

# POETICS IN COLOUR (FOR YOUR EYES ONLY)

Ria Czerniak-LeBov

## ABSTRACT

The way in which we encounter imagery continues to change with each new technology. From etchings to billboards, mobile photography to digital editing software, the materiality of colour is utterly transformed. *Poetics in Colour (For Your Eyes Only)* is a meditation on the subjectivity of colour across physical and digital mediums. In this essay, Ria Czerniak-LeBov explores glitch, process, synaesthesia and affect as she contextualises recent developments within her printmaking practice. Here, she revisits the simple tech failure which marked a departure from her signature monochromatic palette, leading Ria to re-evaluate her relationship and interactions with colour across contemporary visual culture.

As the artist traverses these technologies, imagery and colour are transformed from pigment to light, CMYK to RGB, from print to screen and back again. These images are not an attempt at faithful reproduction. Rather, they are musings on fidelity and singularity. These works acknowledge our entanglement within the physical, virtual and digital worlds we inhabit. The nature and quality of our engagement with colour is contingent upon the medium through which it reaches us. Do not adjust your screens. These interfaces are almost as unique as the eyes that gaze upon them. Whatever way these colours reach your rods and cones is yours, and yours alone.

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'Colour as the object is earthly material stuff. Colour as subject arches over everything like a rainbow, from cosmic rays to the minerals in the earth to what happens inside your eyes, from symbology to philosophical problems, from phenomena to noumena.'  
 Amy Sillman, *On Colour*, 2016

As a child, billboards mesmerised me. From afar, these photographic images resembled my perception of reality. Of course, as I walked

closer and closer, the image came undone. There was a billboard of monumental scale in my neighbourhood, the lower half at eye level. I craned my neck towards it until all that appeared were dots, the image reduced to pure pigment. Overlapping and abstracted, the dots danced before me, mechanical pointillism that challenged the trust my mind had always had in my eyes. This was no longer an image but displayed the constituent parts of an image. Skin, no longer the stuff of tan and freckle, veins and bruise, now appeared as vibrant pinks and greens, blues and yellows. This preoccupation with the dissolution of illusion, the coming apart of matter and meaning,

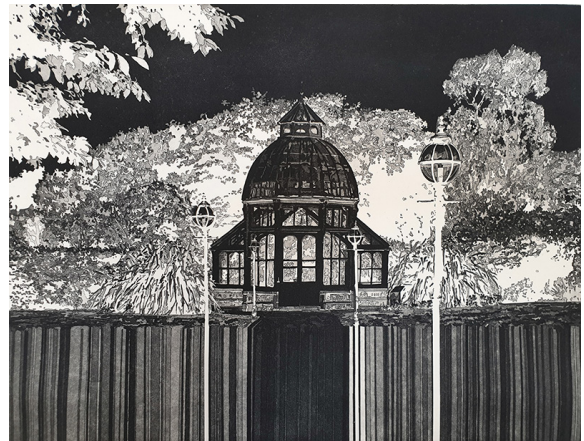


Figure 1



Figure 2

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### Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Conduit, 44(w) x 34(h) cm, Etching and Aquatint, 2022, Ria Czerniak-LeBov

Figure 2: Detail, Digital Print-out, 2023

only deepened over time. Whether such meditations manifest with academic rigour or experimental materialism, the origins of my curiosity remain those of a child immersed in pure optical sensation.

There is an art to *noticing*. I have long considered it to be the defining act of good practice. Some artists notice the particulars of facial expressions or the formal properties of everyday objects. Others notice the unique sensation of their interactions with materials, the physical properties of ink or the marks that humans leave behind. My practice focussed on the built environment and the transformative power of light and shade against the architecture for the longest time. Over the years, my interest shifted. I realised that I was, in fact, concerned with the ways we record light and space, the mediated experiences and technologies through which we view the places we think we know. I began to notice inconsistencies and slippages. Cracks appeared in the facades of seemingly seamless media, revealing the mechanics of their construction. As I passed imagery back and forth from analogue to digital and back again, I began to explore the limits of each medium, moments of failure or glitch waiting to be noticed.

