



Linda Besemer

Too Colorful: a Conversation with David Batchelor

The following conversation was carried out via email from January through March, 2002. David Batchelor is an artist and writer based in London. He is represented by the Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London, and his book *Chromophobia* is published by Reaktion Books, London.

David Batchelor: We met in Santa Fe when we were both installing work in the POST-MARK: *an abstract effect* exhibition in 1999. It was an important show for me, partly because it was the first time I had shown in the US but also because it was one of the few times I felt there was some broad sense of a common ground between a number of the works. Bruce Ferguson, the curator, talked about a type of contemporary abstraction rooted not in ideas of autonomy and essence but rather in a tradition of contingency, the everyday and urbanism. I could readily identify with that, but I also thought the show threw up a number of other probably unforeseen areas of overlap.

Just about all the artists had begun as painters and referred in their work to the problems of painting, but very few made 'orthodox' paintings on rigid rectangular supports that hung from a nail on the wall. David Reed memorably subtitled the show 'painters with problems', and I wondered how you felt about that as a description? Perhaps this is another way of saying the same thing, but most of it was a very 'impure' type of painting, one that readily embraced questions of decoration, pattern and kitsch rather than rejecting them in the name of some higher transcendent aim. For some time I have thought that art is continued more by a process of self-corruption than self-purification... Then there is the wall plane. You have used rails to drape your paintings over, I was using steel shelves to prop mine on or old dollies as supports. Sometimes it feels a bit perverse but also somehow very necessary not to take the relationship between the work and the wall for granted.

Linda Besemer: Although not geographically very far from Los Angeles, POSTMARK was the first serious international venue for my work. As the title suggests, POSTMARK both exploited and deconstructed modernism's legacy of expressionism, formalism, the handmade and the gesture. It might have been more aptly titled "POST-POST-MARK" suggesting a period of abstraction and the gesture's survival. Between the late 60's and early 90's Feminism, French literary theory, post-structural analysis and post-colonial theory focused an attack on modernism across disciplines. Art criticism and practice under the enormous influence of these critiques, targeted abstraction and in particular, the gesture as the signifier of modernism. In many ways this made abstraction and painting impossible (or at least impotent) and created a bifurcated art practice between "evil" formalism and the morally and intellectually superior conceptualism. It seemed to me that one had very few choices if you were a painter: you could ignore this influence, work in resistance to it, or abandon painting all together. None of these propositions were very exciting. Partly, because I thought there still existed some possibilities for painting and abstraction within and perhaps because of its limitations. And partly, because I felt this form/concept feud could be much more expansive and transformative if we could find a way to reconsider it, say as, a symbiotic intensification of each other's differences, rather than as a dualistic opposition. Many of the works in POSTMARK seemed to be alluding to this.

David Reed's characterization of the exhibition as 'painters with problems' situated the works within a kind of active struggle, as opposed to things that achieve inert resolutions. I like the idea of a continuous problem.

I also like your idea of "self-corruption" whereas an erosion of autonomy and a kind of entropic morality become a model for subjectivity. In particular, when I first saw your work, my gut response was that these things are exquisitely perverse – brilliantly colored, raw sheets/pours of plexi/resin on furniture dollies! A perversion and erosion of any notion of pure form.

I was then immediately struck by similarities or perhaps (dis)similarities in our problematization of our respective practices, such as: 1) The unraveling of the continuum between sculpture and painting, such that a sculpture is also a painting and/or a painting is also a sculpture; 2) the active status of the object in general, and in specific its relationship to the wall/floor; 3) The supports or vehicles, as you've referred to my 'rails' – your shelves and dollies; 4) Plastic – the ubiquitous contemporary material – resin/plexi, acrylic paint; and 5) An unabashedly shameless use of color.

DB: Your description of the options facing painting and painters in the aftermath of the collapse of high modernism is quite striking – I vividly recall 'formalism' becoming a

cipher for everything shabby and bad, and 'conceptualism' a cipher for everything smart and good. I certainly think now that that is a manipulative rhetorical opposition (and by the way many of the conceptualists seemed rather adept formalists). It made me give up painting, and then art for a while. The pleasure of returning to something approaching abstract painting in the mid-1980s was never far from a sense of its implausibility. I also felt I wanted to loosen the grip of modernist criticism from the works it sought to characterize. That is to say, rather than consign all late abstract art to the dustbin, it seemed to me more interesting to look for other ways of talking about, say, a Noland stripe painting. I think Leo Steinberg began to do that by exploring the relationship of abstract art to the city. I love his only partially ironic reference to Noland as 'the fastest painter in the West'.

