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Reflecting About Purity

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Reflecting About “Pure Painting and Mottled Colour”, by Tara Ward

(Issue 4.2, Purity, 2013)

Tara Ward

Author

Having grown up in New Jersey, I am fascinated by pleasure piers. Their reconfigurations of bodily propriety are at once formulaic and naughty. I am also one of the last generations of art historians trained by memorizing the contents of survey textbooks, so the Royal Pavilion (John Nash, 1815) is thoroughly inculcated in my mental must-see list. Thus, adding Brighton to the allure of Sussex’s academic reputation was more than enough to justify a trip to England.

What I didn’t realize when I was planning my visit was that the conference for which this paper was written would come to be a touchstone of true collegiality that I would mentally return to in the far more common moments of academic malaise. Indeed, it has come in my mind to exemplify those surprising mixtures of people, places, ideas, and things that provoke the kinds of serious thought that make me smirk with pleasure.

I remember a very bright, very white room with some vaguely gauzy hangings. The easy connection would be to say it evoked the conference theme “purity,” but we were there because pure isn’t simple. Instead, that light-filled space nestled, I think, back behind more sombre mid-century academic buildings conjured the ethereal. The filtered sunlight illuminated a group convened despite the instabilities of graduate work, the vicissitudes

of travel, and the ambiguities of interdisciplinary expectations. It would warm to become a generous gathering. The airy operations of intelligence mixed with cigarette smoke. Conversations meandered from personal to political to philosophical and back again.

In part, I'm just saying that it was lovely to attend a conference about ideas rather than networking, but something about that unruly grouping developed into a collective endeavour to think with, rather than through, difference. This is the framework, the structure of a particular cultural formation of purity, each one of us would say as we took turns presenting our work. And then this is who I am, this is why I'm interested, this is what I'm unsure about would be expressed more quietly during breaks.

As those accounts accumulated and were met with encouragement and empathy, "purity" became untethered. It was not an operation of deconstruction nor an attempt to universalize. Instead a meeting of ideas that were never supposed to encounter each other unmoored the seeming assurance they had in their original context. A sentence would leap across discourses and suddenly find itself meaning multiple things so that each of us had to be both speaker and listener. That process meant that no version of purity could be fully valorised or vilified. Donna Haraway, that proselytizer of the impure, is cycling back through my head: It was "an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (Haraway, 1991, p. 150).

If my paper stood out amidst the remarkable number of smart things said in those two days, it is because I was describing a version of purity that, however momentarily, acknowledged difference without othering it. By giving voice to an expanded understanding of colour theory that I argue was forwarded in early twentieth-century Paris, I suggested that two antithetical things could both be made more pure by placing them in close proximity to each other and viewing them together.

This is not ordinarily the case. Most concepts of purity work against an impure which is understood as dangerous or even evil. In these cases, physical and mental separation from the abject is necessary to avoid contamination. While, as Mary Douglas points out, following pollution rules is often impracticable and sometimes impossible, the idea of purity requiring absolute partition and distance pervades colloquial and theoretical discourse. That is what made our discussions so interesting for those two days: we compared purities (as well as impurities), noticed the seepages between them, and suggested different pairings and slippages.

It was by bringing all these ideas and people into contact and allowing them to taint or, in the more positive terms of colour theory, tint each other, that one began to see not just how purity is used to create order, but how those structures might be rearranged. There was an intellectual playfulness to the surprising connections created by that kind of gathering. And, it produced a humane shared set of thoughts that could move from university to beach and stop for drinks in between.

But I was asked to talk about contemporary developments, and I have, instead, found myself wishing I was in another place and time.

I write this in an America which is currently impeaching a president who encourages masses of people to chant “build the wall” and “lock her up” in unison. And I send it to a United Kingdom actively engaged in Brexiting and possibly redrawing its own borders. These two political phenomena function in part by leaving purity beliefs unspoken. When the pure is assumed to be self-evident, an evil spectre of the other is often created. This is how the nature of the impurity can so easily shift and why attempts to claim abject status as a mode of resistance often backfire: anyone who is not pure might be seen as inhuman and/or immoral.

