; then infusing them into new mixtures to create more subdued secondary and tertiary colors. At the same time she has streamlined forms, making way for planes with more outlined contours, thus adding new emphasis to the work of language. Still, the vivid splendor of nature that she has witnessed in her past remains an ever-present source, if sometimes only through whispers in more tempered creations.

One Prime Nature, Several and Different Secondary Natures

Two-fold as well has been Van Dalen's nexus with nature. With a "prime nature" –that of the real world, that repeatedly dazzles her direct vision of landscapes, of sceneries randomly met; and with "secondary natures" in which the scenic is found man-made: in sown fields, urban parks, and botanical gardens. It is essentially the latter, built green spaces where vegetable life has been arranged by the trimming, sorting hand of man, that catch the artist's adult eye; spaces where they who want to collect a harvest sow the fields, or where urban developers make room for more sensible encounters between the city and its inhabitants, providing their psyche with garden oases. Patricia travels across these artificial creations, colorful parcels grown from diverse sources, and recognizes in them an aesthetic order in which culture, cultivation, and nature have given form to an inextricable whole.

But there is yet another instance in which we can more appropriately speak about "secondary nature", of a kind more strictly related to art: the making –plastic as it is- of a space different and other that, although still loosely related to its source in nature, has at once become sufficiently independent of its fixations, be they geographic or narrating.

Patricia photographed the Luxembourg Gardens while visiting Paris during last September. She later subjected one of those images to her computer's Photoshop "brush", while playing with the "dropper" -that both sucks and drops selected colors, juxtaposing the circles that appeared as abstractions from the flowers. Once on the pictorial support, she placed the resulting round monochromes at different distances from the background, in fact creating a medley of depths, rhythms, and visual textures. Such was the structuring process of the large scale work "Jardin du Luxembourg" that today welcomes visitors; progressively built through different kinds and levels of secondary natures: from the urban garden through successive strata and the different languages involved. While that happened, along the course of the subsequent degrees that distanced the final abstraction from its original reality, the work had shed its traceable references.

Between Emotion and the Need for Structure

"Colors are matter's first sketches"

Plutarch

Van Dalen also works those nether-lands that are the frontier between our emotions and the need for structure. In her most recent stages such polarity becomes apparent, her works acting as hinges that will alternatively open doors to:

-the lively experiences of childhood, and the later incorporation of memory, first to quicken those experiences of color, now to subdues its hues;

-the emotional intensity of color as suggestion, as reverie, as undetermined fragments of dreamscapes; and, on the other hand, the detached mental work required for the reconstruction of forms, the concentration of planes, the rising tide of contrasts;

-the impressions left early in her life by the many stripes of water in the Low Countries, that would stay with her: the channels, but also the furrows and parceled plots for vegetable crops that colored her first perceptions; the fallen leaves and petals along her walks on the grass

of Parque del Este, in Caracas. And, once in her studio, the creative nourishment that those experiences offer to her current research on image fragmentation;

-her being a visual creator that works freely, as well as the designer that knows how to follow guidelines when developing team projects;

With this regard she tells us: “I realized that many of my distinctive traits as an artist resulted both from having studied design, at the Instituto de Diseño Neumann, and of not having pursued regular studies of art at an art school. I wasn’t ‘born’ an artist, so I neither have bohemian habits nor think of myself as an Artist, with capital A. Neither do I have objections to work on ‘commission’ or else find it difficult to follow guidelines by curators, like now from Miguel Miguel. And, similarly, I don’t feel offended because my works are popular among the average guy. Actually it is on that account that I have the liberty to either produce murals in shantytowns or share my work in a classroom. I believe that all this free rein is not due to personality alone (impressed by my Dutch temper, unstoppable even before the waters of the sea), but also the product of my being a designer by training. And so my approach to the creative process starts more from the solution to a problem than from the plastic inquiries of my expressive needs. I’m more interested in developing projects than in ‘expressing’ myself.

