THE EVOLUTION OF COLOUR AND MUSIC IN AUSTRALIAN PAINTING

Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin’s experiments in colour-music arrived at a time in the history of Australian art when an antipathy towards Modernism was on the rise. In contrast to the cultural conditions found in Europe which provided individuals with support through a network of the avant-garde, Australian artists who chose to work outside of the parameters of pictorial myth-based nationalism were continuously isolated by the local art establishment. Sadly the problems that beset de Maistre and Wakelin through what might accurately be described as the colour-music debacle are not isolated events in the history of Australian Art. Unfortunately this situation has repeated itself until the present day. Echoes can be found in Bernard Smith’s response to the rise of Abstract Expressionism via the Antipodean Manifesto as well as the wholesale historical neglect of truly great artists such as Tony McIlgick and the more recent rise in the patronage of traditional art prizes that attract large sums of money towards the promotion of traditional artistic genres.

This essay discusses a series of questions that aim to qualify the impact that de Maistre and Wakelin’s experiments in colour-music have had on Modern and Contemporary Australian Art. What is colour-music and how can it be interpreted from a contemporary perspective? How did de Maistre and Wakelin perceive and respond to the negative criticisms that were generated by their colour-music exhibition? In what ways did de Maistre and Wakelin react to the more conservative position after the 1939 exhibition? Are any traces of the colour-music experiments to be found in de Maistre and Wakelin’s later works? Has colour-music had any influence on subsequent generations of Australian artists?

Colour-music was a complex syncretic system that went far beyond a superficial analysis of the interrelationships of colour and music. In reality de Maistre and Wakelin’s innovative system of progressive thinking developed a visual language that surpassed the conventional logic of pictorial representation. Either by accident or design de Maistre and Wakelin had created what contemporary theorists of abstraction such as Frances Colpitt have defined as a “system of opinion”. According to Colpitt systems are frequently developed by artists using abstraction to express opinions that are often related to personal or social issues. From this position abstraction is best understood to be an alternative type of representation rather than a form of non-representation. Similarly de Maistre and Wakelin’s experiments can be seen as a critical polemic that addressed a broad range of issues relating to philosophy, spirituality, aesthetics, fashion and design as well as abstraction and the interrelationship of colour and music.

Throughout the twentieth century abstract art evolved through three main phases, namely the metaphysical, the formal and the subjective. As with much Theosophically inspired thinking of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries colour-music was a combination of these three traditions. Unfortunately conservatives such as Norman Lindsay would have interpreted colour-music as a "cure" because it was based on an "intellectual conviction".3

The fall-out after the colour-music exhibition had repercussions that affected de Maistre and Wakelin for the rest of their lives, as noted by Leslie Walton in his book on Roland Wakelin. Both artists were labelled as being decadent, eccentric and perhaps worst of all effeminate and a complete lack of peer group and institutional support must have compounded their sense of isolation. De Maistre and Wakelin who had completely different personalities coped with what must have been a massive rejection in very different ways.

For many years I have been haunted by the late photographs of Roy de Maistre. These images were taken in the artist’s London studio towards the end of his life in the late 1940s. They depict a person whose face appears mask-like, emotionless, his mouth and eyes form thin slits in the roughly hewn surface of a face framed in the baldness. De Maistre must have been bitter because he felt that his country, the art world and his lovers had abandoned him. One photograph by J.S. Lewinski in 1960 depicts a studio interior where a triller-lined face curtain barely shuts out the energy and vitality of the outside world. There are no vestiges of Swinging London in this studio, in exile de Maistre appears to have resigned from the modern world.

