

May 2003

Color as Language

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*In my semicircle of personal outlook,
the idealists sit just to the left of the center,
and the realists, just to the right.
To the left of the idealists sit the innocents;
while to the right of the realists sit the cynics.*



Can color be a language? In graduate school, I chose Kandinsky's use of color for a seminar presentation, in hopes of answering this question, but was disappointed. Although Kandinsky had ideas about what each color said, I found discrepancies between what he thought, and the correspondences that Goethe, for example, found. Years later, I was able to find that both could be related to the color theories of Max Lüscher, a Swiss psychologist who argued that humanity's associations with color go back to the days of the infancy of the race. Lüscher, however, warned that an artist's use of color might have nothing to do with these ancestral associations, and to that, I would add, the viewer's or critic's response might run even further afield.

Recently, Ken Johnson in the New York Times described Hans Hofmann's palette as "Playskool-colored." This I would classify as a negative or hostile association, since it implies that the artist was a child, and/or painting for children. I was reminded of the semicircle of personal outlook, which I once dreamed up, and visualize as resembling the semicircle of political opinion from which our terms of "left-wing" and "right-wing" derive. In political assemblies like that of France, the liberals sit to the immediate left of the center aisle, with the radicals to the left of them. To the immediate right of the center aisle sit the conservatives, and to the right of them, the reactionaries.

In my semicircle of personal outlook, the idealists sit just to the left of the center, and the realists, just to the right. To the left of the idealists sit the innocents; while to the right of the realists sit the cynics. In the political realm, I have observed that reactionaries sometimes can't tell the difference between liberals and radicals, and I suspect that by the same token, cynics may have difficulty distinguishing between idealists and innocents. I myself would classify Hofmann as an idealist, and his colors related not to plastic toys but to

nature. I see his intense greens as partially derived from the greens of grass, his yellows from the sunlight, his blues from the sea and sky, and his reds like the reds of poppies or roses or apples.

Negative or hostile responses aren't always useless. Ernst Gombrich disliked Pollock, and Howard Devree, a New York Times critic in the 1940s, disliked Mondrian, so Gombrich described Pollock's poured paintings as suggesting "the ugly shapes with which industrial civilization surrounds us," while Devree called Mondrian's Broadway Boogie-Woogie "just another one of his colorful bathroom tile designs." I have more positive associations with Mondrian and Pollock, but I wouldn't deny that those of Gombrich and Devree represent ways in which their visual experience tallied with those of the artists they thought they were criticizing. I do believe that Pollock and Mondrian had urban landscapes and tiles (not necessarily bathroom) as one of many visual experiences that they synthesized into the composite images of their abstractions, and conveyed unconsciously to viewers like Gombrich and Devree.

Playskool toys strike me as unlikely sources for Hofmann, as I don't think they were made in Germany in the 1880s, when and where Hofmann was a toddler, nor did he have children of his own. This is often the problem with latter-day interpretations. They are based in visual experiences which the artists could not have had, just as any iconographic interpretation must rely on sources contemporary with the art (when Erwin Panofsky wanted to know why a "sealod fountain" appeared in fifteenth-century Annunciations, he didn't go to eighteenth-century books on religion to find answers). Undoubtedly there are cultural references in Hofmann's color choices, as well as natural ones, but I think of taxicabs as one source for his yellows, passenger Chevis and Fords as sources for his blues and greens, fire engines for reds and so on. I would also argue that the matte surface of his

paintings allows the viewer to have both natural and cultural associations with them. If the surface were hard and shiny, it would be easy for the cultural references to emerge, but more difficult for the natural ones.

This continues to be so. The recent paintings of William Wegman at Sperone Westwater were characterized by bright elementary colors whose slick and/or shiny surfaces forced the viewer to think of the work exclusively in a cultural context. Wegman was nominally depicting landscapes, but using color postcards as part of his compositions, and the need to match their slick surfaces led him to give the whole paintings a slick, even slimy finish. Shiny finish also characterized the abstractions of Angelina Nasso at Stefan Stux, though the colors were much more attractive, and the color combinations often quite provocative (purple and yellow, for instance, in *Through*). Still, while Nasso's image was composed of many small circular shapes and while they might have read as stars or flower petals, the slick surface and fuzzy focus tended to limit them more to associations with magnified photography and Lichtenstein's Benday dots.

By contrast, Erik Bakke used a flat matte surface in *The Weatherby Painting* at 450 Broadway. Measuring approximately 12 by 29 feet, this painting was based on two photographs from a 1970 *Weatherby Rifle* catalogue, one showing John Wayne being presented with one of these expensive sport hunting guns, and the other, a prince and princess of Iran on safari in Mozambique posing with a dead Cape buffalo. While I found the subject matter chilling, I liked the color scheme for the naturalness of its blues, greens and browns, and the surface allowed this naturalness to combine with cultural associations. The catalogue, it seems, belonged to the artist's father and the father used to take the son out hunting, so although the subject matter was chilling, it came packaged with family feeling. □