“Jardin du Luxembourg” is a good example of these hinge-experiences fixed between the emotionality of what has been experienced and its memories, on the one hand, and the need for an abstractive distancing on the other, supported by diverse contemporary media, digital technology among them.

A Visit through the Exhibition

“Fragmented Color” is composed by works on paper (collages); collages on fabric; a tri-dimensional work (integrable eventually into architectonic spaces); an in-situ intervention, in which the artist uses fluorescent tapes, and by an ephemeral installation where the space is intervened by means of little flags.

Having to attribute to any of these works the condition of “main” would be an impossible task, since they all have a particular character that makes them special, and they all are good representatives of the artist’s current and varied concerns. If “Jardin du Luxembourg” so far has caught our eyes due to its spread spatiality, and its subtle tri-dimensionality, the unusual inclusion of a whole new range of colors to her work, and the successive abstractive stages of this work in particular; the piece “Tulpen”⁶ also captivates us: thin collages on paper in which prior and newly added colors multiply in circles over wide backgrounds that, through their neutrality, accentuate the planar experience. With a line that both cuts and cuts out the visible planes, the repetition of patterns (a clear interest of hers that seems but to have quicken now), “Tulpen” becomes one of her most detached, un-nature looking works in its formal veneer, even when fully inspired by the artist’s earliest encounters with nature in the Dutch meadows. She says: “these collages on paper are an abstraction of the main subspecies of tulips. With them I pay homage to the country of flowers”.

A work like “Parcelas” contributes the significance of transitions to the coexistence of different times, since there one same surface is shared by fragments of old and new pieces. Here we find her resorting to abstraction at its freest, interplaying between her gestures and the

spectator’s perceptual movement through the induced, suggested depths of the pictorial matter. It is not by the recycling alone of previous works to create a new one, nothing new within the artist’s repertoire, that this work is unique. It is rather that specific moments of the artist’s past are brought together as the present eyewitness of paintings of a different kind. Made into right angled fragments –squares and rectangles of diverse dimensions, they are juxtaposed like pictorial collages over that purist background of modern classicism: the white square, in compositions that while varying in densities will still opt in general for the geometrical. All without having relinquished the organic and tactile pleasures that come through to us from the pictorial paste.

Here the abstract white square contains the advances of previous gestural fragments, making of each of the segments belonging to “other painting” a sign for a renewed reading. But also the white square that supports the work will receive fragments of painted planes, together with the artist’s “new” colors (lilacs, apple green, violet blue, black). These are in any case complex pieces, inviting approaches contradictory to the conventions that negated the coexistence, over one same support, of gestural abstraction and constructive planes. Even within the cotemporary arena, which offers greater liberty to the structuring of plastic spaces, the risks undertaken by this work pose an interesting challenge, both compositional and perceptive. We find it accurate to witness, as well ourselves, this as a dynamic experience: a work-in-progress between the different stages of the artist’s production.

Also in keeping with the structuring of links to previous works, “Prados del Este” makes a development from her monumental “Jardín Lumínico”, the ceramic mural next to the highway connecting to the urban area after which this piece of collages on paper has been named. This is a potentially multiple piece, which changes according to the different modes of composing the collage’s units, impressing the spectator with livelier dynamism than its urban correlative. Opening to serialization, she plays with the whole and its parts, with its condition of piece being exposed indoors while at the same time being a fragmentary referent to her outdoors work. A circular reference, as it were, that through the well-known mural thus opens suggestion on itself as work to be known.

This work creates as well a dialogue of coordinates with the urban landmark, since its fragmentary units are intentionally distributed along the walls of the TAC Gallery, hence figuratively lengthening Jardín Lumínico’s axis and directionality from the highway’s ceramics to the work on paper.

