

NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

Broken Colours: TMI

Broken Colours looks at artists and works that employ colour as a near material, considering how a schismatic chromatic composition might lead to an integrated structural form, and *vice versa*.

The core premise is idiosyncratic. *Broken Colours* draws on my initiation to visual arts. As a university freshman, without prior exposure to studio techniques or practices, I latched onto assemblage and found objects, which encouraged the use of readymades and things at hand. I later discovered personal form-making and began to explore their invention with the rapid, mutable media of oil paints. I have since retained a sculptor's sense of gravity, volume and balance, properties that might be transferred and ascribed to the choice, application and alteration of painted colours. The successive shift from one discipline to another induced a subtle rationalization of continuity. I contrived alchemical transubstantiation at work. For instance, the unification of steel pieces by an oxyacetylene weld was analogous to the polymerization of linseed oil that gradually bonds separate brushstrokes and pigments. Such molecular integrity seemed the very bedrock of metaphysical viability for an abstract image.

What made the issues surrounding consolidation so compelling? That goes back even earlier in my artistic morphology, to a period of homespun auto-didacticism, forged, involuntarily, in imprecision and inexactitude. As a child, I was blissfully, willfully, disdainfully ignorant of fine arts... so Old World and irrelevant. Perhaps they were in my hometown, which had an active element of modern painters, such as Greg Curnoe, whose art one could see on special outings downtown to the London Public Library & Art Gallery. After outgrowing the safety scissors, mucilage, Manila and construction papers, tempera paints, wax crayons and coloured pencils of elementary school, I had no interest in taking up even messier and less determinate media. I went to a secondary school that offered no art curriculum whatsoever. This I took to be further evidence of its obsolescence.

Moreover, I was already steeped in new-fangled, low-skill, easy-to-assemble (sort of) toy crafts. Few of which quite delivered, although they offered specific targets for success. We had two types of Thingmaker—Creepy Crawlers and Fright Factory—which cured wondrous Plastigoop into rubbery fangs, shrunken heads and tarantulas. Spirograph required dexterity and control beyond me, the gear teeth always unmeshed as the crucial moment of completion approached, compounding the other matters of slippage between paper, pins and Bic pens. There was a big jumble basket of hand-me-down Lego, basic blocks, standard colours, nothing fancy except for a few wheels and gears. Sensitive to my low tolerance for failure and frustration, my mother did not allow beguiling paint-by-numbers kits. Jigsaw puzzles provided a more reliable and satisfying substitute, through the practice of which I became an expert copyist of my favourite artist, Norman Rockwell. As a tween, I had glorified colouring books, such as stained-glass-window patterns on translucent faux vellum and oversized “psychedelic” posters, each of which were filled in with a rainbow array of felt-tip pens whose nubs quickly became mushy and blotchy. In secondary school, I dedicated myself to plastic model airplane kits, which I learned to paint in camouflage patterns, even tried to airbrush, and set into handcrafted diorama scenes of shoebox hangars and sandpaper runways. This unrequited hobbyist/handicrafts predisposition plays out in *Broken Colours*.

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The exhibition includes six artists—Amy Brener, Clint Enns, Jay Isaac, Fabienne Lasserre, Rachel MacFarlane and Ella Dawn McGeough. Each works in a hybrid manner, combining elements of painting & sculpture, painting & photography, photography & language, or photography & film in any individual practice. As this disparate group came together, I considered each artist to be a *bricoleur*. A term introduced into modern parlance by the great French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, *bricoleur* means a person who creates or constructs using whatever is at hand. With a misbegotten sense of language and etymology, I teased apart the word into *brisée* and *couleur*, to arrive at the speciously satisfying exhibition title.

Of course, the *pas de deux* between sculpture and painting has been central to modern art, embodied in a single figure, such as Pablo Picasso, or an intimate rivalry, such as that of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. The first artists considered for *Broken Colours*—Amy Brener, Jay Isaac, Fabienne Lasserre and Rachel MacFarlane—sculptor, painter, sculptor, painter respectively, each demonstrate a tendency to imbue the tried and true plastic traditions in which they are invested with most alluring or degrading contaminants.