I noticed in reading some reviews of your work that just about every account says something along the lines of 'yes, they're formal and sensuous, but they're also rigorous and conceptual'. It's interesting people need to say that when, as far as I can recall, every work of art worth looking at is rich in both those areas, and usually in ways that make any separation of form-and-content irrelevant or impossible. But the fact that it is necessary to say speaks to me of a continuing anxiety in the culture about the sensuous and its predicates, and also about the legacy of abstract art. It also says something about your work's ability to get to those areas directly.

I'm not sure what I make of abstract art and I couldn't say it's painting without immediately having to heavily qualify that statement. I would say it is about those things though. Certainly it is also about what you call the continuum between painting and sculpture. Again, and this may indicate something about my limited imagination, I can't think of much interesting painting-related work which doesn't somehow deal with these concerns and their unravelling. The question I suppose is how. The matter of the wall-plane is one of the day-to-day practical manifestations of those general concerns, and it's clear that there are some relatively diverse options. What seems important to me is that, whatever the solution, it has a highly provisional character. I think it is a characteristic of your work and mine that they appear relatively unfixed, relatively mobile in relation to the wall and floor plane. It's also important for me that the support, whatever it is, is a highly identifiable element that can in some sense be separated from the rest of the work. I try to avoid making colored objects. Rather I try to make things that support colors, but the color also has to detach itself from the support. You have certainly detached painting from its support...

Plastic. What a material. It's hugely important in the development of color in the post-war period. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say there has been a revolution in color and that this is largely down to petrochemicals, electrification and electronics. Our color-world is entirely artificial and unnatural. So are plastics. There is nothing wholesome and good in them. When Barthes wrote about plastic in the early 1950s he saw it as seductive but false; its only value was to pretend to be something other than itself. This for me is entirely a part of its beauty.

It's impossible for me to talk about color without at the same time talking about plastics. You mention an "unabashedly shameless use of color." Absolutely. For Barthes and Huxley and others the gleam and intensity of colored plastic was a part of its shame. It was only when I started to use intense color (and, I should add, to begin with this was as a way of trying to sort out something else entirely) that I began to notice the shame that was attached to it in Western culture. And that in itself seemed a pretty good reason for continuing to use it...

LB: In terms of loosening the grip of modernist criticism, I was not only interested in deciphering formalism, I was also curious why lesser forms of critical interpretation were simply abandoned. For example, I was always taken by Meyer Shapiro's idea of the non-narrative. Unlike Greenberg, Shapiro did not see abstraction as a transcendent, a-political or 'purely formalist' art form. Rather, he viewed Abstract Expressionism as a salient critique of a burgeoning post-war industrial culture, which had become increasingly dependent on facile forms of mass communication such as the television. For Shapiro, abstraction's signature character – the non-narrative – posited a potential model for freedom from representation and language. Greenberg merely acknowledges the elimination of the narrative as a 'by-product' in the pursuit of pure form. This seemed profoundly important to me and remains so for a couple reasons. When I was trying to sort my way through the 80's, all the declarations of the 'death' of painting, and as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe says, the 'piety' of conceptualism. I was struck by the complete capitulation to language as the dominant form and strategy used to undermine modernism. When I was in art school, it should suffice to say that I wrestled with a patriar-

chal hierarchy in which the options within representation and narration were very few. There were no stories I could tell that would compete with the boys. In fact, it was only when I began to paint abstractly and entered blind juried competitions that my work received any attention. Abstraction for me was a place, like no other place in culture, where I could overcome some of the inequities of language and subjectivity. I was convinced that the proliferation of women in abstraction during the 80's, (Humphries, Dona, Cheng, Kaneda, Heilman, Haynes, Rae, Ott, Dryer to name a few) when feminist art practice was largely photo based or discursive, was significant and not just an effect of the tenacity of painting or of market need for commodifiable objects. On the other hand, feminist curators and critics would come to my studio and say "What's feminist about that? It looks like it could be done by a man." I'm not suggesting that my work is an attempt to essentialize art forms as early feminist art practice did or to even make connections between women in abstraction. Rather, I want to emphasize that the non-narrative, which was overlooked by formalism and looked upon with great skepticism by feminism, seemed a fertile place to begin painting again.

Formalism and feminist critiques of formalism, (both essentialist and discursive) were focused on the relationship of the active figure – gesture – paint to the passive ground – field – canvas. Formalism saw this as a performative marker of the artist's automatic and self-referential act of painting. For feminism this binary was seen as a metaphorical allusion to male sexuality and domination, such that the figure/ground binary signified the underlying hierarchical inequities of patriarchy (active/passive, subject/object, masculine/feminine). So I thought, a way to begin to open up the limitations of both these discourses was to somehow eliminate or confuse the figure/ground binary. So I 'detached' the paint from the canvas entirely. The supports for my paintings become a vehicle for the 'detachability' of the paint from different architectural grounds.

