



Robert Reed: Setting Colour in Motion

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A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.

– Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911)

Robert Reed is known best to some as the first and, until 2014, the only African American tenured professor at the Yale School of Art. Born in 1938 in Charlottesville, Virginia, Reed – a Professor of Painting and Printmaking at Yale for 45 years – was educated in Blacks-only schools in the segregated south, beginning with the Jefferson Elementary School (whose school colours were red and black), then Burley High School (whose colours were Kelly Green (Pantone 16-6138) and Old Gold (Pantone 15-0955)).

In 1954, aged 16, Reed entered the BS art education programme at the historically Black Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Prior to this, he had taken one art course, with a sculptor named Mrs. Wesley. His training, focused mostly on sculpture (the head of the art department was a sculptor), initiated a lifelong approach of 'constantly thinking three dimensionally.'¹ (His undergraduate school colours were Morgan Blue (Pantone 288) and Morgan Orange (Pantone 1655).)

In 1958, he entered the BFA/MFA programme at Yale University (here, Yale Blue (Pantone 289) and white). Josef Albers, the Bauhaus colour theorist best known for his iconic chromatic investigation *Homage to the Square* series, was appointed chair of the Yale School of Art eight years prior to Reed's arrival. Albers developed a two-year foundational sequence, comprising seven comprehensive courses: Two-dimensional Basic Design, Three-Dimensional Basic Drawing, and Colour in the first year; Drafting, Lettering, Painting, and Sculpture in the second.² Reed matriculated through the curriculum, eventually becoming Albers' teaching assistant on the Colour course. His chromatic education continued in the autumn of 1960, when he spent each morning working side by side with Albers, mixing the silkscreen inks for the German artist's seminal publication *Interaction of Colour* (1963).

Those aforementioned school colours would eventually form the basis of Reed's visual vocabulary, which would be expressed in a geometric abstract language shaped by a personal archive of memories, architecture and observations of public spaces. His oeuvre can be categorised into four distinct major bodies of work: *Plum Nellie* (1970s), *San Romano* (1980s), *Tree for Mine* (1990s), and *Galactic Journal* (2000s). Each of Reed's paintings is a landscape literally layered with a personal iconography – he would use the red clay of Virginia to prime his canvasses before numerous applications of acrylic paint.

There may be a temptation to compare Reed's work with contemporary African American abstract geometric painters such as Al Loving, William T. Williams or Mavis Pusey, or naturally to align his work with his professor Josef Albers. However, the Bauhaus artist with whom Reed most closely shared an aesthetic affinity is Wassily Kandinsky. While Albers's *Homage to the Square* series was an ongoing static investigation of the interaction

of colour, Reed's innovation was to set seemingly static colour in motion. Included in Kandinsky's 1926 publication, *Point and Line to Plane*, are illustrations of lines observed in nature: crystals, plant patterns, skeletal structures, tissues specimens, streaks of lightning. Reed too would focus on the form of objects in nature and urban architecture, analysing the geometry of those forms to compose Bauhaus images.

Gazing upon the suspended spherical forms in the *Galactic Journal* series, one sees the influence of Belgian surrealist René Magritte. Reed was particularly drawn to Magritte's painting *The Château of the Pyrenees* (1959), 'the one with the big rock floating in the sky'. "I felt close to those people who, as Magritte does, deal with the juxtaposition of different kinds of situations", Reed would state in a 1973 interview, "it has been an influential thing to me because of its form dynamics".³ Reed's widow, Susan Whetstone, recalls that up until the time of his death in 2014 he kept a large, hollow plastic rock suspended from his New Haven studio ceiling.

Like Kandinsky (and László Maholy-Nagy, another constructivist artist with whom he shares an affinity), Reed also left his birthplace, travelling to various states and cities throughout the US to pursue a career as an artist. Education was an escape route that would eventually become his trade route, providing a stability and security that fortunately did not distract him from his artistic practice. In fact, it directly enabled him to explore representations of his experience as a Black man living in the eras of pre- and post-segregation.