Brener's cast-resin monoliths incorporate translucent pigments and opaque shards of mirror or concrete. She poured liquid polyurethane into PVC-lined plywood trays, which cured in numerous thin layers. Each layer is differentiated to create a graded complex of hue and tonality. Furthermore, the striations embed various optical interrupters, such as Plexiglas, Fresnel lenses, mirror, glass vials or found materials, synthetic and natural. These variously disperse, reflect and refract the passing light, according to their inborn properties and the visual angles of incidence, producing a mosaic in the round. Frequent sources of found materials are component bits of computer interface and casing, which suggest reification of the luminous virtual imagery that passes for observed experience. Brener's sculpture is bodily, and not: anthropomorphic in scale and stature; spectral and transient in its response to the changing conditions of light and space.

Isaac, a rag-and-bone man by family trade and, when necessary, a housepainter by day, instills magpie encrustation and cluttered accumulation into his neo-modernist compositions. If carefully calibrated transparency and revelation are Brener's guidelines, an archaeological methodology in reverse, then Isaac proceeds by opportunistic and expedient salvage. His completed pictures evoke all that he has shaken away from the resultant form, with a clinging residue of the process from which they were extricated. Hence their gritty, disheveled appearances, as Isaac puts painting on a perp walk. His colours are chalky, obdurate and chiselled, yet connote a distinctly pliant human pallor, the bruises of experience. In contingent, hodgepodge settings, they are the heraldry of the chameleon. Isaac's employment of a long mirror ultimate effaces pictorial presence.

Lasserre winds strips or collages patches of multi-hued textiles to form taut appliqué skins over organically inspired minimalist cores and armatures. This process results in sculpture that registers both hard and soft, with determined surface and indeterminate depth. Lasserre's relatively simple, subdued volumes emanate contingency and potential reconfiguration above the surface. This latency is indicated by the bandaging, scaly, molting, regenerating sheaths whose vigor imperceptibly emerges from the core. Similar to Brener,

NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

Lasserre directs attention to the planes of her works, yet both artists push the crucial tension and stress toward the compressed edges of their sculptures.

MacFarlane has long created miniature maquettes in the studio as the basis of dense, quasi-landscape or still life paintings, which appear so utterly unfamiliar as to verge on non-objective abstraction. For *Broken Colours*, her research device of the maquette fledges into a three-dimensional, composite tableau. In two plywood boxes, MacFarlane fabricates a heightened perceptual experience with DayGlo effect, strong contours and silhouettes, mobile sightlines, direct illumination and intermingling conventional paper and paint with materials devised for cinematic and cosmetic effects, such as foil and mesh. This work arises from her longstanding inquiries into the mechanics of narrative and persuasion. With the maquette endowed with independent activity, MacFarlane's conventional works on canvas or panel abandon their hitherto ambiguous spatial references to activate the very thin, but potent epidermis of paint on flat surface.

Today, the sculpture/painting dialectic expands into a kinesthetic array of media and sensation. *Broken Colours* also engages artists whose primary modes are time-based or conceptual. Enns has a mathematician's rapture with chaos. He submits vernacular Internet videos to crystalline micro-faceting by editing found footage based on sonic memes. *Let Me ASMR You* mines the new subculture of autonomous sensory meridian response, a pastime that enacts gentle, often domestic, auditory or textural cues, for instance folding towels or brushing paper, to stimulate a sensual, physiological response, such as tingling. The ASMR phenomenon has generated copious YouTube videos of instructional, therapeutic or proselytizing nature. Under Enns's radical redirection, ASMR becomes more arousing than soothing, more comic than pacifying, suggestive of a desperate maintenance of the spirit. In *Buried Gateways*, Enns plays with the ritual of travel photography. By placing a packet of found snapshots underground for a year, subjecting its contents to random decomposition, he retrieves a new set of images built out of vestigial chemical bits that correspond to modern colour.

McGeough's works almost eschew colour entirely, dominated by black and gray. *Bon Voyage!*, a series of eight silk prints, saturates horoscope-like phrases (that attribute sentient desire and agency to various colours) in monotone smog. Here colour is a state of mind, and not necessarily ours. *The Mountain (chroma black details)* surveys a mound of hardened black paint via twelve scenic views. Yet even this dense, absorptive substance and surface reflects glints of radiant light.

These artists show a courage and conviction to blur the distinctions over matter and sensation, which escaped me at the moment of truth. That is the vicarious, restorative project of *Broken Colours*. Fortunately, latter-day opportunity allows it to be put together—at last.

—Ben Portis, July 2015