

Kamila Benayada

## Colour as text in the paintings of Stuart Davis.

American painter Stuart Davis can be considered as a ‘writer-artist’: he developed a body of theoretical work, in which he analyses colour, establishing a colour theory which contributes to an aesthetics based on balance, rhythm, and structure. In his paintings, colour becomes an element of change, of evolution, creating polyphony, counterpoint, and transformation within works and in series of works. But as Davis uses his environment to find the stimulus that will lead him to create a work of art, he is also confronted by events that change his use of colour: colour becomes ideological as art theory and current events mix in the artist’s mind, and then in his work: colour, then, goes beyond the optical, it is something that comes out of a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial society that insists on keeping colours apart. Painting against this backdrop, the artist uses colour (as pigment) to make a stand on colour (as race). Texts, ideas jotted down in Davis’s *Notebooks* suggest that text (on the canvas, off the canvas, and the subtext of contemporary events) informs the different layers of meaning in the painting, and the different interpretations of colour that the artist points to.

### 1. Davis’s colour-theory: defining ‘color-shape’ or ‘color-space’ in words and paintings.

In the 1920s, Stuart Davis started to elaborate an art theory in his writings (in his notebooks, daybooks, but also in calendars and in full articles), which can be seen as his personal definition of modern art, and which included a reflection on colour and its role in a modern painting. Davis’s use of and writings on colour indicate that colour, had various functions and senses for him, ranging from optical, to material, to emotional, and to structural. But these different understandings of colour and its place in art do not really compete, nor does one take precedence over the others. All of these ways of understanding colour are related: colour is multiple. In his 1922 notebooks, he explained:

[...] [P]ainting is *an art of color* and that means that a finished work will appeal to the spectator by the *coordination of colored shapes* placed in *logical order* on the canvas. [...] There is a dominant color to which all the other colors bear a simple *numerical relation* to one another.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘ART’, 30 Dec. 1922, *Notebook*, reproduced in Diane Kelder, ed., *Stuart Davis, a Documentary Monograph*, pp.34-35. Italics mine.

There are a number of words in this quotation that deserve to be noted: first Davis considers that painting is an art of colour, not of drawing, or of representation: colour is the foundation of painting as an art form. Colour can contribute to the appeal of a work of art; it has to be controlled, and used in an ordered, logical, and even numerical, construction that is the modern painting. Even though it grounds a painting, it does not exist in and of itself, it is not independent, it is one of the contributing elements in the work of art, which, for Davis, is an almost scientific organisation of space on the canvas.

So colour is used as a medium, a middle element, one of the means available to a painter. As medium, colour is texture<sup>2</sup>, and Davis explored the effects of thickness of paint on canvas, as the ground (canvas or paper) altered the colour perceived by the eye. Colour perceived is thus the result of an interaction between background and the coat of paint applied on that ground.

In 1923, he wrote: 'If a red plane be placed on a white background the red will have the relative value of dark. If it be placed on a complementary green background light and dark value may be said to be equal. If it be placed on a black background its value will be light.'<sup>3</sup> Perception changes, as does value: colour is not fixed, it is not absolute, it is what we perceive it to be, and that perception can be modified by its treatment. From there, Davis goes on to another definition of colour, where colour is light:

VISUAL ART EXISTS THROUGH LIGHT, whether in black and white or in color one is always dealing in light. LIGHT, WEIGHT, COLOR, THESE ARE ALL SYNONYMOUS TERMS TO DESCRIBE THE SAME QUALITY OF LIFE THAT MAKES A PICTURE LIVE<sup>4</sup>.

Colour and light are not opposites, they are the same in that they have the same function: to bring the painting alive for the viewer. The distinction between colour and light does not apply: colour is both optical and material, concrete; it is a medium in the same way as the canvas is a concrete medium. As texture, it interacts with the texture of the background, paper or canvas. As light, it can be perceived differently depending on the context in which it is placed (the context being the surrounding colours, and the ground). In 1940, Davis created his own version of Philipp Otto Runge's 1810 'colour sphere': the Colour Cube. In this cube, Davis integrates various hues between extremes of black and white.

---

2 'Color must be thought of as texture which automatically allows one to visualize it in terms of space. Aside from this it has not meaning', Stuart Davis, in: 'Recent Painting in Oil and Watercolor', exh.cat. Downtown Gallery, NY, 1931, in Kelder, p.111.

3 'The Process of Painting', *Notebooks*, 20 April 1923, in Kelder, p.49.

