

Chromatic Fields

Print Media and the Artist's Book

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Abstract

My research interests centre around drawing as a form of meditative inquiry into colour as light, silence, time and perception, in which print media and the 'artist' book have a pivotal position. Drawing (I see printmaking as an extension of drawing) is reduced to the fundamental activity of making one mark after another, in both intuitive and predetermined sequences. In recent drawings colour is activated by a concentrated series of dots (almost like pixels in a digitised image) of colour pencil. When viewed from a distance, they dissolve, producing a fluctuating surface of indeterminate colour.

My commentary will focus on a collaborative project with composer Jamie Crofts, which centres on a limited edition book-work which seeks to assimilate different disciplines, in this case, drawing, music and print media, as a means to examine aural and visual liminality. The project investigates the relationship between composition, notation, drawing, music and silence, as well as the importance of accuracy and inaccuracy of the human hand, resulting in fluctuations in touch and pulse. A shared interest in repetition and near – repetition allows for the possibility of variable permutation of small units, in which the interactive act of opening and turning pages adds a sequential and temporal dimension. The book incorporates screen-printed score, image, and contains a CD of mp3s and data.

The paper will also discuss the nature of a collaborative practice between artist and composer, and artist/composer and printer/designer. My concern is with positioning print as an extension of drawing, and as a means of extending its field through the vehicle of the artist's book and collaborative practice. My reductive abstraction invites a slowing down of visual perception and the attentive nature of compositional processes connect to ideas of contemplative practice that run counter to a society fixated by speed.

Introduction:

Chromatic Fields originated in 2010 as part of a sabbatical I was awarded from the University of Brighton. The limited edition screen-printed book explores the inherent potential of printmaking for multiple rotations and permutations. It emerged and developed from a series of conversations in which the composer Jamie Crofts¹ and I shared our interests in composition, notation, drawing, music and silence, while recognising the autonomy of sound and vision as discrete forms. In this paper I will attempt to give an overview of the project from its inception through to its realisation as a limited edition book. Before discussing this project I would like to put this work in context by summarising previous book projects and outlining the importance of drawing.

¹ Jamie Crofts has been writing music since 1977, and has given concerts involving the work of Erik Satie since 1979. Jamie has written "furniture music" for numerous exhibitions, including a commission from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, for their Cutting Edge exhibition (50 Years of British Fashion) 1947 to '97. He founded the music imprint SOUNDkiosk Piano Edition working with Robert Orledge to publish first correct editions of works by Satie and Liszt.

www.soundkiosk.com

Context:

My work up until 2006 dealt with a reduced abstraction in which colour in darkness was explored, through both paintings and printed works in both portfolio and book form². This work was shaped in part by a series of residencies that I undertook from 1993 until 2003 at the Eremo di Santa Caterina, Elba, Italy.³

Ten years after my initial visit to the Eremo, I was invited to make a new series of work investigating how a sustained engagement with a particular location impacted upon my practice. The research involved making drawings, paintings and an artist book that explored the possibility of abstraction to communicate an attachment to a localised experience of place. The geometry of the architecture, the symbolic, liturgical and devotional forms and the shadowed light were all elements that in some way came in and out of the work.

From the drawings, I made a limited edition book – *Night Prayers*.⁴ I began work on both plate and stone lithography but eventually made a choice to have photo litho plates made from drum scans of soft pastel drawings. This resulted in the drawings being destroyed in the process of scanning and leaving the printed pages of the book as the only record of the images.

The artist book formed the centrepiece of an exhibition held in the interior of the church, adjacent to the Eremo. The placement of the work was specific, so the imaginative space-the open- geometric forms within the work - maintained a relationship to the proportion of the architectural and symbolic elements of the building. Emma Hill (Hill, 2006, 31), reviewing the book, suggests that:

The hybrid nature of artists' books tends to make them unviable for conventional publishing and distribution networks [...] Initiatives by artists and curators are, however, providing opportunities for books to be made as integral components of exhibitions and installations.