National and international travel enhanced his practice as he engaged with various landscapes, presenting the forces he discovered. Reed first visited the South of France in 1994. Captivated by the region, he returned in 1996, 1997, 2003 and 2012, basing himself in the seaside town of Antibes. With the exception of 1997, he stayed at the Hotel Le Relais du Postillon on every visit, requesting the Florence Room each time. Upon arrival, he would convert the room to a studio from which staff and visitors were banned. Referring to his summers in Antibes as a "self-imposed exile", he limited his communication with students, friends and family to focus solely on his artistic practice. Practising the Bauhaus principle of rigour, Reed would use the restrictions of his tiny hotel room and its rectangular window to create 'strict parameters for exploration' and an 'economy of means', referring to an efficiency of both material and labour. He incorporated social equity by observing the activities from his hotel window, which looked out onto a public park and playground on the Place des Martyrs de la Résistance, and activities within society would become essential to his artistic practice. The small compositions and collages of cut forms he made during these stays were experiments within this environment; they were not only studies for future paintings but works in themselves that incorporated earlier paintings. As Reed stated in a lecture in 2013:

*In a sense it was sort of like a recycling because the actual images come from directly looking at paintings and directly from the paintings and to re-present them by this method was very much a part of reliving a part of my life.*⁴

In 1997, he stayed for a month in a two-bedroom sublet at 3 rue Thuret in Antibes and, as he had in the hotel room, redesigned the space, converting it into a studio. His routine was described as follows:

*Most days Reed would leave the sublet at dawn while the streets were empty of people. He would use this time to make rubbings of street elements such as street pavers and manhole covers. He produced more than two dozen 43 x 29.5 inch drawings. Antibes was now becoming a direct source of inspiration for his work. In this series of drawings is the evidence of rubbings from the apartment's elevator security gate, the raised relief of the sublet's bathroom tiles, and the streetscape elements like grate covers and street pavers.*⁵

This visit would be the catalyst for the series of paintings, drawings and collages entitled *Galactic Journal*, which he composed over the following four years. We encounter them now 21 years after they premiered in 2001 at Bayly Museum at the University of Virginia, in many ways coming full circle. The colours in this body of work serve as text, chronicling not just his time in Antibes, but his childhood anxieties and fantasies in Charlottesville too.

Many constructivist artists fled from war, creating abstract images that alluded to activities within a specific landscape. In the same way, Reed created images that referenced both the landscapes he escaped in the south and those he encountered in Europe. Reed stated:

*I unconsciously identified with many of the issues that [Jon Schuler] was working with in his paintings. He was very involved with [...] his translation of his personal experiences with the landscape into formal painting concerns. And I can remember really absorbing his pictures, which came at a very important time in my life because I had just gone through a very formalistic set of values and I was asking myself questions about my personal imagery and how that could be translated.*⁶

The landscapes in the *Galactic Journal* series are influenced by nature, parks, urban architecture and the industrial revolution. Whilst the colours are enchanting, the landscape itself would be treacherous to traverse. The lines intersecting with spheres, boundaries and barricades could be telephone wires, trade routes or escape routes. Some series titles are specific, such as *Le Relais Du Postillon Playground Red*, *Le Relais Du Postillon Playground Green*. Subtitles in each series, such as *Washington Park [Wash and Park]*, *Rose Hill Drive*, *Carousel*, *Jefferson Top*, *Civilian*, *Burley* contain cultural context. Each canvas coded in colour collapses a series of interactions in a specific time-space-continuum into an autobiographical time capsule. In a lecture at Baylor University, Reed recalled the lexicon of images developed in Antibes. They include an outdoor staircase, a playground with concentric circles, narrow streets, fences, celebrations, and parades and carousels with no music.

In *Carousel (aka school colours)* (2004), layers of red, black and yellow spheres are connected by purple, black and red lines, all of which move toward a central point in the lower left of the canvas. At that central point one encounters the carousel. Lines cascading from the central point give the illusion of velocity and the carousel seemingly spins upon the surface. It is composed of all Reed's school colours, situated side by side, each occupying its own sphere. It is as if school children had run around in circles chasing one another (the empty spirals etched into the background might allude to their absence from the scene).

In *Rose Hill Drive* (2005) the same empty spiral occupies the lower leftmost corner of the canvas. It intersects with a broken framework: a rectangular grid of eight blocks, outlined in black. Its origin point is the block of eight 'school colours' that occupies the lower rightmost corner of the canvas. The building blocks of Reed's education take on the architectural form of towers and skyscrapers. Representing upward mobility, they seemingly lead to a hexahedron-shaped network of possibilities in the universe, represented by the ten fuchsia spheres circulating above.