During this period, colour made a surprising intervention in my otherwise monochromatic printmaking practice. I had photographed a striking Victorian glass house, only to find myself digitally manipulating it as I navigated a new image editing app on my mobile phone. I inverted the palette, creating an uncanny nocturne. I selected a filter named V-Extrude, and suddenly, static lines appeared. My image broke down into tonal information strips resembling the aquatint test strips pinned on my studio wall. I etched this altered image, my hand mimicking each jagged pixelation to form the contours of my fragmented foliage. This highly detailed print, however, did not easily allow the strangeness of these mediated marks to be seen. I photographed the final etching and decided to print it digitally at A0 scale, hoping to give these details scale to breathe. Blown up tenfold, each line became a border, each leaf a territory. However, it was not the scale which had transformed this image. By chance, the studio technician had forgotten to change the settings to *black and white*, and the resulting print-out bore pastel stripes throughout, which is evidence that the colour print cartridges were running low. It took a moment to process how and why my black and white image had suddenly been colourised.

While the intaglio ink I had used was carbon black, the warm white Somerset paper and the natural light of my photograph had added a range of subtle digital frequencies imperceptible to my own cones and rods. However, they detected and amplified by their journey from pigment to data to pixel to RGB on the studio monitor. In the physical universe, my ghostly glasshouse emerged reborn, the image ruptured by perfectly arranged bars and lines. These mechanical strips of washed-out cyan, magenta and yellow punctured the velvety night sky, layering glitch upon glitch as my etched extrusions now came apart, revealing their digital constitution.



Figure 3

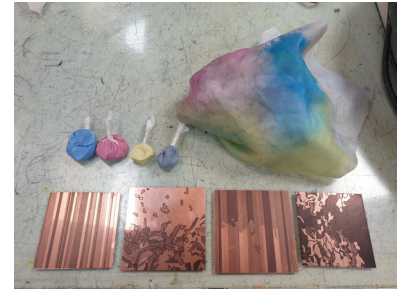


Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Stopping out with bitumen during the aquatint process  
 Figure 4: CMYK Multi-plate printing from etched and aquatinted copper plates  
 Figure 5: Afterglow, 12(w) x 13(h) cm, Etching and Aquatint, 2023, Ria Czerniak-LeBov

I took the print-outs, which are no longer the stuff of trees and structures or of pixels or glitches but now simply arrangements of pigment on paper. I carried these images back to where the process had begun, from digital back to analogue. By etching hard ground lines into copper, each striped plate was incrementally aquatinted, giving them a range of densities to hold translucent inks. As I painted each area with bitumen, the associated colours existed only in my mind's eye. So often, our matrices remain monochrome throughout much of the etching process. The printmaker's mind equates bitumen with the protection of lighter tones, while deeply etched, aquatinted copper is seen not for its own material qualities but for its potential as a pigment carrier. As we develop our matrices, printmakers must constantly hold on to multiple visual experiences simultaneously, that which we see and foresee. We see copper, ground or bitumen while foreseeing a material's capacity to hold colour.

So began a period defined by stripes yet stripped of technological context. After all, my understanding of physics is poor, and my attempts at comprehending this cross-medium failure are speculative at best. Instead, I simply witness transmutation, watching as hues, tones, and opacities present themselves from every perceptible thing and non-thing, pigment or light. This meditation on colour caused me to reassess my lifelong love of black and white, my concept of nothingness and everythingness. The stuff of black holes, of material absence, starkly contrasts with the rich, inky saturations of multi-plate etching when each colour collaborates conspiratorially to obliterate any trace of pure pigment.

Meanwhile, though my monitor gathers the full spectrum in its efforts to present me with white light, only the paper itself is white as images translate from pixel to print-out. White is the absence of information, present through omission. So, we are presented with a paradox across mediums, a computational chasm bridged by perception. After all, my eyes are undiscerning about the physical absences and presence of colour. They simply interpret red as red and yellow as yellow, no matter the physical qualities of pigment or light. They respond physiologically, pupils dilating and constricting, sending sensations of warmth, disgust, pleasure or overwhelm coursing through my neural pathways.

As imagery is passed from physical or mechanical to digital and back to physical, works are estranged and reacquainted with their former incarnations. At the most cellular, physical and experiential levels, screen-based RGB seems to transform as it morphs with the touch of a button into CMYK. We balance and tweak, cross-referencing original or mechanical artworks and their digital referents, attempting fidelity across formats and file types so viewers may experience imagery as close to its intended hue, temperature or chroma. Infidelity marks the creation of a second artwork, distinct through digitisation, synthetic simulacrum, as unique to each screen as to each human beholder.

