



Eric Cruikshank: Paintings and Drawings

Colour | Light | Space

Highland Institute for Contemporary Art, Inverness-shire

By Daniel F. Herrmann

As to the situation of the colours, the purest and strongest must be placed in front of the piece, and the colouring varied according to subject, time and place. If the subject be grave, melancholy or terrible, the general tint of the colouring must incline to brown or black, or red and gloomy; but it must be gay and pleasant in subjects of joy or triumph.

Encyclopedia Britannica or A Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, edited by William Smellie, Edinburgh 1771

The Scottish artist Eric Cruikshank is a modern painter. Born in a country and into a culture with a strong narrative tradition, his work departs from customary figuration, yet revels in the craft and artisanship of his chosen medium. Instead of portraying famous men, it analyses the qualities of colour and light. Instead of imitating landscapes, it explores notions of painterly space. And instead of illustrating stories, it investigates the process of painting itself. More than anything, this approach relies on the individual viewer. Our perceptions of colour, light and space are not only dependent on the painting - they are just as much dependent on the conditions in which we perceive it. Changes in lighting, spatial arrangement, distance to the object, subjective mood of the beholder and even the time spent with the artwork, become constituting factors in understanding it. Instead of a mere consumer of a pre-packaged story, the beholder becomes participant observer.

While this embrace of non-figurative abstraction is thoroughly modern, Eric Cruikshank's devotion to his craft is conservative in the best sense. As a meticulous artisan, his medium of choice is panel painting. A traditional medium, it not only provides the most reliable support for the fastidious application of paint, but its commanding historicity also commits the painter to critical awareness of his own work.

Cruikshank's 2008 painting Number 6 exemplifies this. Resembling the form of a triptych, it does not feature a figurative story. Instead, it requires the beholder to engage with the qualities of paint and painting itself: dark and absorbing, its surface does not immediately reveal the plethora of hues and gradations of visible colours. On second glance, noticing delicate changes in the surrounding light or one's own position towards the work, rich depths of colour are to be explored. Painted in a laborious process of coating layers of pigment on top of each other, the individual brushstrokes hardly visible, the triptych is anything but a solid monochrome. Instead, its panels darken towards their edges, leaving their centres to emanate a subtle glow, only to emphasise the rich, dark overtones of the

middle panel. What starts of as a seemingly uniform coat of paint is quickly uncloaked as a nuanced field of colour, ever changing in the beholder's perception as light conditions alter, vary and transform.

The four panels of Number 1 similarly succeed in immersing the viewer in the sensory experience of colour. In addition, however, the perpendicular arrangement of the final element harnesses the quality of the surrounding light to disclose the panel's chromatic affluence. As a corner piece, Number 1 invites its viewers to change their point of view. Even in the same light, the slightest shift in position in relation to the flat surfaces rewards the beholder with new hues, evolving from lapis lazuli and aquamarine to a rich palette of dark peacock blues, and tying the experience of colour to the experience of space.

The distinctive quality of Number 3 is spatial immersion. The panels present the viewer with resplendent shades of green. Progressing from lighter to darker tones, the viewer has to physically move to perceive the work. Its larger-than-life format also allows the colours to fully capture one's field of vision. Focusing all sensorial attention on the colours and the surface, the painting absorbs the beholder in the process of painting in a way no figurative narrative ever could.



With its focus on the chromatic qualities and the process of painting, Eric Cruikshank's work stands in a long art historical tradition. In the Middle Ages, colour and the materials of paint were seen as signifiers of thematic importance as well as wealth. From the Renaissance onwards, the predominant western aesthetic theories favoured the illusionistic rendering of narrative subjects without traces of their material production. In the 18th century, developing critical discourses, such as the example of the Edinburgh encyclopedist William Smellie, were prescriptive of colour's emotive qualities and defined the deliberate visibility of paint which was not tied to a narrative form, as non-canonical and criticised it as 'modern'. The 20th century's advent of abstraction made use of this 'modern' separation of colour and paint from narrative form. No longer tied to figuration, suprematists, abstract expressionists, colour-field painters and many others explored the qualities of colour and paint for their aesthetic potential, as well as for the artistic arguments surrounding them.

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