

Colour Conversations

Duncan Bullen

Richard Davey: *Your new works appear very different to your previous paintings. The repetitive application of layers of paint has been replaced by an obsession with dots of silverpoint and coloured pencil. Could you describe your process and the significance of these dot-grids in works that are about colour and light?*

Duncan Bullen: I start with an aluminium panel on to which I apply layers of gesso, sanding each layer before applying the next. When I've applied an initial base, I then add a tint of colour to the gesso, say an ultramarine, to create a slightly smaller square of almost imperceptible colour within the panel. I then sand it back, before adding another colour, perhaps an emerald green, and then I sand that back. What you end up with is a very subtly tinted surface. The sanding is really important, it gives the sense of something coming through from underneath.

These squares of colour will then sit on the studio wall for a while, allowing me to become familiar with colour relations. I will then begin to populate the surface with varying weights of silverpoint dots, covering the pictorial field to form a matrix of marks that begin to develop a visual rhythm. The surface is articulated as much by the spaces between the dots, as by the dots themselves. The drawing is continued by the addition of coloured pencil and the specific structure of each drawing emerges during the making. These units of colour act as both the means of composition and the sensation of the visual encounter.

RD: *Each dot has a real sense of energy, almost a personality.*

DB: There are various stages in the making of the work and I proceed step by step. But, what really interests me is the way that one constructs a veil of marks, that in turn creates a space where colour generates a field of light - a visual energy, a pulse, a vibration...

RD: *From a distance, however, you're not aware of the dots or the structure. Instead you are enveloped by a sensation of indefinable colour and light, and a subtle sense of movement.*

DB: The dot's the key. When you stare at them you lose focus; the edges go, colour shifts and dances. It's an interesting paradox – the more I have enhanced the physicality of the making, the more they allude to the intangible and the ineffable. I am interested in colour that hovers on the edge of perception, emerges on the eye and in the mind only to retreat back into its own ground.

RD: *As you say, they've lost any sense of colour being attached to a form, instead colour is form. But whilst these colours may not be seeking to represent anything specific, do they have an external inspiration, or are they optical experiments?*

DB: I guess you could say it is a kind of 'Abstract Impressionism'. It has roots in the constantly changing light of the visible world – however, I am not seeking a literal depiction, a representation, but rather a visual correspondence to the way we experience colour as energy - constantly changing, in a state of flux, filled with patterns and rhythms and repetitions.

RD: *As you say, these are not static works.*

DB: No, however, there is an equilibrium, but they're certainly not static.

RD: *But then lights not static.*

DB: Paul Klee suggested that 'In the work of art, paths are laid out for the beholder's eye, which gropes like a grazing beast...the pictorial work springs from movement, it is itself fixated movement, and it is grasped in movement (eye muscles).'

RD: *Yes. It's both constant, and dynamic. In this small green drawing there is an echo of the DNA helix twist and spin that you find in James Hugonin's paintings. Do you find that different patterns produce different qualities of light?*

DB: If I try to impose something on the surface it fails very quickly. I find that when you are constantly responding to the construction; colour formations emerge, it's about being in tune to the practice - unlocking what is lying dormant, allowing the drawing to find itself. The pattern, which resembles the five on a dice, seems to radiate out from the centre, whereas when I use a chequerboard pattern, it seems to generate a more encompassing, all over, sense of light.

RD: *One seems to echo the shafts of sunlight that punctuate a sunny day, and the other, the subtle nuances of light that can be found on a cloudy day. There's no sense of a colour system then?*

DB: No, colour is elusive and fugitive. I like the fact that it's relative, affected by what's around it and always dependent upon its neighbour. I see colour and light as interchangeable; it's experiential, it seems to defy systems.

RD: *As you're inspired by natural light effects do you feel the need to use colours that are natural?*

DB: The colours I am using are vibrant yellows, blues, reds, violets and greens, but put together in small clusters, they are far from what one might term 'natural'. One might think of Monet, for instance, who was attempting to capture the evanescence of light, but the colours he used were not 'natural', but arranged in such a way that they evoke something that is true to a visual sensation. When colour is freed from having to describe something and is allowed to be itself, it has its own vitality. Colour has a suggestive potential.

RD: *Maybe what they are revealing is that light is about otherness.*

DB: Yes, I'd agree. The drawings offer visual equivalents to things seen and unseen. By accepting the transient nature of light and colour and making drawings that address perceptually these qualities - that change and evolve when you look at them, I am hoping that new relationships between the temporal and the eternal will emerge.

RD: *Painting has so often been about creating illusions of reality, but these drawings seem to have moved beyond that, they seem to be about creating reality, about generating light.*

DB: It is seeing the world as generative – a constant state of becoming. In previous work I was trying to depict light, now it's about creating a space for light to gather.