4 'ART', p.37

The hues range from yellow to orange to red to violet to blue and green. He was trying to see how the perception of colours changes according to the context in which the colour is placed. In 1950, he wrote:

Every time you use a color you create a space relationship. It is impossible to put two colors together, even at random, without setting up a number of other events. Both colors have a relative size: either they are the same size or they are not. And they are the same shape or they are not the same shape. They also have, always and automatically, a positional relationship to some necessary, basic, coordinative referent. So the notion that thinking of color as a thing in itself seemed inadequate. For my own personal use I simply called the things that happen when you use two colors, and the process of drawing and painting, a color-space event.<sup>5</sup>

The 'color-space event' is the result of the effects of contact: two colours or black and white, put side by side, relate, they are 'coordinated' (co-ordinated, combined and ordered) to create a visual effect, which is perceived by the viewer, and that perception is an event: perception itself is the effect of contact, between the viewer's gaze and the composition.

This idea (that a colour can only work as a coordinate) links painting to music. Davis uses the same vocabulary when talking about music and about colour: when writing on jazz, he mentions the 'numerical precisions of the Negro piano players in the Negro saloons'<sup>6</sup>. His colour combinations are also called 'colour intervals'<sup>7</sup> or 'optical intervals'<sup>8</sup>, where colours are related to one another in a scale defined in his 'Color Cube'. The scale establishes a matrix for colour interaction, to create emotions.<sup>9</sup> In 1939, he wrote: 'The tonal intervals of music have their counterpoint in painting in intervals of tone, color, contrast, size, and direction.'<sup>10</sup> Colours, brought together on the canvas, work as notes or instruments might, simultaneously, to create harmony. As in jazz, colours, like the sounds produced by different instruments, are juxtaposed and superimposed, seemingly independent, but coherent as a whole.

---

5 Quoted in John R. Lane: 'Stuart Davis in the 1940s', in *Stuart Davis, American Painter*, ed. Lowery Stokes Sims, exh.cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991, p.71.

6 Stuart Davis: 'Autobiography', New York: American Artists Group, 1945, repr. in Kelder, p.23-24

7 *ibid.*, p. 24

8 Interview with James Elliott, Spring 1961, archives of Earl Davis, available online.

9 'Only through the employment of color shapes and scales would one get the closest approximation of the strength of emotion felt by the artist', Stuart Davis Papers (SDP), 5 March 1923, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums.

10 Notes on WNYC Mural, 23 March 1939, in Kelder, p.12.

And this in turn creates depth. Colour combinations define Davis's three-dimensional pictorial practice: juxtaposition of hues creates illusory depth or brings shapes to the foreground, much in the same way as lines or drawing create illusory depth through the use of diagonals.

If the artist is working in color every color that he puts on the canvas creates a degree of relief or recession. There is no such thing as a two-dimensional picture. For if it has not at least two tones it cannot exist and the mere presence of these two tones means that a statement of light and shade has been made. Light and shade means third dimension.<sup>11</sup>

So basically, colours can only work as colours if they are paired, or if they work in a group, as colour is a reactive element, reacting to place and to context. And this reaction allows the artist to create illusions of 'relief and recession'<sup>12</sup>, or 'advancing and retiring planes'.<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically, Davis also used colour to erase the illusion of depth that drawing can create: this is apparent when one looks at Davis's re-examination of his own work. In 1930, he painted *Summer Landscape* which he then used 10 years later as a basis for a new painting, *Summer Landscape N°2*. As lines disappear from the first version to the second, what was initially a landscape organised in such a way as to lead the eye towards the centre in a staged set, an artifice, becomes a combination of coloured shapes that appear to be flat, keeping our gaze at the surface of the painting, and suppressing the primacy of the centre.

In the initial version, Davis uses colour change, going from grey to blue, to stage a move from foreground to background, framing the background between vertical lines, the tree on the left, the pole on the right, the red factory and its chimney on the left, the red masts on the right: lines and colours take our eyes towards the centre, 'color-spaces' are used to create an illusion, the illusion of depth, the illusion of representation.

In the second version, though the main spatial structure remains the same, the unified green ground unifies the space, there is no distinction between the centre and the margins, Davis does not lead the gaze towards any particular space, there is equality throughout the canvas. The initial colour-shapes were shapes defined by lines, but the shapes are transformed by colour in the second version. The shapes 'say' things, re-present things, but the colour variations draw attention to something else than the figure represented. In the second version, colour frees shapes from their figurative meaning. It takes

---

11 *Notebooks*, 31 Jan.1923, in Kelder, op.cit, p.40.

