

Xane St. Phillip, "Paradise Lost"

*"White and Greens in Blues was a culmination of the inner seasons, just as at times it is not the passage of a swift dawn or a prolonged sunset that is so deeply stirring, but it's palpability: the concretion of flux."*

- James Schuyler<sup>1</sup>

"White paint is my marble,"

- Cy Twombly<sup>2</sup>

How do we begin to talk about sensation? When we first speak to share our awareness of the changing temperature or an unexpected flavour, or cry out in alarm, or swear in agitation (and all of these things might register both pleasure and pain) to define hot or cold, sour or sweet, damp or dry, we are social animals; trying to fix between ourselves and others a borderland between exterior and interior experience, a shared skin. Colour is a comprehensive language that allows this exchange to find its middle ground, a shared domain that, while certain - unless one is colour blind a red light is red, not green - is also variable in affect (is that red invigorating or angry?)

Artists, negotiate colours partly through theory, red read as complementary or analogous, saturated or neutralized, but also pigments: Cadmium Red or Venetian Red or Alizarin Crimson, each one a distinct entity. Burnt Sienna, a low-intensity orange-brown the colour of cordovan leather, is cooked Siennese dirt, rust-coloured because of iron oxide. Thus, on a chemical level, colour is alchemy. The analogy holds up for our understanding colour theory too. Just as we are scarcely aware of a sensation before conveying it to others, so too we hardly begin to describe a colour without relating it to other colours and perceptions of colour in an endless feedback loop. Colour as an idea in the eye of the beholder, but in the mouth and index finger too: promiscuous, jealous, various, collusive, infinite, resilient and never wrong.

Xane St. Phillip's "Paradise Lost" is about specific sensations – warm, cool, closed, open - but also about what sensation itself is, or (in keeping with the title's elegiac tone) the gap between sensing and saying. Perhaps the most poignant examples of this gap come via images of stars.

One of two floor pieces in the gallery uses a pattern of interlocking eight-pointed stars of the kind frequently featured in mosque-decoration. St. Phillip crafts this image using black linoleum tiles, a connection to the exhibition space's history as a

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<sup>1</sup> James, Schuyler, "Mark Rothko", ArtNews, 1958, reprinted in James Schuyler, Collected Art Writings, Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. In David Sylvester, "The White Originals/Cy Twombly the Sculpture", Art In America, July 2000. [http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly\\_writings2.htm](http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings2.htm)

schoolhouse (the gallery floor is composed of the same make of tile in a weary institutional greige.) In accordance with the Japanese principle of *Nōtan*, or 'dark-light', the graphic black pops the background flooring into sharp relief (I am reminded of critic David Sylvester's characterization of Henri Matisse's use of dark and light: "light flares out of the blackness."<sup>3</sup>) The star-patterns shift from positive to negative in constant, symmetrical synergy.

Above, the ceiling's similarly institutional acoustic tiles are also spangled with stars, these cut out of white mat board. In his artists' talk, St. Phillip remarked that, given more time, they might better have been made of gold leaf, but I disagree: the mat board looks fresh, present tense and lean; he has used a framing material to make a drawing, reversing the roles of edge and center, punching holes of implied absence in the drop-down ceiling. The effect is at once both off-the-cuff and artisanal (St. Phillip worked for years as a professional framer), an urbane combination thematized throughout the whole of the show.

The gallery's main window is veiled by a four panel, freehand "cut drawing" executed by VISA student Sarah Cowan. The pattern is an "inhabited vine," a Roman motif featuring an arabesque line enlivened by animals, in this case birds and rabbits. During various hours of the day, arcing southern sunlight splashes vibrant colour through the cuts from the yard outside - unexpectedly from a graffiti mural on the side of a steel shipping container- whose lyricism, extracted and transfigured, glistens; pointillist daubs bobbing in sun-limned filaments. Cowan's intuitive contours recall Matisse's phrase, "drawing with scissors", and the shifting light's activation of colour into line echoes his scheme of window and wall decoration for the *Chapelle du Rosaire* at Vence, France, in which the glow of stained glass is carried to a drawing on the opposite wall. Here, there is the same combination of soft mutability and atmospheric power brought about by an economy of means, but with the intimation that the combination has been chanced upon, and that all (from the graffiti to the paper to the room itself) is provisional.