Finishing our transit through the exhibit, her piece “Garden” is a reminder that during recent years Van Dalen had already returned to nature, but rather than as the onlooker enchanted by its beauty, as nature’s own cooperating factor: directly “growing” over green areas her own ephemeral installations; environmental works more conceptual and dematerialized both because of their constituting elements and their limited life. In that manner she “planted” her creations in the gardens of sculptures of museums; on the green extensions of the Universidad Simón Bolívar; on the lowlands at the Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden, in Coral Gables. And in like manner, at the TAC Gallery, she plants now this new work, made up of 4,082 pennant-like flags in three colors: orange, rose, and red over its grass “green” background.

A Language on Language

It can be said of the three works previously considered –“Parcelas”, “Prados del Este”, and “Garden”, that they are a language on language, since through them Patricia reflects and elaborates from previous paintings or installations. She reflects over the mural’s vocabulary through resources proper to collage; on site specific outdoor installations through indoor pieces; over the pictorial condition through non-pictorial strata; over her recent experiences with glass mosaics, ceramic tiles, and acrylic forms through the plane color papers of her latest collages; over the transit from nature to abstraction, starting from a photography, through the digital manipulations of flowers and their colors that bring to life processes akin to mathematics, such as permutations, variation, and combinations.

Envisaging the Fragmentary

“Estallidos de Luz” (Blasts of Light) is the one piece in the exposition made in situ, “drawn” on the wall with colored lines of various fluorescent tapes, some with a smooth surface, others made of vinyl and with a coarser texture that resembles fabric. Here the textures of different languages (paper for drawings, fabric for paintings) are brought together; diverse thicknesses of lines coexist and freedom for action –now positively “expressive”- increases. Not only are the joys of color, with their perceptive instants for the visitors changing delectations, made available, but Van Dalen has also proposed a new unstructured-structuring, withdrawing all color from the familiar condition –and perimeters- of “stains”, “planes”, “zones”, to instead have it incorporate into the incisive rationale of line. Yet one that here does not draw a figure, searching for identities by the outlining of zones of meaning, but that instead forces the space to explode with the creative enthusiasm of one who has thrown an open work. Line and work break free from their limits, making the real containers that are floor and ceiling look fictitious and soft.

The relation line/color, or form/color, is narrowly integrated, organizing between them the totality of the work in manners that radically depart from the classic antinomies mentioned in the Renaissance, where the overwhelming world of colors was bound and determined by the well defined forms traced in the drawing.

The works of this exhibition are the response to Van Dalen’s current research, who has not only kept probing in her visions of nature, but who now specially heeds the theme, so contemporary, of fragmentation –of image, of the painting, of form, of space, of plane, of color.

In this sense, we can note how this exposition deals with the fragmentary condition both in its unifying parts (each “fragment” proper) as in the making of the total spaces of each of the works. And furthermore, within the very structuring of the group of pieces that compose the internal games of the exhibit, of which Miguel Miguel’s curatorship is a particularly enlightening reading.

It is of importance to notice that the inward fragmenting of the works should not be perceived solely in their disrupting and dissolving meanings, as it has been standard of some critical positions on modern and contemporary art. Here there is also the arising realization of a concept of fragment that sees its integrating and mediating aspects. Fragments mediating, so we can thus apprehend the multiplicity of things that surround us, and their sensorial impact. A challenging media by which to integrate that diversity with our perception’s unifying force.

It is not surprising then that these fragments will also show that integrating and mediating condition (besides a certain disruptive force and the disquieting perception that some of the works innately stimulate), since to Van Dalen, they continue having primordial referents in nature, playground par excellence of the universal dialectics between totality and fragmentation. (Since a sole flower can say: crop, pollination, beauty. Or a small sowing field can advert to man’s labor, sustenance, survival, exchange, and even to that venerable goal among philosophers to which man aspires: the attainment of the good life).

Patricia Van Dalen is now in the process of building a color that is plane, abstract, and fragmented; a color with value in itself, detached, apparently, from the world’s callings. But hers is not yet, as she may sometimes have wished (and as so many moderns have) a work bare of expressivity. But we may ask: Could such work at all be at some point? And even more: Does it matter to the work that it is? Does it to the artist?