Robert Reed's colour-coded, cartographic constellations demonstrate a mastery of postmodernism. Ann Gibson in her essay, *The African American Aesthetic and Postmodernism* (1995), writes:

Following Roland Barthes, Hal Foster usefully defined postmodernism as distinct from a modernism that saw itself as whole, 'sealed by an origin (i.e., the artist) and an end (i.e., a represented reality or transcendent meaning)'. The postmodern in contrast, is a 'multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of

them original, blend and clash'. The difference, Foster concluded, was that modernism has been posited as a sign: a stable unit composed of signifier (in the case of art, the physical aspect of the painting or weaving) and signified (our understanding of what it refers to). Postmodernism, in contrast, admits the contemporary dissolution of the sign and the released play of signifiers.⁷

Reed's relationship to Charlottesville was fraught. Having attended segregated elementary and high schools, having sat at the back of the bus, his was a childhood that, due to social, economic and political systems, kept him from participation in the totality of life and play of Charlottesville (furthermore, Charlottesville's parks and schools were not integrated until 1959).⁸

Perhaps Reed observed others playing upon slides, swings, merry-go-rounds, see-saws, monkey bars, climbing frames and sandpits in the playgrounds he passed by in Virginia from which he was barred. Perhaps the agony of being relegated to accepting a life lived exclusively in a mostly impoverished Black neighbourhood provided him a view into a world of experiences in which Whites did not participate or know. Perhaps early on Reed understood that these were not parallel worlds. Perhaps it was his recognition of his lived experiences in a non-parallel world, where separate does not mean equal, that compelled him to document and abstract into geometric forms his Charlottesville American apartheid, lived inside of Black Vinegar Hill.

Like the scene captured in Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* (c. 1435–1460) – the inspiration for Reed's *San Romano* series – each canvas in this body of work is a territory marked by multiple, thin lines that traverse the canvas, guiding the viewer through a site of cultural collision. One of the sites Reed references in the *Galactic Journal* series is La Place des Martyrs de la Résistance, one of several national memorials to French soldiers who defended the territory of France in World War II. Collage elements and calligraphic etchings layered onto the picture plane ensure texture of the territory, bringing each painting's surface into the sculptural, three-dimensional realm. The repetition of geometric forms, the rhythmic lines in *Galactic Journal* works signify the paradoxical energies and encounters in public space, parks and specifically on the playground. Is the playground a postmodern metaphor for freedom, for the space in which freedom is played out?

In 'The Range of Metaphor' (2014), Klemen Slabina and Francisco Martíne present the activities on the playground as the interplay of public and private, emerging out of a need for change in the contemporary world. 'Hence the metaphor of the playground stands for all temporal and spatial dimensions of cultural settings, within which freedom is used to take the needed risks and break with the established order to participate in the flow of playful (political) debate and action. Even when the debate and action (re)gain their prior structural framework, the playground remains as a risky possibility of a structural break'.⁹

The segregated playground of Reed's childhood, the same Charlottesville space that he later memorialised in his painting *Washington Park [Wash and Park]* (1999), would decades later be the site of protests, parades and counter protests to integrate parks, universities and public space. Reed would not live to see the structural break in Washington Park as Unite the Right rallied there on 11 and 12 August 2017. But he likely would have understood and had use for the ways in which the politics of freedom played themselves out in geometric formation, almost like one of his paintings.

Setting his 'school colours' in motion, Reed successfully compressed past, present and future in his paintings. Where the language of colour theory and the language of racialised segregation and discrimination intersect, here is where one enters Robert Reed's compositions.

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¹ Robert Reed in an interview with Lisbeth Anderson Jordan, recorded 6 February 1986.

² Cathy Braasch, 'Hyperdimensional Investigations: Robert Reed's Curriculum and the Legacy of Bauhaus Pedagogy' in: *Wolkenkuckucksheim | Cloud-Cuckoo-Land | Воздушный замок, International Journal of Architectural Theory*, vol. 24, no. 39, Bauhaus Transfers, 2019, pp. 165–183.

³ Interview with Robert Doty, New Haven, Connecticut, 25 January 1973.

⁴ Robert Reed, lecture at Martin Museum of Art, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 12 September 2013.

⁵ Susan Whetstone, *Robert Reed: The Antibes Years*, Robert Reed Estate, May 2019, p.22.

⁶ Interview with Robert Doty, 1973.

⁷ Ann Gibson, 'The African American Aesthetic and Postmodernism' in David Driskell, *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View*, Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1995.

⁸ 'Washington Park: Separate and Unequal', available at: www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=170149

⁹ Klemen Slabina and Francisco Martíne, 'Playground: The range of metaphor', 2014, available at: www.academia.edu/8243345/Playground_the_Range_of_a_Metaphor_with_Klemen_Slabina_