Other influences St. Phillip cites throughout the show include colour-theory pioneers Joseph Albers and Johannes Itten, along with architect/painter Le Corbusier (whose book, *Le Poeme de l'angle droit*, was propped by the east window during the opening). These influences are evident in square, modular paintings, whose wooden supports are St. Phillip's tribute to the beveled tongue-in-groove paneling that lines three of the gallery's four walls. The grooves become borders for dividing planes of colour selected from the Colour-Aid System, the designer's tool that Albers himself used with students. Of the varying tones and temperatures, St. Phillip says, "I tried to have neutrality and temperature and value all in balance in these pieces...every one tells a different story."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Sylvester, "Matisse", from *About Modern Art, Critical Essays, 1948-2000*. London: Pimlico, 2002. P. 143.

<sup>4</sup> All quotes by St. Phillip are from his artist's talk at the Slide Room Gallery, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPefBoZ7ezk>

Minimalist in spirit, the wall pieces reward close scrutiny, though scanning them is literally staring at a wall. Density and duration add hidden weight to the matrix of the curt, closed squares via the application of colour to surface; some of the boards were painted in a dozen layers to achieve the right look, while others were touched only twice. The architectural character of the works becomes more focused when each piece is viewed as an experience unto itself, as if a colour palette for an imaginary interior. Viewed this way, each becomes like a still-life painting with almost nothing in it, revealing the real substance of still life: light and shadow, stasis and transformation, palpable presence or conspicuous absence.

The way in which the gallery's vertical lines become a rhythmic substructure for the wall pieces has the effect of sharpening the border between work and wall, as if reminding viewers of the here-and-now-ness of experience in the specifics of surface, support, texture and pigment. This argument is curiously reversed on the south wall, where a diptych of canvasses painted in soft blues seems to melt into an even paler blue alcove.

Playing to the space, St. Phillip has chosen the one perfectly smooth half-wall of the gallery to mount a conspicuously painterly piece. Five hues of blue pigment have been scumbled, dragged, rubbed on, pulled off, plied with turpentine burns and basted with wet-into-wet glazing, resulting in a surface that while purportedly not 'about' water nonetheless recalls both the diaphanous transitions and dense, gestural confectionary of Monet's *Nymphs*. The bold move to mount the diptych on a blue wall floats its tensions in a pool of coolness that seems to suspend it conceptually as well as pictorially.

Does an abstract painting lose its expressive integrity when threatened by a literal comparison to landscape, or, does its history of marks become only so much decoration when its colours are 'too beautiful'? These problems have been explored before with care, by another St. Phillip's influence, Richard Diebenkorn, notably in his well-known series, *Ocean Park*. A more contemporary struggle St. Phillip understands is the inescapability of the quotation marks we now place around abstract painting itself (he often points out that many students do not learn to make abstract paintings, but only copies of other abstract painters' work.) The blind of the blue wall is a kind of patient parentheses that displaces the object-hood of the painting in an imagined space apart. The effect is theatrical but also absorbing, the split of the diptych hinting at a seam in the curtain, impenetrably imperturbable.

In the same way, a nearby orange canvas offers punctuation chased with relief. The west wall, clad in horizontal boards, is painted along its surfaces, gaps and crevices in mauve, pink and turquoise, respectively, all sharing the same value, with resulting subtle discords and contrasts. The unsettling physical twinge associated with discord colour combinations is the result of upending the mind's expectations that purple must always be dark or orange always pale, when darkness necessarily conveys heaviness and pallor lightness. Like orange desert rocks against a cobalt

sky, or the wan violets and greens of Aurora Borealis, discords often feel transportive and weightless. The bold, glazed oranges of St. Phillip's minimal square act as both charger and foil to the wall's split differences: orange supports pink and opposes turquoise, electrifying the gaps between boards; at the same time, the flat, matter-of-factness of tinted canvas offers – as the artist has remarked – a relatively static ground for the eye. A small scuff mark in the corner of the orange (the canvas was primed outside and picked up dirt) settles the orange as picture like a signature.