A dilemma remains on which only the continuation of its process will throw light, but that we can already start tracing by going round the exhibition that we have analyzed today. Therein we believe to have seen, in parallel to the abstractive road toward purer forms, a significant zone of emotional and affective resistance.

For now she continues her quest for color per se, together with the different forms to produce it, and decant, re-produce, transform, concentrate, and fragment color. But the capacity for joy before the vastness of the sensorial –be that of nature, or of color in painting - is one of the strengths that certain looks moved, impressed from the arts, would neither seem to wish nor, strictly speaking, be able to evade.

María Elena Ramos
March 2008

¹ Leonardo Da Vinci. Tratado de la Pintura. Madrid: Editorial Aguilar, 1964, page 270

² Empédocles. Quoted in Historia de los colores, by M. Brusatin. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós, 1987, page 37

³ M. Brusatin. Historia de los colores. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós, 1987, page 20

⁴ Heinrich Wölfflin. Conceptos fundamentales de la historia del arte. Madrid: Editorial Optima, 2002, pages 249 / 221

⁵ Patricia Van Dalen. This and next quotes from the artist are excerpts from correspondences exchanged with the author of this text during the months prior to the exhibit "Fragmented Color"

⁶ "Tulips", in Dutch



Jardín Lumínico

Mural en cerámica. 2004-2005. Autopista Prados del Este. Caracas, Venezuela

Ceramic tile mural. 2004-2005. *Prados del Este* Highway. Caracas, Venezuela



Prados del Este uno, dos, tres, cuatro y cinco

Acrílico Liquitex sobre papel Fabriano satinado de 300 gr encolado sobre papel Fabriano áspero de 300 gr
82 x 112 cm

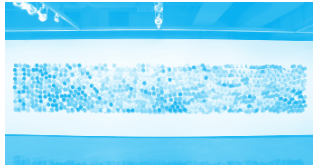
Liquitex acrylic on Fabriano 300 gr semi-gloss
paper glued on rough Fabriano 300 gr paper
82 x 112 cm



Tulpen (geel, oranje, groen, blauw y violet)

Acrílico Liquitex sobre papel Arches satinado de 356 gr encolado sobre papel Arches satinado de 356 gr
104 x 66,2 cm

Liquitex acrylic on Arches 356 gr. semi-gloss
paper glued on semi-gloss Arches 356 gr paper
104 x 66,2 cm



Jardin du Luxembourg

Pintura acrílica sobre 739 círculos de acrílico incoloro de 11 cm Ø y de 5 mm de espesor, tubos de aluminio de 3/8" Ø 140 x 860 cm (dimensiones variables)

Acrylic paint on 739 colorless acrylic 11 cm Ø circles and 5 mm thickness, 3/8" Ø aluminum tubes 140 x 860 cm (Variable dimensions)



Parcelas

Acrílico Liquitex sobre tela encolada sobre tela preparada con gesso 30 piezas de 35 x 35 x 4 cm c/u

Liquitex acrylic on canvas, glued to canvas prepared with gesso 30 pieces of 35 x 35 x 4 cm each



Estallidos de luz

Intervención en pared con teipes de papel y tela de vinil 280 x 455 cm aprox

Wall intervention with adhesive paper and vinyl tapes 280 x 455 cm appr



Garden

Ambientación con 4.082 banderitas de vinil y varillas de hierro pintadas con acrílico 280 x 600; 280 x 440; 280 x 600 cm

Setting with 4.082 iron stemmed vinyl flags painted with acrylic paint. 280 x 600; 280 x 440; 280 x 600 cm

Texts

Miguel Miguel, María Elena Ramos

Translation

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Malina Gallac

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Alvaro de Prat

Designed by

Fonte: César Jara, Raúl Lira, Caracas

Printing

La Galaxia, Caracas