I think we are in some close agreement about color, its artificiality and its relationship to plastic. In 1990 I applied to the American Association of Abstract Artists, which was established at the turn of the century in New York as a social think tank to support American artists engaged in abstraction and it still exists today. They rejected my application because my work was "too colorful". This made me think of the alienation color has endured throughout painting's history with certain periodic exceptions – say for example of the color field painters. Like the paint, I've tried to approach color in a deadpan self-referential way, which is to make color as much like the material – plastic/acrylic – that it is. A recipe of 'purity' which is wholly impure.

I am curious about the distinction you make between "colored objects" and "things that support colors." Perhaps you could explain this a bit more.

DB: I remember being told a story by an ex-conceptual artist once. The work she put in a large group show was criticized by some of the other artists not just because it contained imagery but, worse than that, because these small photographs were in ... color. To paraphrase Art & Language, color was a kind of kryptonite to conceptual art. It's not difficult to see why: it comes down to color's profoundly awkward relationship with language. It's less easy to see why the American Association of Abstract Artists should have a problem with work that is "too colorful." That's a great put-down. It's like a comedian being told she is too funny. I have always liked Yves Klein's rhetoric about the monochrome representing the final release of color from the prison of language and line, but it does beg the question as to why so many subsequent monochromes have been black, white or grey. I suspect any art that craves respectability will have a problem with color somewhere down the line. At least it will with intense color; color that exceeds the limits of contour and plane, and equally disrupts the orderly divisions of color-theory. That's the kind of color that interests me, obviously enough.

This is what I meant when I referred to color 'detaching' itself from the object. Clearly color is experienced mostly in relation to a particular surface and texture and degree transparency and reflectivity. Color is 'everywhere bounded' as Stephen Melville said, but it also 'repeatedly breaks free of or refuses such constraint.'. I am fascinated by this relation of color to its objects and I suppose I try to perform this relationship in my work. So my panels of color are supported by some very dumb and banal objects that are at the same time quite independent of the color. More recently I have begun to work with forms of illuminated color or colored light but here what's important is to prevent a 'transcendent' detachment of the color from its object. It's like your recipe for an impure purity. A friend, George Smith, referred to it as a gas station sublime as opposed to a mystic glow or whatever. Again plastic is important here...

Do you think there is still a proliferation of women in abstract art? I suspect there is but

I wonder if you think it is for the same reasons as there was in the 1980s? And how you think abstraction has changed since then?

LB: I'm fascinated by color that as you say "exceeds the limits" or the excess of color. What's so predictable about the "too colorful" rejection is that it implies some color is ok, but too much is unacceptable, or that the real problem with color is its containment and regulation. This has an all too familiar ring to it. Throughout western art, the contours of the female body have suffered a similar scrutiny. In *Chromophobia* you wonderfully enumerated many examples of western culture's predilection to 'feminize' color. The conundrum for contemporary feminism in general, is how to talk about difference, shared experience, or subjectivity without essentializing. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari acknowledge that it is essential for women to "win back..." their own subjectivity. But they also warn against "... confin[ing] oneself to such a subject." Feminists are both drawn to and critical of this position. This is where I think abstraction's dissonant relationship to language has potential to do the impossible: to be inside and outside of ideology simultaneously. Through abstraction, a woman's traditional position of exclusion from language and the symbolic is, in a way, neutralized. Yet, at the same time, the history of abstraction, its forms and the critical discourse surrounding it, place the abstract artist in a clearly established ideological framework. I think this could explain some of abstraction's attraction to women artists, although it's impossible to say that all women, or all women who make abstraction are creating feminist or feminine forms or that one could determine a common experience shared by 'women' abstractionists.

Contemporary abstraction itself is another question entirely. For many of the aforementioned reasons I believe that abstraction – now more than ever – is a salient art form. But it does not carry the kind of cultural currency it carried in the first seventy years of the twentieth century. It seems one voice among many now. Although abstraction, and in particular abstract painting, has celebrated a recent renaissance. But, if I had to describe this period, I would say that the majority of art practice and criticism has, as Guy Debord predicted, collapsed into the "spectacle of capitalism."