The following year I was selected to be artist in residence at the Experimental Printmaking Institute at Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. The residency offered me an unprecedented opportunity to develop an ongoing interest in the architecture and writings of Louis I Kahn and the designs of Amish Quilts. Although both of these interests have different cultural, social and artistic ambitions, they nevertheless share a formal language of light, space, simplicity and order as well as a distillation and condensation of form and colour that resonate with my own concerns of realising the translation of geometric form through a reductive abstraction. The outcome of the residency was an artist's book - *Silence and Light*⁵.

Both *Night Prayers* and *Silence and Light* presented an opportunity to produce and document the resulting activities from two contrasting residencies, while at the same time enabling me to investigate my interests in a particular form of contemplative image making-characterised by a particularly dense chromatic range.

² *Hermetica* (1999), *Dark Light* (2001) and *From Silence* (2003) were solo exhibitions of paintings each accompanied by the publication of a set of mezzotint and aquatint intaglio prints held at the Jill George Gallery, London, UK.

³ The Eremo di Santa Caterina is a former monastery on the Italian island of Elba. The Eremo was built in the sixteenth century as a place where Christian hermits could live and worship. It has since 1977 gained an international reputation as a place where artists, writers and scientists can carry out research.

⁴ *Night Prayers*, limited edition book, published by Edizioni S. Caterina, Italy, 2004.

⁵ *Silence & Light*, artist's book edition of 12, published by Experimental Printmaking Institute, Pennsylvania, USA, 2005.

Drawing and Print Media:

Shortly after the completion of these two projects, I began to reconfigure my practice. A reappraisal of my intentions, material and medium followed, in which I stopped making paintings, and took an extended break from any form of printed work. Instead, I returned to first principles and immersed myself in drawing as a primary focus, rather than as a preparatory study for a work in another medium. The first results of this activity gave rise to a group of work using silver point and colour pencil on gesso coated panels, which were exhibited in the 2008 exhibition *Figuring Light; Colour and the Intangible*.⁶

Through the concentration on the procedures, processes and materiality of drawing, and the simple placing of one mark after another, I began to find a way of moving from a visual language based upon an emotional or symbolic response to subject, to one built from patterned structures that rely on three characteristics: a unit, repetition and a system of organisation.

Each drawing begins with an initial plotting of a basic grid, which I distort in Photoshop. Compositional decisions are kept to the minimum and are made by the press of a key. I output to a digital printer where they act as a kind of a priori construct, a map predetermining the terrain for the drawing, allowing for a point of departure and return.

The choice of colour or weight and grade of pencil is also determined at the outset. Each mark is repeated in a given formation and distributed evenly across the paper, with no one mark allowed to touch another and each mark is given equal status. Removing compositional decisions during the making of the drawing becomes an act of trust in the resulting formations as they unfold, rather than overly influencing these relationships during the making. The adoption of patterned structures becomes for me, not something overly rational and logical but simply a stable frame upon which unstable events can be built.

The American composer Morton Feldman (2000, 140) writes;

The most interesting aspect for me, composing exclusively with patterns, is that there is not one organizational procedure more advantageous than another, perhaps because no one pattern ever takes precedence over the others. The compositional concentration is solely on which pattern should be reiterated and for how long and on the character of its inevitable change into something else.⁷

Increasingly, I find that I am working toward a non-hierarchical format, one in which no mark or colour or form is given priority over any other. The objective here is to invite us to consider and focus on the material grammar of the work, its inherent abstractness rather than the associative meanings that we as human beings are so fond of attaching. In contrast to the exactitude of the digital 'maps' the actual drawings convey the accuracy and inaccuracy of the human hand in the act of physically making repetitive marks on paper (even though in my drawings each gesture is reduced to the smallest point). Tony Godfrey (1986, 9), suggests that drawings 'present us with the archaeology of touching' He quotes the American artist Brice Marden to support his claim 'the hand touches more delicately in drawing. There is less between the hand and the image than any other media'.

