

The book that made me simplified my palette

By

Marion Landry

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I often question whether if form was more important than colour in my own artistic practice? I am sometimes able to find harmony in distorted shapes, bad compositions, or even in wrong perspectives, but colour always has to feel right. So why does colour - which is so important to me - such a struggle? Why can't I obtain the colours I see in other paintings? Many answers came while reading Bright Earth, Art and the invention of color, by Philip Ball. The book taught me that by limiting my palette I could reach more vibrancy, more harmony, and better balance.

As I learned about the origins of pigments, their chemical composition and usage over the centuries, I got inspired to experiment with pigments I had never previously used. For this paper, I will be expanding on some of these experiences that happened in parallel with the reading. Of course, the knowledge I got from the book is more profound than I can discuss in this paper. As an example, I learned that up till late 1800, the variety of pigments was very limited and artists had to know a lot about chemistry in order to be successful painters. Until oil was used as a binding agent, mixing colours was taboo and almost impossible due to chemical reaction between pigments. Hence, the reason why the development of glazing techniques was so important in order to broaden the limited colour range available at the time. While reading about the history of white pigments, I started to understand the differences between Lead, Zinc and, Titanium White, which I later experimented with. As a result, due to its quality of neither being too heavy or opaque, Zinc White - which I had never used before - is now the white I mostly use to mix with other colours. I also learned about the status and importance given to ultramarine pigments over the centuries, which gave me the desire to try it. Encouraged by the reading, I started to use Raw Sienna and found that by mixing it with Zinc White it creates the warmest grey, perfect for deep shadow effects. As my knowledge of pigments deepened during my reading, my desire to work with these new ideas and pigments increased.

Indeed, I started to discover what was my main challenge: I was fallen victim of the wide availability of pigments, which came with the commercialization of colours. Ball explains this phenomena when he states that, “This commercialization of artists’ supplies contributed to the distancing of the painter from his or her materials – the beginnings of that impersonal, unloving attitude toward the primary substance of paint that was ultimately to impel artists of the twentieth to take up household emulsions.” (Ball 180) I realized that I was detached from the origin of my material and probably fell into the category of unaware modern painters, as described by Ball when he stated that “And yet few, if any, modern painters have understood their materials in the way that the painters of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance did” (Ball 317)

Moreover, alone in my studio, I would of never decided to emphasize on colour by working with analogous, contrast, and/or colored light as suggested in this class. This exercises, in combination with the reading, forced me to look at colours in ways I had never done before. While browsing the Internet for visual references I started to observe other artists’ palette. At that point, only still in the introduction of the book, I was using my personal interpretation of the color rather than questioning which pigment where used in the various works. As I started to read the book, the complexity of being an artist and the tight relationship one needs of chemistry really started to add another level to my comprehension of other artists’ work. Also, I had not taken into consideration that mixing colours was impossible due to the chemical reaction between pigments. For example, if a colour pigment was not available (such as orange or purple) the colour simply didn’t exist on the artist’s palette. This lasted for quite a long time in the history of painting and its effects were far reaching. Ball makes this very clear when he states, “... the Renaissance painter possessed a range of colors scarcely broader than that of the medieval artist while facing a new need for accuracy in their use. “ (Ball 107) The effect of glazing to vary or heighten the intensity or saturation of colours suddenly started to make a lot more sense, and it got me curious to experiment for myself.

Though I had painted my first two paintings of the model Sal, with little insight or clear intention with regard to the pigments I had selected, I found myself starting to question my choice. I had previously chosen colours mainly by what they looked like out of the tube in combination with my desire to achieve an analogous painting. Now that I wanted to try a glazing effect, suddenly I wished I had taken notes on the pigments used so I could really understand the effect that glazing might have. During the in-class exercise with coloured lights projected on my paintings, I understood what Ball was saying when he stated that, “A glaze acts as a kind of color filter: a red lake glaze over a blue ground transforms it to rich purple.” (Ball 113) This was illustrated clearly when projecting the blue light on my Sal painting and the colours totally changed. As a consequence, I became curious to try a blue glaze on top of the painting. But which pigment of blue should I be using? And why? A change in me had sparked, and I was now questioning the relationship and role that pigments played in my paintings. In the end I settled for a Phthalo Blue due to its intense tinting strength. It was the first time ever I had chosen a color based on its pigmentation. That simple exercise, combined with the insights in the reading, set me out on a journey to explore pigments, which has caused a fundamental shift in my understanding of colour and the very nature of the materials at the foundation of my craft.

