

Cooking with Colour

Robin Richmond, August 15, 2021



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1. *Occitanie* 59 x 39 cm 2. *Terra Incognita* 20 x 30 cm 3. *Green Fuse* 20 x 30 cm
All mixed media on handmade paper

“Painting is like cooking. You add, you adjust. You add. You adjust. You say “Why did you put that colour there?” I say “it just felt good”.

The world famous chef, Jacques Pépin, in conversation

Lately, I've been painting on big pieces of paper, tearing them up, and dropping the shards into a big old chest under the window in my studio. Then, I've dived into my chest which looks like a convolution of a whirling dervish's manic episode, a lucky dip, and the after-effect of an angry 3-year-old's temper tantrum. I then calmly, judiciously, and elegantly reconfigure the shards of paper to make paintings. This is a new way of working for me and it feels liberating. I'm not sure where it's going, or even if I will stick with this new system, but post lockdown and pandemic-related sadness and *ennui*, it feels energising. I can't keep out of the studio and am sneaking up there at all hours of the day and night. No one is looking over my shoulder, and there are no solo shows on the horizon, so it's like being a child again. I've shown these new paintings to about three people. It's art for art's sake.

Whatever.

Creation, destruction and creation. The process has collage elements but that's not quite all of it. It's not arbitrary. There's lots of planning involved. The paper has been pre-prepared to be good to go. I know what colours I'll need, and I make sure the ingredients are all there for the grabbing. There is lots of over-painting. Lots of archival glue, lots of expensive gold leaf, and lots of pigment. Mainly lots of mess.

What this process reminds me of the most is cooking. You set out to make a dish. If it's me that's cooking, there is a lot of inverted snobbery and arrogance about not following a recipe, though I confess to owning and reading a huge number of cookbooks. I grow my own herbs and I use them with a knowledge of how they will taste, that corresponds to my deep knowledge of colour and how it works. It's often said that when Claude Monet had cataracts in old age his habitual subtle palette grew suddenly fiery and wild. Manganese violet, cobalt blues, and creamy pinks turned to red ochre and vermilion.

All because he couldn't see properly.

That makes no sense to me. Any artist worth their salt (hah - cooking again) knows how to mix colours in their sleep. And what each constituent colour will do to its fellow colour, either mixed or adjacent. The labels on the tubes are quite helpful too....

In my kitchen /studio I use a huge variety of herbs (my prepared colours) and spices (my prepared scraps of paper) and it's all meant to coalesce into something greater than its parts (the painting). If it works, it's very like making a satisfactory meal. Sometimes it just is right and the balance works and the ingredients have an organic logic. This is a good day. But the paintings can get overcooked and I'm growing aware that my Mediterranean upbringing leads to a penchant for over spicing.

It's always on the verge.

I like the verge. The liminal. The edges of things. These new painting are about Byzantine mosaic, ancient rocks, the history of minerals, shooting stars, mining precious metals and collecting jewels. About pieces of matter.

Maybe that's why I'm using pieces of colour.

I also enjoy the danger of this technique. The fact that I can ruin everything. Like with cooking there is no real way back. Fresh lemon juice can rescue a salty sauce and *creme fraiche* is this cook's best friend, but there is nothing - absolutely nothing - that can rescue one of these paintings that has gone bad. Many of them have.

Thank goodness that I don't work in a restaurant.