It is not my intention here to give special credence to the artists' hand or to ideas of personalised gestures in art. For instance, Sol Lewitt's wall drawings, which he began in 1968, and are realised by a third party from a set of instructions, question where the artists' touch begins and ends. (Debbaut, 1984 7-9). However, when viewing the drawings, one can still detect the tremor of the hand, albeit, not the artists' hand. Yet interestingly and perhaps

⁶ *Figuring Light: Colour and the Intangible*, curated by Dr Richard Davey, Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham, UK 14 November 2008 - 18 January 2009.

⁷ Feldman, Morton, *Crippled Symmetry*, Res (vol. 2 Autumn 1981) pp.91-103: reprinted in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed by B.H. Friedman Exact Change, Cambridge, 2000.

paradoxically the 'Wall Drawings' also reveal to me at least, that the concept falls away in the company of the perceptible materiality of the work.

Within my own practice both the exactness and imperfection of the human hand are crucial factors in the realisation of a drawing. I do not wish however, to make a case for a definition of drawing in terms of touch or materiality, but I do think it worthwhile considering drawing and touch in relationship to print media, and how this fits in with the way print can be seen as an extension of drawing.

Arguments have abounded around notions of the status and authenticity of what may or may not be classified as an 'original' print and here is not the place to resurrect such debates. Besides, attempts to 'define the original print' according to Susan Tallman (1996, 10), 'has done real damage to the cause of prints'. But it may be worth highlighting that a key characteristic of print media and a 'distinguishing feature of the print is its production by means of a separate printing surface or matrix [...] interposed between the artists' hand and the final image'.

Therefore, in the making of a print touch is always a step or two removed from the final artwork. It is by the means of some intervening substrate such as plate, stone or screen that the human hand is revealed. Susan Tallman (1996,8) citing Pat Gilmour suggests that:

'...The potential the print has for multiplication is acquired at the expense of direct touch. There is no print process that does not place at one remove from the sheet of paper the hand that seeks to make it [...] Once printed, the mark is not intrinsically better or worse than one drawn directly: it is simply different'⁸

It is precisely this difference that interests me. Therefore, whether it is a direct process such as painting or drawing, or an indirect one, such as the extended print family, it is simply a means of transference of idea or information. What seems to me to be of importance is the right alignment of idea with medium, recognising the characteristics and qualities specific to the chosen media.

Collaboration:

The collaborative project *Chromatic Fields* formally began in 2010, however, the seeds for this project were possibly planted back in 2001 when I first heard Jamie perform some of his own compositions alongside those of Erik Satie, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons at the Friends (Quaker) Meeting House, Brighton.

When Jamie and I decided to collaborate, Jamie played me some compositions for piano that he had been working on since 2006. He called the compositions *Chromatic Fields*, a title he borrowed from Morton Feldman's *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, a composition from 1981 for cello and piano. Simultaneously, I was working on a series of colour pencil drawings, which overlapped with concerns I had been developing albeit in a different medium.

Most of Jamie's *Chromatic Field* compositions consist of 176 single notes. These are the 88 notes of a piano played once through and then repeated. And so the main difference between each piece is the order of the notes. "Chromatic" music makes consistent use of most or all of the 12 pitches used in western music. In terms of music then, this chromaticism is taken to its natural extreme: the full range of a standard piano keyboard. "Field" on the other hand is a word Jamie uses to describe a consistent abstract texture in his music. For the pages of the book, Jamie has removed all performance indications, staves and stems leaving only the notes and ledger lines.

The dialogue between Jamie and myself was always open, resulting in a fluid conceptual process, which allowed for shifts of emphasis and structural alterations to our own individual practices and to the collaborative work. This is highlighted by the fact that the book format with

⁸ Gilmour, Pat, *Kenneth Tyler: A Collaborator in Context*, in *Tyler Graphics catalogue Raisonné 1974-1985*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and New York: Abbeville Press 1987, p.10; quoted in Susan Tallman 1996. *The Contemporary Print: From Pre-Pop to Postmodern*, Thames and Hudson.

its fixed sequences was not part of our original conception. At the outset we conceived of the possibility of making a set of nine screen-printed images and nine screen-printed scores, which could be collected together as an unbound portfolio. This could then be displayed either horizontally or vertically or simply leafed through. The works would contain no titles or numbering and could be displayed in any permutation.