Orange and mauve are situated on the colour wheel on either side of red, the absent presence that, according to the artist, colours much of the exhibition. In Matisse's famous painting, *Red Studio* (1911), the entire space seems to have been flooded in a hue the tone and temperature of blood. Matisse picked up this red from the murals of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii, a source that has inspired painters – from Jacques-Louis David to Mark Rothko - since its excavation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Matisse's painting presents a concrete thesis on the convivial flux uniting nature and culture: a small statue of a nude stands in for a resting body, plants echo the contours of patterns; the clock has no hands, and everything is transparent that is not quickened by life or art.

Settled into a niche in the St. Phillip's mauve wall is a small, six-pointed star rendered from black floral wire. St. Phillip dedicated the show to artist friend Rachel Berman, who passed away the week the show opened. As a counterweight to the orange canvas, it is a frail token of mortality, an *Et in Arcadia Ego* whose elegiac character is also present in the exhibition's most obvious nod to history (as well as its most aggressive architectural intervention). A double-row of columns lead from the space close by the memorial niche, and gallery entry to an open door leading outside to a cement basketball court and, beyond that, a grassy field. The millwork surrounding the entry and exit doors is loosely painted a soft hospital green.

The columns are simple structures composed of flat millwork that has been whitewashed and gently stenciled with a stylized cypress tree motif. They are in part a cunning solution to a difficult installation space, as one of the columns masks a structural support stud; the others are there for rhythm and symmetry (St. Phillip, a stickler for proportion, once designed a studio based on Palladian principles). This use of nature in quotation within a rigid geometry recalls the classicism of Le Notre's gardens at the palace of Versailles, a reading complemented by another floor piece, a 'reflecting pool' of blue linoleum tiles based on an ancient Roman mosaic motif. Cypress-columns compose a kind of allée to lead the viewer outside, where one is confronted by an actual Italian cypress sapling, planted in the scrubby urban grass.

Whitewash (with its connotations of sanitizing ugly truths) has a long and varied history of bestowing, not only lightness to a surface, but purity, with the latter's twin connotations of hygiene and separateness (white is cooler in a hot country; lime wash possesses antibacterial properties.) Here, whitewash is primer for an impressionistic mirage's primitive rhythms. As heralds of an obscure past, they

speak to the suspension of disbelief that the garden proposes, even as the rudimentary structural proposition of the allée disciplines the positioning of those passing through. This washed-out white is the formal echo to the white and shadows of Cowan's cut window screens; both are votive scrims, softening or concealing reality while proffering virgin surfaces for archetypal devices.

Discussion at St. Phillip's opening included questions about his choice of title, *Paradise Lost*; some thought it alluded to the role of artifice that allows the ordinary (a scuffed institutional floor, the creases between clapboards) to grow expansive in the imagination. David Sylvester writes about a cut-paper composition of a swimming pool by Matisse:

"...Volumes and space seem to switch roles with each other [...] sometimes the blue areas seem to be the swimming or diving figures. Sometimes the figure seems to be the white and bare canvas contained within an open blue shape. Sometimes the blue shapes seem to oscillate between being figures or limbs and the empty spaces around and between being figures or limbs."<sup>5</sup>

The formal oppositions with which St. Phillip interrelates artwork, colour and architecture ultimately reveal a locus of control that must make its peace with the graces and fallibilities of space, time and circumstance so evident in this venue. Along these lines, the exhibition title also recalls Ezra Pound's rueful coda to his monumental address world literature, *The Cantos*:

I have tried to write Paradise

Do not move  
Let the wind speak  
that is paradise.

These lines are more complex than they first appear to be. The listener must stop, but the wind must move in order for it to speak; to, 'let the wind speak' is to momentarily subtract authority from poetry. But this silence is the reader's also, who listens out of range of the interior call and response of Pound's poetry. This gesture of self-abnegation is kin to the kind of immersion that colour-field painting has historically called on viewers to embrace as a means of achieving a bodiless, meditative state. But as a mandate for an exhibition, it is also willingness on the part of this artist to allow viewers the freedom to drift from interest to interest. St. Phillip's casual care approximates an open-ended invitation concealing the efforts that have produced it, a gesture of hospitality reminiscent of the Arabic and Mediterranean cultures he candidly admires. It is also a kind of metaphysics of being at home in the world, an elevating of the elements and principles of design that unites with an elegant gesture the cosmetic with the ontological.

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<sup>5</sup> Sylvester, p. 143.