In this heated context, inquiries into purity and popular references to it have fallen off. The problematic exception being discussions of racism where the use of the notion is so vile that I find myself tempted to engage in

counter-purification. Like so many others, I have difficulty envisioning thoughtful comparison, let alone enjoyable intermixing right now. Stopping those practises is often one of the effects of purity beliefs. So once again, I find myself longing for a seemingly white room that was wonderfully, pleasurably, responsibly impure.

Tara Ward is a Lecturer in History of Art at the University of Michigan, United States.

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Pure Painting and Mottled Colour

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Tara Ward

For those of us immersed in the field of modern art, the word “pure” always seems to have been spoken by Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). The equally preeminent and problematic art critic claimed that the history of modern art was a process of purification and famously wrote:

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered ‘pure’ and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. ‘Purity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance (1961, p. 86).

Greenberg insisted that art must retreat from the world and that each medium needed to purge anything that more properly belonged to another art form. In this explicitly, but tenuously Kantian view, modern painting had progressively rid itself of all recognizable objects and any illusion of three-dimensional space. What replaced the mimetic tradition was an attention to the literal characteristics of the medium; painting increasingly recognized the shape and size of its support as well as its use of pigment. This not only fulfilled the need for “self-criticism”, it also served to differentiate painting from sculpture, architecture, and literature.

For Greenberg, it was Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) who achieved this purity of medium. Pollock’s drip paintings were abstract and, perhaps even

more importantly, nearly incapable of producing a semblance of spatial extension. Instead, trickles of paint call the viewer's attention to characteristics of pigment like viscosity, absorption, and colour. The artist's process, which involved throwing paint onto an unprimed canvas on the floor of his studio, created an overall composition. Lines extend to and even beyond the edges of the stretched canvas, highlighting the shape and size of the piece. In Greenberg's view, this painting about painting was the fruit of an historical process of purification that began a hundred years earlier. It is worth noting, however, that the detritus of the studio floor (cigarettes, tacks, etc.) was often captured and hidden by these pure webs of paint. That strikes me as an apt metaphor for what has happened to another version of 'pure painting', namely the one forwarded by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) in his 1913 *Aesthetic Meditations: The Cubist Painters*.

The text is an edited collection of the poet's art criticism which includes twenty-seven references to purity in less than fifty pages. Here is one example:

Virtuous painters in this Western age contemplate their own purity in spite of natural forces...
 Painting, in the West, is becoming purer, with the ideal logic that the old masters have handed down to the new generations the gift of life.
 And that is all (Apollinaire, 2004, p. 7).

Thanks to its evocative, dare I say poetic, language, scholars have typically denigrated *The Cubist Painters*' visual analysis. Apollinaire has also been repeatedly castigated for his attempts to organize all his painter friends into one overarching stylistic category. Yet, while there is general agreement that Apollinaire's art criticism cannot be mined for interpretative gold, *The Cubist Painters* is typically understood as proof that there was a collective artistic drive towards abstraction. The poet's version of purity has, even as recently as the *Inventing Abstraction* show at the Museum of Modern Art in

New York (December 2012 through April 2013), been conflated with Greenberg's "enterprise of self-criticism".

Apollinaire's book includes sections on Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Marie Laurencin, Juan Gris, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Raymond Duchamp-Villon. This list is notable for the way it largely coincides with retrospective critical judgments of the period and impressive for its embrace of some of the most formally radical artists working at that moment. Yet, none of the works illustrated or discussed in the text was fully non-objective. While Léger and Picabia would experiment with abstraction in the year following *The Cubist Painters'* publication, only František Kupka was consistently producing non-figurative works at the moment of its writing and Apollinaire never mentions him. On a deeper level, the formal concerns that allowed these artists to be grouped into a single style are radically different from those seen in the work of Pollock. The examples overwhelmingly address the problem of representing three-dimensional space and avoid displays of pigment as pigment. Apollinaire also pointedly acknowledged the promiscuous play of media in this milieu by illustrating the Maison Cubiste, a fully decorated model house produced for the 1912 Salon d'Automne. In short, Apollinaire's purity was nothing like Greenberg's; therefore, I want to propose an alternative interpretation of "pure painting", one that offers a way of disentangling purity from "self-definition with a vengeance".