During our conversations we made a decision to develop the work as a book with fixed pages. This came about primarily because Jamie composed *Chromatic Field 55* in fixed time, the consequences of which became one of the key building blocks of the project. In email correspondence, Jamie describes the process:

I've finished Chromatic Field 55 today in two versions.
I think one works better visually (55a) and the other aurally (55). Very odd. Actually quite exciting...Both versions are music quite new to me and different from the first five.

So it seems in the middle of the set of nine there's a pivotal composition... Unlike the first four, this one is in fixed time: Every beat even. My first thoughts are then to return to the free time of the first four, making a symmetrical set....

I've been a little preoccupied with what seems to be one of the fundamentals of this project: That the order of the nine can be changed...I'm coming to terms with that in relation to the nine, but I can't get away from the pivotal nature of no. 55.

I've done a re-write of CF 55 to create a piece, which lasts about 30 minutes... The long Chromatic Field, No. 60, based on the notes from 55 is looking like a better candidate for the visual score. As it exists, it consists of 693 notes. This would create 9 pages of 77 notes. The repetition of notes in this particular Field, I feel, would make a better 9 page score. As the pages progress, the material changes gradually.⁹

Number 55 not only had an effect on moving from our initial idea of a portfolio collection to one of binding the pages as fixed sequence, it also made us both consider our original idea of nine scores and nine different screen printed images. During these conversations I made what I believe to be a crucial decision, which was to use one structure from which to make two subtly different drawings. One drawing would be at 90 and the other at 45 degree angles. These particular drawings all utilise a nine-colour palette, which consist of three secondary-colours: orange, green and violet and six intermediary colours - yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, red-violet, red-orange.

As with just about all print processes the use of colour requires a separate matrix for each colour used, which more often than not is drawn, cut or incised with the absence of colour. Therefore, developing these drawings into a printed form required me to make separate positives for each of the nine colours used. I chose to make these positives by re-drawing each colour in black light fast ink on to True Grain. From these positives I then could make use of the inherent potential of printmaking for rotation, variation and permutation. By this I mean that each drawing is rotated throughout the book. Also each time the points of colour are printed they appear in a different location, which equates to a two-point shift.

The repetition of subtly different variations implies a slow, almost static temporality. The images are no longer reproductions of the original drawing but through printed means offer reflections around the same piece. This enhances a temporal, subtly shifting, momentary and evanescent sense of the work, in which the act of turning the page intimately links the physical to the visual and aural.

Realisation:

⁹ Crofts, Jamie, email correspondence with author

Kathan Brown (2006, 74), founder of Crown Point Press, advocates that in 'any creative work, you need a high level of skill, but all the skills you employ need not be your own'. The trick is 'knowing when to develop skill yourself and when you can use the skill of others' (2006, 74).

This view, while embracing skill, gives due credence to the often collaborative nature of printmaking and opens out to a more pluralistic position, one that sits in direct contrast to the viewpoint that puts undue emphasis on an individual's technical mastery and specialisation of process.

Within my own practice I have a limited interest in technical apparatus and procedure. Nor am I interested in being an expert or specialist in any one medium. Rather I will gravitate to, and explore, process and technologies in terms of their appropriateness at any given point in the development of a particular body of work. This is testified by my choice of aquatint and mezzotint for previous work, which explored a tonal chromatic density.

So in this instance, the printing of *Chromatic Fields* was given over to Jane Sampson¹⁰, an experienced screen-printer. Working with a specialist in the medium was crucial to the realisation of the project. Each permutation and rotation was worked out beforehand and presented as a diagram. I believe that this approach to making and realisation requires an openness to the possibilities inherent in any given process and an ability to work with and recognise the expertise of others.

To clarify, drawing for me is a lone studio enquiry, where fundamental ideas are worked through, and resolved drawings are made. These works may have the potential for continuum, one work suggests the next or possibilities for expansion. How these drawings are extended becomes a collaborative discourse. Drawing is direct, without mediation, whereas print is always mediated. So for me, the actual physical act of making a print is less important than the realisation of an idea worked out through drawing. Though I should stress that the result of the printed process must never be simply reproduction, but must engage with the unique characteristics and possibilities of the medium. However, and I hope this is not a contradiction, the notion of facture – the way something is made – is of fundamental importance as a means of connecting the physical, visceral and visual aspects of an artwork. To use a musical analogy – this could be the difference between composing and realising the work as performance or recording.