While pursuing the experiment further, I was attracted by Picasso’s palette during his blue period. While looking at Deux Femmes au bar (1902), I was inspired to try his palette out for one of my painting. At that time, I hadn’t really questioned which pigments he had used in the painting, but I really liked the effect of his blues and greens. My initial impulse would have been to use Phthalo blue again - mainly because it is a cool blue with a bias towards green. But the reading got me questioning my initial bias. So I kept searching and looked closer. A quick Google search taught me that Phthalo blue pigment was first discovered in the mid- 1930, therefore it was impossible it had been used in Picasso’s painting. Since I had been reading a lot about the use of ultramarine, I decided that it was a more appropriate choice. I found out later in the

book that it was probably a Prussian blue, as stated by Ball "...among the artists who used it for mixed greens, and it is found in the blues of Monet, van Gogh and Picasso, for whom its slightly grayish-green tone better suited his melancholy purpose during the Blue Period than the bright tones of cobalt blue or ultramarine." (Ball 244) The experiment got me to try a different pigment, but it also made me realize that the combination of colours was as important as the choice of pigments. The painting had an orange background and as I filled the blue areas, the combination of complementary colours made the blue look really vibrant. As I started to fill the surrounding surfaces with green, the blues transformed to a more greenish tint. This use of complementary colours combination was a technique employed by the impressionist and well explained in the book. As I was reading this chapter, my studio experiment proved the accuracy of this technique. Though it was not my first time juxtaposing these two complementary colours, it was my first time really paying attention to the pigments, their properties, and really getting excited about the fundamental alchemy of paint and colour.

As I read how the discovery of certain pigments had a real impact on the artist community, fundamentally changing their practice, I started to wonder what the effect would be for me to discover a new colour. So when Ball described the discovery of browns such as Raw Sienna, I had a desire to try it out for myself. Raw Sienna or Umber is a colour I had never found appealing. Even though I had a tube of it, I had never in fact used it for anything. I was curious to see how it could impact my work. What an impact indeed! I started to experience what Ball was saying in his book about Umber when he describes that "For the somber palette there is nothing to match the profundity of umber" (Ball 135) and again "Umber was highly valued for rendering deep but translucent shadows". The experience of this pigment in my work was as much of a revelation then reading about its discovery. It was happening in parallel in my mind with the reading and in the studio with the painting I worked on. So I followed Matisse suggestion from the book when he states that "I use the simplest colors, I don't transform them myself; it is the relationships that take charge of them." (Ball 302) and

start limiting my palette to only few colours. Furthermore I started to pay more attention on the combination of pigments I was using and really observed how I could achieved certain vibrancy by using the right combinations.

Indeed, the book was at times a difficult read filled with really theoretical and technical language. But my practice in parallel helped to crystalize the information into first hand experience and helped me to apply the information and choose what to do with it. Matisse said it well in the book when stating that “My choice of colors does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on feeling, on the very nature of each experience...I merely try to find a color that will fit my sensation.”(Ball 303) My own experience in the studio combined with the knowledge I got from the book gave me a deeper relationship with colours. Without wanting to stick strictly to theory, I now feel I can make better decisions about colour and pigment in a more informed way. Newton says it well when he explains, “Color is a function of the illumination– Newton.” (Ball 36) and one can really interpret colour the way he or she wants. In addition, while making a conscious decision about specific colours certain historical aspects related to the pigments can also be brought into context in the artwork, adding a deeper level of complexity to my work.

In conclusion, the theory revealed and learned in the reading gives me the freedom to choose colour with a different awareness, while still having the choice to interpret and apply it in the way that I desire. Thankfully, we don't need to be chemists to be artists any more, and worrying about chemical reactions between pigments is a thing of the past. But, if limiting my palette is the only thing I retain from the book, I will have taken a great leap forward in my art. More is not necessarily better, and my recent experience in the studio certainly proves that. In the end, I do agree with Ball when he states that “... the art of painting does not derive from the mathematical sciences, nor has it any need to resort to them to learn rules or means for its own art, not even in

order to reason abstractly about this art: for painting is not the daughter of mathematic but of Nature and of Drawing.”(Ball 132)

Work Cited

Ball Philip, *Bright Earth, Art and the invention of color*, The University of Chicago Press,
Chicago, 2001