

TEMPORARY DEFECTORS. DIETER HUBER'S PALETTES

Hans Dieter Huber

THE TRANSLATION PROBLEM

Palettes are used by painters to mix and apply paints. They are not works of art in their own right. To obtain the right shade of color for a specific place in a painting, the paint must be mixed precisely in terms of color, brightness and saturation. The painter must also prepare the paint on the palette in the right quantity and consistency and ensure that it is properly thinned with solvent.

When mixing paint on a palette, the painter encounters a translation problem. The environment in which a shade of color is mixed on a palette will always be different from the one in a painting. This difference often causes a given color to appear lighter or darker, more or less saturated or in a different shade in the painting than on the palette.

An experienced painter can make up for these differences by grouping colors in such a way that the shade of color to be mixed is placed on the palette in a neighborhood in which it will later appear in the painting.

Most commercially available palettes are made of plywood and have a dark brown color, while canvases are ordinarily sized with a white primer. The translation problem begins with this brown. All colors appear lighter and bluer on a brown palette than on a white canvas.

Dieter Huber has come up with a unique solution to this problem. He uses palettes made of transparent acrylic glass. This enables him to hold the color he has mixed against the corresponding spot in the painting and adapt it to its eventual surroundings. In this way, he can pre-adjust the color more precisely and eliminate the need to correct it in the painting later on.

Painting palettes have existed practically forever. In 2008, paleontologists working at an archeological excavation level dated to 100,000 BC at the Blombos Cave site found two large abalone shells that exhibited traces of an ochre pigment bound with animal fat. These objects, along with a round grinding stone, two small spatulas, a shoulder joint from a young seal that was heated to extract the fat and the ochre pigment are among the oldest tools ever found on earth. Yet that is not the whole story. This find is significant for other reasons as well; for it was here that the world's oldest palettes were discovered – tools used by an early artist who used this method to produce his pigments 100,000 years ago.

PHOTOGRAPHED PALETTES

Dieter Huber's photographs of palettes transpose the translation problem to a meta-level. They function within the framework of a kind of methodological shift that solves the problem of translating a color to a different substrate once and for all. For instead of actual palettes, Dieter Huber exhibits detail photographs of palettes he uses for painting. These substantially enlarged macro images enable viewers to give their full attention to every fine detail. To that end, the artist produces high-resolution photographs with a digital camera equipped with a combination of spacer rings and a macro lens produced specifically for his purpose by the manufacturer. Following a color-correction process and digital post-processing, he prints the photos on opal acrylic sheets with an inkjet printer and mounts them on Aluminum Dibond. The panels are milled on all sides and varnished with dammar resin, much like painted pictures. The material object – a photograph on acrylic glass – is reproduced in three different sizes, each of which confronts the viewer with a different kind of visual resistance.

Large formats control the viewer's gaze and subject it to the demands of the picture, whereas small formats are controlled in turn by the viewer's gaze. In enlarging the details, the artist raises questions about such matters as the total overview, the accuracy of a particular observation, visual control of the viewer's gaze and the viewer's somatosensory orientation.

ISOLATING THE VISIBLE

Photography functions like a device designed to isolate what is visible. The camera eye isolates the spatial and temporal complexity of the arrangement of colors on a palette from the community of the other senses and reduces it to a visual detail. Visible elements from the stream of space and time are fixed in the photograph. It selects a single aspect of the work of art and isolates it from the other senses and from all spatial and temporal contexts. These strategies of isolation and fixation represent the great cultural-historical achievement of photography. When everything is subject to decay over time, photography has the power to suspend the inevitable process of decay and establish permanence. Photographs of palettes are attempts to secure these often random color situations against the progressive loss of presence and imbue them with the same aesthetic meaning in the viewer's mind as the painting realized with the aid of the palette.

The entire process of preparing colors for painting is transposed to a meta-level of visual self-reflection. The photographs are a critique of painting's claim to absolute authority, which they question by declaring more or less random traces of paint on the palette as art. The photographs show that even the process of mixing paints leads to convincing and successful pictorial inventions. The palette always serves a



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specific purpose, namely that of producing the right shade of color in the right quantity and consistency. Yet the translation of a palette into a photograph has no purpose other than to engender disinterested pleasure in the viewer. It becomes an object of aesthetic experience.

SEEING AS PROJECTION

The human brain interprets colors, lines, traces and progressions on the basis of the greatest presumable probability. The viewer believes that he sees images from a high altitude – landscapes, skin surfaces, clouds of stars – or, if this imaginative projection doesn't work, simply different spots of color, drops, craquelures or brushstrokes. Leonardo da Vinci discussed this projective power that inspires the mind to new inventions in his treatise on painting in the 16th century.

It consists in your ability to look at certain walls smeared with all sorts of spots or stone with mixed compositions and recognize things that resemble diverse landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, vast plains, valleys and hills of various kinds. You can also see battles of all kinds, oddly strange figures, facial expressions, costumes and countless other things which you may shape into good and perfect form. ... you may not find it bothersome to stop from time to time and gaze at spots on a wall or ashes in a fire, at clouds or mud or at other places. If you observe them correctly, you will discover in them the most wonderful inventions that inspire the painter's mind to new inventions, be they compositions showing battles between animals and people, be they landscape compositions with monstrosities such as devils and the like that are suited to the purpose of bringing you honor, for the mind awakens to new inventions in view of such unclear things.¹

FILLING VOIDS THROUGH IMAGINATION

Dieter Huber's photographs possess an astonishing projective quality. In search of order and meaningful coherence in the chaotic diversity of what he sees, the viewer projects his personal associations and experiences, his knowledge and his fantasies onto these pictures. He fills the voids in the representation in his own subjective manner, thereby going far beyond what is actually present in the material object. His imagination becomes the critical interface at which the visible elements of the photograph diverge from the specific material character of the photographic surface and translate it in a biologically grounded, emotional-cognitive medium in the viewer's mind.

The palette photographs functional in principle much like Hermann Rorschach's ink spots. Rorschach developed the Rorschach test in 1921, in which subjects are asked to describe what they see in symmetrically paired, abstract ink spots. He used the extraordinarily imaginative responses of his subjects to draw diagnostic conclusions about character, personality or mental disorders. Dieter Huber's photographs also have this highly projective quality. Viewed objectively, they actually represent nothing at all, but are instead abstract excerpts from more or less random situations that have emerged on the surface of a palette during the painting process. Yet they stimulate the viewer's projective imagination to the extreme. Everything that is missing in the photographs – time, space, motion and objects – is projected onto the surface of the photograph by the viewer's imagination. In filling in these empty and uncertain places with their projective imaginative power, viewers of these pictures go beyond what is actually visible on the surface of the photographs in uncontrollable ways that cannot possibly be foreseen on the basis of the pictures themselves.

The surface of the photograph becomes the critical interface at which the physical, material structure of the picture is translated into the biological dynamic of an emotional-cognitive structure. The viewer completes the image offered suggestively to him by the artist with his own emotional-cognitive fantasies.

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¹ Translated from Lionardo da Vinci, *Das Buch von der Malerei*, edited, translated and elucidated by Heinrich Ludwig, in *Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, edited by R. Eitelberger von Edelberg, vol. XV. Lionardo da Vinci. *Das Buch von der Malerei*, reprint of the edition of 1882 (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller Verlag, 1970), p. 125, Art. 66 [from the author's slightly amended German translation of the original].