Jamie and I decided to insert blank pages interspersed between printed pages as indicators of silence or as a visual pause. Silence is of particular interest to both of us, not as something vague or absent but rather as an active, transforming and preeminent condition for composition and perception. Together and separately, we are concerned with giving each event time to live before moving on, allowing for an emergence from and a return to silence.

Whereas my previous books have involved stitching and hard cover casings, for *Chromatic Fields* a decision was made to use a more matter-of-fact and pragmatic solution to binding. We chose to wire bind giving the overall sense of a notebook, rather than the 'rarefied production values' that Hill referred to when reviewing *Night Prayers*. The design of the book was also arrived at by means of a mutual sharing of ideas between Jamie, Richard Denne¹¹ and myself. Richard then subsequently fabricated the design. The graphic layout was kept to a minimum and the typography was chosen from fonts designed by Keith Bates¹².

¹⁰ Jane Sampson is an artist and printmaker with a special interest in screen-printing and photographic imaging. In 2000 she set up and co-directed Brighton Independent Printmaking, Brighton's first open access printmaking studio. Building on this success she set up Ink Spot Press in 2010.

¹¹ Richard Denne is a printmaker with a particular interest in books. He is based in Brighton, UK.

¹² Keith Bates has been an active participant in the international Mail Art network since 1983. In 2004 he established the K-Type Independent Type Foundry to concentrate on his fascination with lettering.

What interested Jamie and I when considering the book format and how it might be displayed in a public context is the obvious, essential, yet often overlooked notion that a book is meant to be handled and viewed sequentially through the simple act of turning the page. It is often the fate of artist's book works that they are displayed in a glass case. Chris Taylor (1999. 1) points out:

By preceding 'book' with the word 'artists' do we subjugate these objects to the same artificial reverentialism that we apply to the majority of art works in other media? Are we denying ourselves the one thing, which makes artist's books quite different and special in the visual art world – the requirement to touch and manoeuvre?

This 'requirement to touch and manoeuvre' is I believe a vital aspect of the book, one that is specific and distinct to its particular condition. The intimate act of turning the page, not to mention its conceptual rationale and sequential nature is lost and consequently overlooked by displaying such books behind glass. Consequently, like many other aspects of our lives, our experience of the world becomes mediated and thus distanced from direct encounter.

Conclusion:

So, to recap, my recent practice has focused almost exclusively on drawing and my engagement with print is an extension of this process in which the book holds a pivotal place. My own practice, I believe, has been enhanced by the collaborative dimension that the book form provides. Working closely with Jamie has helped to define my interests in a form of drawing, which is non goal-orientated, implies a constant state of becoming and exists in equivalence to the temporal dimension of certain forms of music.

Both Jamie and I are interested in paring away everything we deem to be extraneous. Our approach to composition emphasises a restrained, perhaps even a quietist, philosophy of making, in which the space between – generative silence - is as significant as the work itself. I see my own reductive approach as a sought for value that cannot simply be seen in terms of reductive imagery but permeates all aspects of making, thinking and being. Consequently, part of the shift in my practice has been to do with developing a way of working characterised by a particular pace of making, which I would like to think also invites a particular pace of looking.

This project has been about correspondences between single points of colour and their relationship to a sound world composed using single repeated notes. Both of us realise the independence of sound and vision as distinct forms. Listening to the notes on the piano is of course, a different experience from looking at points of colour on the surface of paper. However, we have cherished the opportunity to consider parallels and associations that have resulted from the dialogue, while at the same time recognising difference. We were simply interested in putting together two related, but different, types of information. We never spoke of meaning or content or even intentions it seemed understood from the very beginning that our only wish would be to engage with the world subtly and unobtrusively.

As John Cage (1973, 126), once remarked:

All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know Nothing.

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