As many times as Apollinaire mentions purity, the number pales in comparison to the overwhelming motif of colour and light in *The Cubist Painters*. A conservative count of references to those themes yields seventy-five, including three mentions of rainbows. Given the staid hues used by most of the painters he discussed in depth, it would seem that Apollinaire was overindulging his poetic license, but the writer was indeed looking at rainbows. As he was editing *The Cubist Painters*, Apollinaire became very close to Robert Delaunay (1885-1941) and Sonia Delaunay-Terk (1885-1979).

The poet lived with the Delaunays for several months in 1912 and he wrote a monograph on Delaunay in 1913. Not only were the Delaunays the most effusive colourists in this milieu, they were fascinated by the colour theory of Michel Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889). Parroting his hosts, Apollinaire discussed Chevreul's key idea, simultaneous contrast, at length in *The Cubist Painters*. This leads to the question: what do colour theory and simultaneous contrast have to do with purity?

The answer lies at the heart of Chevreul's work. A world-renowned chemist forced into the study of colour in order to explain disparities in the production of tapestries, Chevreul hoped to create an overall system explaining the effects of optical comparison. He catalogued the changes that happened when two colours are seen simultaneously and annoyed his friends with experiments that aimed to discover a systematic theory of colour combination. Here is one of them: take a rectangle of green and place one red and one blue rectangle on either side of it. Despite the fact that the green is a single colour, a tonal gradation will appear in that rectangle. The green will look darker on the side nearest the blue and brighter where it comes in contact with the red. Furthermore, the colour will shift in tint with the area near the blue appearing more blue and the side in contact with red seeming, somewhat counter intuitively, more fully green. Chevreul described the visual interaction of green and red as follows: 'It is evident that the colours of the two objects in contact will purify each other, and become more vivid' (Chevreul, 1987, p.57). In other words, it is easier to recognize green as green when it is next to red. Together the two colours are brighter, easier to see, and less tainted by other hues. In the context of colour, purity is defined in terms of clarity and comparison in *lieu* of being tied to notions of distillation, purging, retreat, and exclusion. For Chevreul and his followers, pure colour was relational. It was a phenomenon produced by the proximity of difference.

In addition to listing the results of his experiments and presenting illustrations that allow the reader to participate in those tests, Chevreul's

1839 tome *On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast and the Combination of Coloured Objects According to that Law in Painting, the Gobelines Tapestries, Beauvais Tapestries for Furniture, Carpets, Mosaics, Stained Glass, Cloth, Printing, Lighting, Interior Design, Clothing, and Horticulture* published a diagram meant to explain and predict the effects of optical comparison. Its base is one of the first colour wheels (figure 1) with hues arranged so that blue, yellow, and red are equidistant from each other around the circumference of the circle. Chevreul also included tone in the chart by expanding the wheel into a hemisphere. A radius perpendicular to the centre of circle illustrates the gradient from white to black. This tonal range is then mixed with the hues in order to form the remainder of the three-dimensional shape. Chevreul's colour hemisphere is a diagram of the relationships between colours, one that involves subtle – in fact, he says they are infinite – gradations of both tint and tone even as it quantifies similarities and differences.

Chevreul posited that the effects of optical comparison can be calculated by determining the distance between two colours on the hemisphere. Analogy is created when colours are near each other on the chart. When analogous colours are viewed together, it tends to flatten out the difference between two samples and lessen the clarity of the hues. This was what happened on the blue side of the green rectangle discussed above and those two colours are contained in a single quadrant of the hemisphere. Contrast occurs when the locations are far apart. This heightens our experience of the distinctions in both hue and tone. When diametrically opposed, or complementary, colours, like red and green, are placed side-by-side, they will appear to be more pure. Chevreul named that special case “simultaneous contrast” and claimed, as the title of his book suggests, that it was the basis of all the effects of visual comparison. The simultaneous purity of two very different hues was the foundation from which all other colour relationships were constructed.