After colour-music the styles used in de Maistre’s paintings swing like a pendulum, erratically moving from sedate modes of conventional representation to aggressive forms of brightly coloured analytical Cubism. An example of what resembles an almost post-modernist use of stylistic appropriation is contained within his portraits. Examples of this type of approach can be found in his Portrait of Ann, Lady Butler (1935) and Ann, Lady Butler (1954). The earlier work is a conventional representation of the sitter while the later work is a geometric remix of the original. These paintings typify the almost schizophrenic attitude that de Maistre must have had in relation to his own personal history as an artist as well as the desire to be acknowledged by the establishment while retaining his restless quest for innovation. Throughout his life de Maistre often resorted to quoting, borrowing from formal and conceptual techniques and methods that had their origins in the colour-music experiments. Another example is the way that many of the colour-music experiments feature as a focal point in the paintings of his studio interiors. These contradictory and unpredictable shifts in style mirror the tumultuous struggle that characterised much of his personal life.

On the one hand de Maistre was a highly conventional man who adhered to a belief in Catholicism while promoting his familial connection to the Royal Family. On the other he was an outsider who continuously struggled with his homosexuality, poverty and even the spelling of his own name. Interestingly de Maistre was an influence on the creative development of younger gay men including Francis Bacon and Patrick White. However, the recent film on Bacon makes no mention of de Maistre and David Marr’s definitive biography of White pays scant attention to him. Notwithstanding, traces of de Maistre’s influence remain embedded within the brushstrokes, palettes and compositions of Bacon’s and similarly within the colour allusions of White’s prose. Significantly de Maistre was discovered to become an exile leaving Australia for a second time in 1930 never to return.

The post-1919 photographs and paintings of Wakelin reveal a very different story. A decade after his collaboration in the colour-music experiments Wakelin returned from Europe to settle in Sydney and withdrew into the confines and consolation of a suburban married life. Unfortunately for de Maistre his homosexuality prohibited him from this option which would have been a much easier alternative to enduring four decades of hardship in London. Many of the photographs of Wakelin from the 1930s onwards depict him attending family picnics or discussing art with friends including Lloyd Rees in scenic locations on Sydney’s lower North Shore.

By the 1930s Wakelin’s art had become increasingly traditional, much to the approval of his former critics. Many of Wakelin’s paintings and drawings from this period onwards illustrate his domestic life. Typically many of Wakelin’s images depict his wife Estelle or Weekly Bay. From the early middle-age onwards Wakelin slipped into the persona of “Rolly” and he was widely known as a jovial suburban artist who produced what can be best described as amateur art. Not surprisingly however Wakelin must have longed for his days as a young experimental artist. Remarkably a close inspection of his later work reveals the presence of traces of colour-music. An example is his depiction of a newly constructed building in the city titled Qantas House, Sydney (1957). Superficially this painting is just another traditional cityscape yet beyond the Victorian tenements and shop-fronts are traces of what appear to be the remnants of a colour-music experiment that has been encrypted into the gleaming façade of an ultra modern building. Based on these observations it is reasonable to surmise that de Maistre and Wakelin’s withdrawal from their innovative position was borne out of necessity rather than choice.

Until now the general consensus has been that the early experiments in colour-music have had little or no influence on subsequent generations of Australian artists. This myth is repeated in Heather Johnson’s first book on Roy de Maistre, The Australian Years: 1894-1930, which suggests that experiments in colour-music had no sustained influence on the development of Australian art.4 One of the most remarkable things about influence is that it is often delayed. By the 1950s a new generation of Australian artists had abandoned representational painting and sculpture for abstraction. By this time

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The John Nixon 2007 graphic notation for music composition 3-D COLOUR GROUPS 45 x 60 cm Installation photograph, painting leaning on Yamaha Electric Piano with colour-coded keys (recreate on MDF) Photographed in the artist’s house, Biet Hall, 2008. Image courtesy the artist.
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By the 1930s Wakelin's art had become increasingly traditional, much to the approval of his former critics. Many of Wakelin's paintings and drawings from this period onwards illustrate his domestic life. Typically many of Wakelin's images depict his wife Estelle or his daughter Joan. In 1935 onwards Wakelin slipped into the persona of "Rolly" and he was widely known as a jovial suburban artist who produced what can be best described as amateur art. Not surprisingly however Wakelin must have longed for his days as a young experimental artist. Remarkably a close inspection of his later work reveals the presence of traces of colour-music. An example is his depiction of a newly constructed building in the city titled Qantas House, Sydney (1957). Superficially this painting is just another traditional cityscape yet beyond the Victorian tenements and shop-fronts are traces of what appear to be the remnants of a colour-music experiment that has been encrypted into the gleming facade of an ultra modern building. Based on these observations it is reasonable to surmise that de Maistre and Wakelin's withdrawal from their innovative position was borne out of necessity rather than choice.

