

THE JOY OF THE GRADIENT IN ITS PRINTED AND NATURAL FORMS

Sam Nias

'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead —his eyes are closed.'

Albert Einstein, 1931

I have long been fascinated by the relationship between colour gradients and nature and their place within it, especially when thinking about natural phenomena. This has formed the core of my practice as an artist and printmaker, which I have dedicated mainly to printing gradients, not only on paper but also on other substrates, to create sculptures or light installations.

Whether lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time to catch one of life's simplest pleasures - a rainbow or sunrise or adventurous enough to seek out one of life's great experiences, such as the northern lights, there is such joy, awe, and wonder to be found in absorbing these spectacles of light and colour. Spectacles of light and colour are natural phenomena created by science and circumstance, using light and colour as their medium so that Mother Nature can provide us with the most bewitching visual feasts, gradients being an ever-present part of these shows. Images 1 and 2 highlight examples of natural phenomena that some of us will have experienced firsthand but appear far more out of this world to some.

Another artist who explores themes around phenomena and nature using natural elements is Olafur Eliasson, illustrated in his piece ['Beauty'](#) (1993). Eliasson simulates natural phenomena similar to a *fire rainbow* in a gallery environment, allowing viewers to be as close to a natural rainbow as possible. Part of the magical allure of a rainbow in the wild is that they always seem just out of reach - a mirage or an illusion on the periphery of our realm. Interestingly, in the

case of Eliasson's work 'Beauty', the mechanisms involved in making a rainbow are laid bare for the viewer and yet do nothing to reduce its effect; I imagine the viewer to be just as enchanted by Eliasson's work as they would be stood outside in a field confronted with a rainbow. The beauty is in the simplicity of the events before them—the outcome belying the sum of its parts.

According to Dr Dachner Keltner, professor of psychology and director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center in his book "Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life," awe is a feeling we get when



Figure 1



Figure 2

we experience something vast and mysterious that transcends our understanding of the world and mentions eight sources where awe can be found: moral beauty, collective effervescence, nature, music, spirituality and religion, life and death, epiphany, and visual art.

When speaking about subjects such as 'awe', it is hard not only to mention the sublime. The subject of *Nature* and the *Sublime* are inextricably linked for any artist who tries to tackle them. Josef Albers, the constructivist and colour theorist, explains artists 'purpose: 'The purpose of art is to re-present nature, not represent it'. A sentiment I agree with is that I understand the beauty in the ultimate failure to replicate nature compared to the real thing. The 'search' for the sublime is another of humankind's quests that does not necessarily have to lead to completion.

The gradient in its natural and printed forms is the purest, most simplistic expression of colour. It can elicit pure, endless joy. So visually satisfying, nourishing for the soul, emotive in a childish manner. Permanent yet transient, opaque whilst translucent. Images 3, 4, & 5 show one of my works, 'Colourfield IV', which involves printing gradients onto clear perspex using tinted oil-based varnishes. The process involved printing many 'dummy' gradients onto newsprint until the gradient was utterly smooth and blemish-free. The newsprint was then swapped out for a piece of perspex to execute a one-off screen-print onto the perspex. I went through many painstaking attempts in order to achieve the best result. The final piece appears as sheets of tinted glass. These panels can then be used to create various forms of sculpture using natural light to 'activate' them, bringing them to life and making them more dynamic whilst giving them a natural element.

In contrast, two colours side by side maybe completely mundane combinations we see daily without them even registering in our conscience (as I sit here looking at a stack of tastefully coloured but unremarkable box folders). However, colour was critical for the work of constructivist and colour theorist Josef Albers in his series '[Homage to the Square](#)' (1949-1976)

Unlike Albers, two colours merged through a seamless transition are, to me, more seductive, emotive, and poetic. In some cases, such as artist [James Turrell](#)'s manipulation of light and space to create works ranging from immersive installations to wall-based light works, enveloping the viewer in colour borders on the spiritual, I would argue.

The transition between the solid-state colours and the middle section, or 'the blend,' of a gradient is magic, and it is quite hard to quantify, even unfathomable.

Similar to exploring colours across the night sky, the transition or 'the blend' transcends the sum of its parts much like the natural phenomena referenced here previously. It is irresistible, holding a



Figure 3

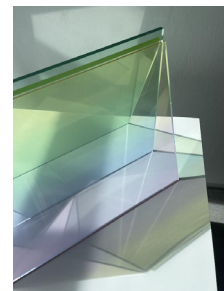


Figure 4



Figure 5

gravitational pull like a singularity at the centre of a black hole. It is here each colour is lost in a haze, trying to find its way back to its more solid foundations before giving way to becoming something new, something neither here nor there, lost on the spectrum.