Figure 1: Color wheel originally published in CHEVREUL, M. (1839) *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l'assortiment des objets colorés considéré d'après cette loi dans ses rapports avec la peinture, les tapisseries des Gobelins, les tapisseries de Beauvais pour meuble, les tapis, la mosaïque, les vitraux colorés, l'impression des étoffes, l'imprimerie, l'enluminure, la décoration des édifices, l'habillement et l'horticulture.* Paris: Pitois-Levrault et ce. Photo from Omega * (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Robert Delaunay and Sonia Delaunay-Terk were deeply influenced by Chevreul. They studied the text and consistently referenced it in both their writings and their artwork, often entitling their pieces some variant of 'simultaneous contrast'. Robert Delaunay's *First Disk* (1913, figure 2) is, for example, obviously indebted to Chevreul's diagrams. Its circular shape, regular bands of colour, and division into quarters echo the plates of *On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast*. However, Delaunay's work is not just a colour wheel. At some points the Disk follows the progression around the circumference of Chevreul's chart as when aubergine transitions to purple

and then blue around the outer band. However, most of the painting is far from that logical order. There are abrupt juxtapositions and Delaunay often places complementary colours in positions where they almost but don't quite meet. Thus, the jump between yellow and purple at the intersection of the two upper quadrants or the blue blockade between red and green at the centre of the piece. The colour combinations neither intensify the hues nor create a harmony of tone or tint. Indeed, these colours seem rather dissonant and one finds oneself confused by the relationships between proximate hues. Thus, I would suggest that *First Disk* was a studio experiment, a kind of proof through negation. By showing that we have certain expectations of colour combinations, it serves as a theoretical grounding for using Chevreul's colour relationships to depict other types of interactions.



Figure 2: Robert Delaunay, *First Disk*, 1913, private collection. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

Most of Delaunay's painting takes the method of simultaneous contrast with its emphasis on spatial relationships and applies it to the subject of the modern city. Delaunay was the great painter of the Eiffel Tower. In his *Windows* series (1912-1914) a centred silhouette of the Tower is surrounded by a veritable prism of hues. This is not simply an application of colour to a Cubist structure, but rather the transformation of Chevreul's theories of difference and analogy into a technique for representing a modern space that is incompatible with linear perspective. The radical height of the Tower flummoxes both diminution of scale and the singular vanishing point, as can be seen in Delaunay's earlier depictions of the Tower where the structure crumbles around a central spot opposite the viewer. This is not the case in the Chevreul-based *Windows*. There, Delaunay has transferred the onus of depicting space to colour and translated Chevreul's system of colour relationships into markers for differences in position. Thus, for example in the 1912 *Simultaneous Windows (2nd Motif, 1st Part)*, the oranges and yellows that frame the Tower establish a foreground—it is in fact a curtain—and contrast the distance of the central blue figure. Just as orange is diametrically opposed to blue on the colour wheel, in this painting they establish the furthest and the nearest locations in space.

Delaunay would also use colour to evoke the abrupt shifts, speed, and disorientation of the modern world. In *Sun, Tower, Airplane* (1913), the Eiffel Tower, a Ferris wheel and a biplane give rise to extreme transitions between hues and spinning colour wheels. These three objects are all key examples of modern technology and they also offer radically new experiences of space and time. If we conceive of the right-hand stable axis where the technologies can be seen as a cause, the effect is clear: the new technologies produce a complete destabilization of the fixed, singular point of view of traditional Western painting. The world is no longer stable. However, thanks to colour, there is still an order to this complex and changing environment. Reds and greens, oranges and blues (the key examples of simultaneous

contrast) are placed side-by-side suggesting both the ability to distinguish between objects and a sense of space despite the simultaneity of these phenomena and the fullness of the painting.

This theme of using simultaneous contrast to represent the experience of modernity was taken up by Delaunay's wife, Sonia Delaunay-Terk. She utilized the techniques of colour combination in order to depict and create objects for modern Parisian nightlife. In 1913, Delaunay-Terk created four paintings of the Bal Bullier, of which the most well-known is the ninety-seven-by-three-hundred-ninety-centimetre piece at the Centre Pompidou (figure 3). Located in Montparnasse, on the Boulevard Saint Michel, the Bal Bullier was a *guinguette*, or dance hall-cum-beer garden-cum-amusement park, and a frequent haunt of the Delaunays. What might it mean to call a depiction of this space of low culture, of primitivist and orientalist fantasy, of prostitution and drinking a “pure painting”?