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One of the most remarkable things about influence is that it is often delayed. By the 1950s a new generation of Australian artists had abandoned representational painting and sculpture for abstraction. By this time John Nixon's colour-music composition (for electric piano) is an example of a modernist graphic notation for music composition (for electric piano) which is an example of a modernist graphic notation for music composition (for electric piano). Photographed in the artist's house, Bitter Hill, 2008. Image courtesy the artist.
abstraction which was mainly being practiced in Sydney presented a genuine threat to the traditional genres of landscape and portrait painting. By combining an interest in Zen, gesture and jazz, artists such as Peter Upward pushed abstraction to new heights. During the 1960s and into the 1970s Upward worked closely with jazz musicians occasionally exhibiting his works in night clubs in Kings Cross. After his return from London in 1971 Upward worked closely with Horst Liepolt, an influential manager of the local jazz music industry who sold paintings by consignment. Many of the titles of Upward’s paintings made specific references to music including Synophsion a major work produced in 1959. The marriage of Abstract Expressionism with the concept of improvised music opened the door to what was to become the next generation of colour-musicians.

Colour Field painters including David Aspden combined the use of colour and music in new and innovative ways. Aspden’s life-long interest in music enabled him to develop an individual system of colour and form that made reference to a variety of musical traditions. Although Aspden’s main interest was jazz he was also inspired by classical music in particular composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach. Aspden’s choice of colours and formal compositions were based around a process that he referred to as “time tuning”. This system resembled Bach’s elaborate musical compositions and his careful use of colour and form resembles the musical techniques such as counterpoint and fugue. This enabled Aspden to produce large works such as Bach’s Blues that contains a vast selection of shades and tones of blue to create an overall composition that is constructed through a system of subtle formal variations.

Since the late 1970s John Nixon has developed an ongoing dialogue between monochrome painting and punk and experimental music. Within the tradition of painting the monochrome still represents a radical break from pictorial art in that it emphasises the difference between paintings and pictures. The main strategies that monochromes and punk and experimental music as well as readymades and conceptual art share are that they critically engage with the conventions associated with authorship, originality and technique. Some of Nixon’s recent paintings from the EPW Polychrome group of works such as Colour Music (Music Composition) of which over twenty-five works have been produced during 2007-2008 have developed well beyond the conventional sensory associations that have previously connected colour to music. These paintings that have been constructed using coded shapes and colour stripes are designed to primarily be read as graphic notation colour scores and as a result can be played by musicians. Through the use of pictorial symbols Nixon has become a composer by producing non-objective paintings that answer the central question that de Maistre and Wakelin struggled with in 1919, can a painting be performed?

Another innovative development in the history of Australian colour-music is to be found in the work of John Aslanidis. As with de Maistre, Aslanidis was a student at Sydney’s Conservatorium of Music before going to art school. Since the early 1980s he has continuously explored the relationship between optical and sonic art through a detailed examination of the patterns of waves, frequencies and vibrations. For Aslanidis the aim of painting is to create chromatic intensities that resemble the experience of listening to music. Through the study of art historical styles such as Futurism and Synchronism Aslanidis has been able to explore the history of multi-sensory techniques including synaesthesia. The connection between form and content in his work is crucial in that the compositions are qualified by their cultural associations. Aslanidis is an active participant in the field of electronic music whose work engages with sub-genres of electronic including dub, minimal techno and hip hop. As a visual artist much of his inspiration has come from listening to live music and participating in the culture that surrounds it.

In retrospect the obstacles that confronted de Maistre and Wakelin in the development of their philosophical system are reminiscent of the difficulties that contemporary painters working in Australia face today. The cultural expectations surrounding the role of painting remain largely unchanged since 1919.

Christopher Dean

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