The most seductive gradients have the widest blends, no discernible defining features, just a stream of space and colour. A gradient must start with two defining colours, the start and the end, but one also needs to merge the colours in the middle to achieve a satisfactory blend and, in doing so a third colour. A classic vertical gradient would include two colours as a starting point on the left and right hand side of the screen. To begin the process, the ink is applied side by side on the screen. The printer can give the blend a helping hand by roughly mixing the two colours at the point they meet in the centre of the screen. Then the blend begins, which is just a repetition of pulling the screen onto newsprint or any other scrap paper until one is happy with the blend's smoothness and width. One can adapt the width here by continuing the pulls, and the blend should get gradually wider. Factors such as the viscosity of the ink will play a part here; thinner ink will blend quicker but yield less control and thicker ink, and vice versa. It highlights the transient nature and adds to the mystique of the gradient as it will not remain in the sweet spot for long, so when it is at its most visually pleasing, it is incumbent on the printer to execute the final print (or prints) making it hard to do in large multiples making the ones one does print more special. There is also great anticipation of never quite knowing how the print will turn out, how the colours will mix or how the weight of the gradient will land. A perfect gradient reads like a good story with a beginning, a middle and an end.

CONCLUSION

During a recent car journey with my partner, the sun broke out from a heavy period of rain, and the most distinct rainbow appeared before us. The pure, visceral pleasure from this experience had not lessened since I first remember seeing such a wonder. These pleasures are timeless, surviving age, and certainly capable of making us feel childlike in our excitement about the encounter. In the same way that we never tire of witnessing natural spectacles, I never tire of printing gradients - endless combinations, forever enthralling and constantly satiating. There is always a sense of surprise at the outcome, something unexpected. There is such beauty in the mystery of not knowing all the answers.

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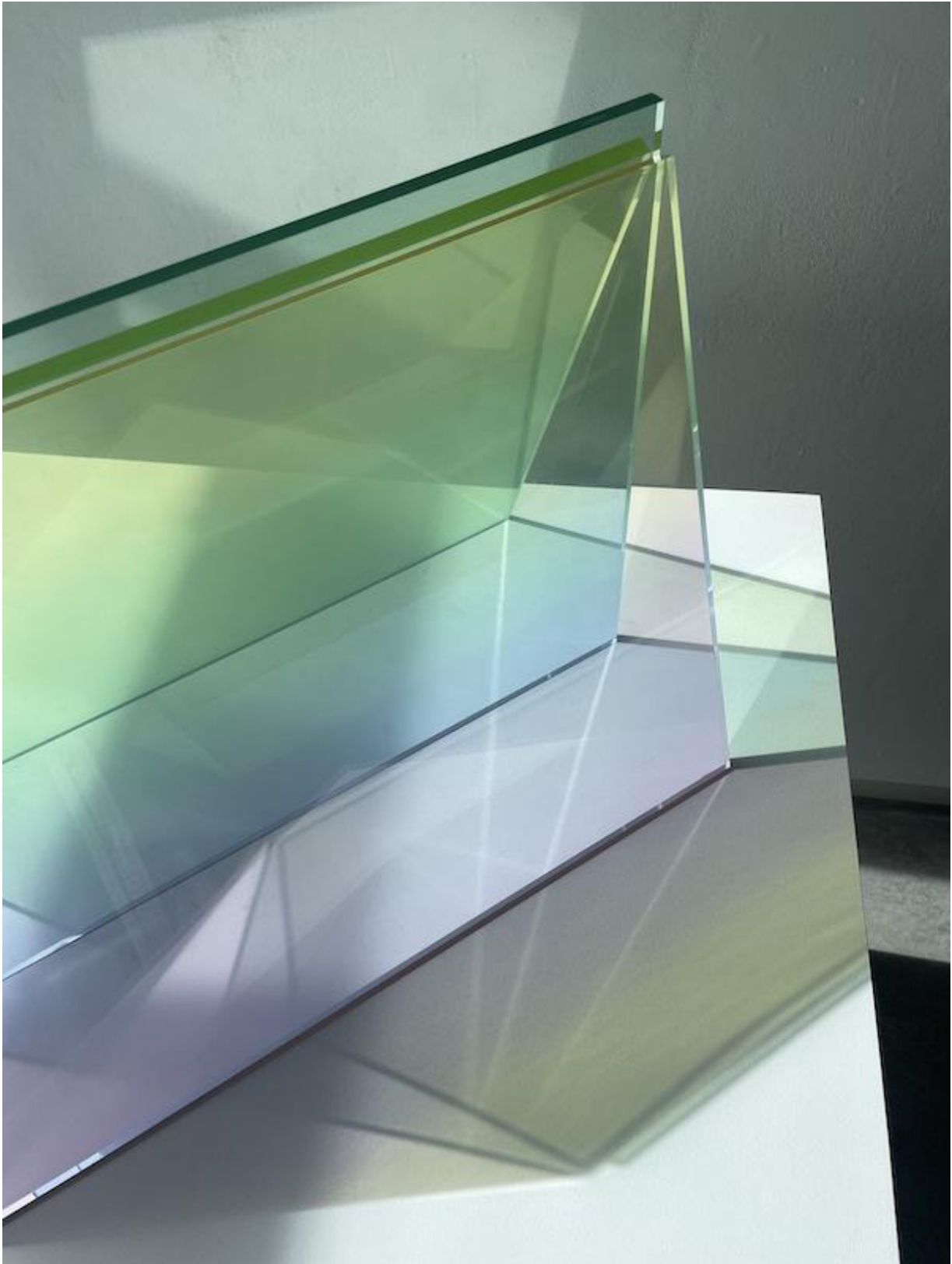
Tate Gallery <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime>

IMAGE GALLERY





Samuel Nias, Colour Field IV, Screenprint on Perspex



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