DB: You flag Essentialism as one of the key potential problem areas in sexual politics when it was also one of the key actual problems in modernist theory. In art at least I think the exploration of contingency offers a way of exorcising the demon of essence – and purity of course, and autonomy. That may have something to do with the, or at least my, continuing interest in the found object and types of readymade. Also and in particular I spent most of a chapter of *Chromophobia* trying to dislodge ideas of color from tendencies to essentialise it – either in terms of language and 'universal basic color terms' or in terms of 'primary' and 'secondary' colors, which of course immediately goes to notions of pure and less pure colors. Most assertions about the essence of something turn out to be highly contingent in the end.

I watched *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* the other evening. There's one of those classic cartoon scenes where someone gets run over by a steamroller and is then peeled off the floor all flat and floppy but still alive. It immediately made me think of your paintings! I think there is something comic (or should I say 'comedic') in your work. I mean it's funny that painting survives what you have done to it, both literally and metaphorically. I think it offers the possibility for a kind of laughter, and laughter is one means of dealing with piety, regulation, etc. The (literal) flexibility of your work also reminds me of that moment of revelation that was seeing Eva Hesse's work for the first time. Not so much Hesse's painting as the sculpture – I wondered what her work had meant to you.

I think the kind of space you have found within abstract painting, and the way you describe it, is close to the kind of space I began to find in color-based work. Maybe that's only a difference in emphasis; maybe it's to do with a difference of location, and of gender. At the same time I cringe at the term 'colorist'. The associations that conventionally go with the term are pretty irrelevant to what I'm interested in. Like you my relationship to 'abstraction' and 'colorism' is strongly ambivalent – but then I'm not sure I would want it any other way. I am a colorist in the same way as *The Simpsons* are colorists.

We haven't talked about your use of pattern, design, composition. Some of your work is compositionally regular and all-over; some more asymmetric. I wonder how you go about generating these forms and selecting and placing colors; are they planned in advance or worked out as you go along?

LB: When I make my paintings, I start out painting one surface subtractively (front to back) and then I build up its ground in consecutive layers of white paint. Eventually, the

consecutive layers of ground accumulate such that they become the surface for the second side of the painting. The demarcation between the surface and the ground becomes imperceptible as they merge into a singular form, yet they maintain distinct variation. So the idea of front and back is more like a Möbius strip than a literal or clearly defined front and back. Before I start, I usually make a watercolor drawing, or actually a drawing collage. I cut and paste strips of watercolor painted paper to determine the pattern, color and composition. I have a good friend who is a digital video artist. She freaked out one day when she came to my studio and saw piles of shredded paper and hair thin colors strips strewn about. She said why don't you do this on the computer? I'm not sure what she objected to more, the mess or the inconvenience. I told her I didn't like the colors on the computer and she thought I was crazy since I had over 14 million colors to choose from. To which I replied, "just give me 7 or 8 I really like". We've been in this constant battle every since about the quality of color on the computer. I like to use water color because by applying it in thin translucent layers to the paper I can achieve the same effect as when I paint. For me computer colors are always a tint or shade of a color – a color mixed with white or black. It seems impossible to get really intense (plastic) colors.

The drawings are a really important part of my process. Sometimes I just spend months working on drawings before I even begin to paint. And Composition in a very traditional sense is key to my process.

In some paintings the surfaces have identical patterns with either different grounds or shifting grounds which exaggerate the figure-ground relation and illicit a sense of time as well as of simultaneity. Some paintings have a direct art historical reference to modernist works such as Mondrian's grids and Newman's Zips. Some paintings intensify the surface-support, such that the painting is a solid slab of acrylic paint. They consist entirely of painted layers and expose the topography of the painting's construction, while inseparably create a second two dimensional surface which repeats the surface stripe pattern. Eva Hesse's infamous "Hang Up," and really all the floor-wall pieces have had a great impact on me. I particularly love the resin Judd-like pieces which run down the wall to the floor. I like the symbiosis of geometric and organic forms, the translucency of the resin, and as you say its 'flexibility' – particularly as it relates a condition of gravity in the pieces. This is very interesting considering much of minimalist sculpture had a very different relationship to gravity. I'm thinking, for instance, of Tony Smith and Richard Serra. The huge industrialized forms defy gravity – culture over nature. Hesse's are more integrated with the conditions of materiality and environment.

It's funny – literally – that you should mention cartoons. When I was a child I watched cartoons so much I went through a brief period where I couldn't make distinctions between reality and cartoons. I thought we all lived in a cartoon. A pre-adolescent existentialist crisis! Perhaps my interest in hyper-flat bodies of paint is connected somehow.

I've always thought of my paintings as humorous. I'm not interested in the ironic, it seems so mean-spirited and cynical. But a good laugh can be shared by all. Although I must admit I don't really know where the line between good humor and irony is. I suppose it lies in the intent.