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Months after making them, a fellow printmaker looked at one of these striped prints, framed and hung on the gallery wall. She paused before declaring in earnest that she could taste the colours, that the flavours of Neapolitan ice cream flooded her taste buds as her eyes rested upon those translucent pastels. I knew what she meant. There are shades of pink that palpably fizz upon my tongue, affective memories of sherbet that activate my salivary glands decades after that flavour dispersed. My colleague's synaesthesia was apt in ways I had not yet considered. While my literal employment of cyan, magenta, and black required little consideration, the y of my analogue CMYK gave me pause for thought. My instincts had drawn me to citrus, a zingy freshness that I, too, had attributed a flavour. Lemon yellow, not primrose or ochre, not sweet like apricot but sharp like Sicilian granite.

Perhaps you, the reader, look at these words and images on your laptop or phone. Maybe they will someday appear in a physical publication, digitally printed. Just as your experience of every physical hue and tone is subjective, the colours on your screen or in your hand are yours alone, absorbed as they are by your eyes only in this time and space. Perhaps they are composed of light alone or the result of inkjet pigment spritzed across identical reproductions. Maybe the jagged lines, the gentle blend of one hue into the next, call to mind the hands that etched, inked and printed the matrices, or maybe the bodily digits that handled those inks are now digitally imperceptible. Perhaps the palette is skewed by your light source or a crack in your screen from the time your phone fell from your pocket as you leaned over. These images need not be faithful. They are not attempting to represent an original. I hope that they continue to be transformed with every technology and every pair of hands they pass through, evolving and dissolving like gelato on your tongue.

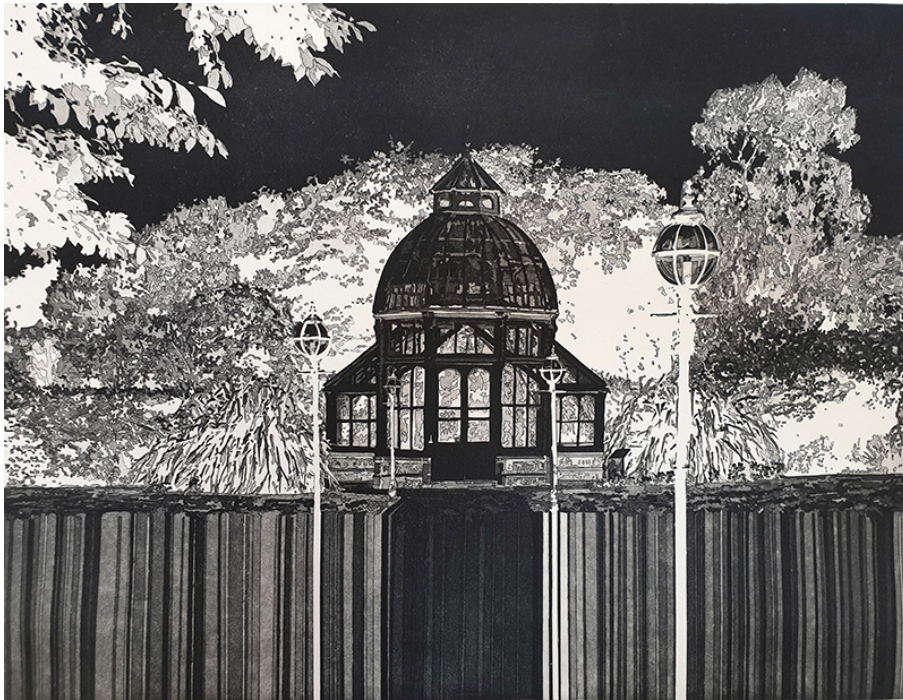
## **AUTHOR**

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Ria Czerniak-LeBov is a printmaker, writer and curator. She is a full-time member of Graphic Studio Dublin, working predominantly in etching and aquatint. Both her artistic and academic practices explore the relationship between analogue and digital technologies, rarity value systems and expanded print practices. Her etchings have been exhibited at Royal Hibernian Academy, Royal Ulster Academy, National Botanic Gardens, Office of Public Works and Trinity College Dublin. As a writer, her work has been published by Printmaking Today, Pressing Matters and IMPACT Printmaking Journal. She is currently a part-time lecturer at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin

IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 2: Detail, Digital Print-out, 2023



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