Figure 3: Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Bal Bullier, 1913, Centre Pompidou. Photo from Nicolas Patte (CC BY- NC-SA 2.0).

My answer to that question is that Delaunay-Terk is analysing a complex modern environment and depicting its relationships through colour. Take for example the dancing couples in the Centre Pompidou work. Most likely engaged in a tango, the intertwined bodies are differentiated using diametrically opposed hues. It is colour that allows viewers to interpret a number of the curves in the painting as one person's arm wrapped around the shoulder or waist of another individual. The entangled limbs produced by the dance are differentiated through colour. This is an intriguing response to the crowding of the dance hall and the modern city in general in that the colours allow us to distinguish individual objects from a massive amount of sensory data. It is also a presentation of a highly sexualized activity in which both partners are made more rather than less pure.

Delaunay-Terk consistently used this motif, as can be seen in *Tango Magic City* (1913) and her joint project with the poet Blaise Cendrars, the *Prose of the Trans-Siberian* (1913). A two-metre tall page that is folded into the size and shape of a traditional paperback book, the piece is yet another artistic entanglement of a man and a woman. Again, colour serves to differentiate between them: contrast of tone establishes the distinction between text and image, male and female. The saturated hues of what can only be described as Delaunay-Terk's side are juxtaposed with the visible backing and softer washes of Cendrars's half of the page. However, this initial division is consistently undermined and revised. The black and red of the type are echoed in the painting and the narrator of the poem declares: "If I were a painter I would splash lots of red and yellow over the end of this trip" (Cendrars, 1992, p. 26). The two sides of the book are far apart on the scale of tone, but close on the axis of hue. What I am suggesting here is that Chevreul's system was transformed by the Delaunays into a method for clarifying complex spatial and social interactions.

Those relationships were not abstract, but rather represented the lived experience of modernity. This version of the *Bal Bullier* is nearly four

metres wide; thus, it is nearly impossible to assume the position of a stable, distanced viewer in relationship to it. Indeed, the colours appear to shift and sway when one walks parallel to the painting and takes it in through peripheral vision. As Delaunay-Terk's sketches of the boulevard Saint Michel remind us, these forms are depictions of the modern urban environment with its crowds, speed, and abrupt juxtapositions. And that is an immersive experience. The viewer is part of the crowd, in the dance hall, on the street. Yet that overwhelming and confusing form of modernity is understood as capable of producing purity precisely because things are so close together, precisely because of the differences it encompasses.

Remarkably, Delaunay-Terk acknowledged that she was an integral part of this environment even as she sought to clarify it. Turning the shapes and colours of her *Bal Bullier* series into a fabric patchwork, Delaunay-Terk created radical sartorial experiments, including dresses she wore to the dancehall. The garments establish an analogy, a relationship of proximity, between artist and locale. However, to wear a dress that bright and variegated on the streets of Paris is to place oneself in contrast to other people. Like the green we saw earlier, she stands out, is "more vivid", and, to make this explicit, she is more pure.

Thus, the Delaunays and their poet friends undoubtedly understood purity in a way that dramatically contrasts the canonical notion of pure modern painting. They eschewed "self-definition" in favour of an entanglement with difference and rather than retreating into abstraction they, quite literally, took their work to the streets. This mottled and prismatic purity offers at least the possibility that pure painting need not whitewash the world, and I am deeply interested in the ways these works recast notions of modernity's alienation and overwhelming stimuli.

However, in the context of this issue, I want to conclude by calling your attention back to Chevreul's diagram. It is certainly worth questioning this chart for its scientific accuracy and universalism, but the idea of

grounding purity in a way that forces the user to acknowledge multiple sliding scales and their relationships, in terms that demand that one investigate the nature of difference, strikes me as deeply important for larger discussions of purity. What excluded terms might be made more vivid and clear if other types of purity were understood as products of simultaneous contrast?

Tara Ward is a Lecturer in History of Art at the University of Michigan, United States.

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