12 *ibid*.

13 *Notebooks*, 26 Feb.1923, in Kelder, p.40.

the gaze away from representation, or shape, to spatial relations, and combinations and juxtapositions of colours where no space takes precedence over the others. Colour, in the second version, is the basis of change, while words (the title) create continuity, stability.

Davis wrote: 'space is a matter of linear direction and all other phenomena – size, color, texture — are the result of it.'<sup>14</sup> In other words, space is created by lines and the directions the lines take. But colour frees the artwork from the bonds of line and drawing: colour takes over from drawing, going from line to space, from identifiable subject matter to coordinated coloured shapes, transforming an optical experience into a conceptual experience.

## 2. Colour as an element of change and equality.

Colour, therefore, introduces transformation. Just as Davis establishes that colour combinations create relief and recession, the same can be said of different versions of the same painting. Davis repeatedly went back on former works to re-examine them, and rework them in different colour combinations. The dynamics of colour within a work is extended from one work to another within a series.

In 1955, for example, he painted two very different versions of the same basic composition of shapes: *Ready to Wear*, and *Cliché*. The two are exactly the same size (142,9 x 106,7 cm); the first has a palette limited to 4 colours—red, white, blue, and black—, and the second has only 2 colours—black and orange. While the first looks like an abstract arrangement of coloured shapes, the second looks like a drawing (or what we understand to be a drawing: lines in one colour against a background in another colour), with black lines in a combination of straight lines and squiggles.

In *Ready to Wear*, the left side of the canvas has a black background onto which coloured shapes of white, red, and blue appear to be collaged. On the right, the background is blue, again with a painted illusory collage of shapes of white, black, and red. This allows Davis to work on relief and recession: a colour that seems to be in the background, receding behind the other shapes, can also appear to be on the surface of the canvas, depending on the colour that is adjacent to it, and on its shape: the white X in the top right hand corner seems to be on top of the black rectangle, which itself seems to be on top of a red oval shape, while to the left of that combination, white is in the background, with blue and red shapes in the front, and a black square in the foreground.

---

14 SDP, 1932, reel 1.

In *Cliché*, this play on advancing and retiring planes disappears, as Davis works on line thickness to create a tension between the shapes: the squiggle in the centre has thin lines and although it is in the centre, it attracts the eye less than the shapes around it that have thick lines.

In both versions, Davis works against preconceived ideas about light and dark, or about centred subject matter, or again about three-dimensional space. He questions ready-to wear ideas or clichés about colour, and about space and line. In *Ready to Wear* he shows that no colour can be considered to create either relief or recession, two primary colours can have similar effects, as can black and white, all are equal in that they can all serve the same purpose and create similar effects of colour-space; and in *Cliché*, black and orange, line and ground attract the eye equally, and the painting is more about interaction of colours, or of lines than a drawing of something on an orange background, black is both line and colour-space as the lines thicken to fill space and create black shapes. In both paintings, what goes on on the canvas interacts with the words of the title. The painting is where things occur simultaneously; the painting, as a ‘color-space event’, is a crossroads (the letters XRD in *Cliché*).

Towards the end of his life, Davis painted another series: *Letter and His Ecol*, with an earlier coloured version, and two later black and white versions. Again, the three versions are the same size. The 1962 *Letter and His Ecol* is a construction of color-space relations, using two primary colours—yellow and red—and red’s secondary colour green, and black and white. In his colour cube, black and white are the two extremes, red in the centre colour, and yellow and green are next to black and white respectively. Davis also combines writing and coloured shapes, and geometric and non-geometric shapes. The writing is itself transformed into coloured shapes that seem to cancel their meaning: Davis’s signature is more a black squiggle than two distinguishable words; the orange inscriptions in the black oval space in the top are fragments of words (‘Inst’ for institute; ‘ecol’ for école). And the three letters of the word ANY, at bottom right, are turned around and seem to be independent shapes doing their own thing in the colour-shape composition.

The first black and white version (both black and white versions were started in 1962 and continued until 1964, the year of Davis’s death) has thick black lines on a white background, while the second has thin black lines on a similar white background, and neither has any of the writing, or Davis’s signature. Davis wrote: ‘A basic Absolute of a Line Drawing is its TONE in which all Figures in its total configuration are Equally Visible.’<sup>15</sup> The black and white versions cancel the effects of colour by making the figures or shapes visible, but at the same time, contrary to what Davis writes, black and white themselves become colours that interact in much the same way as the colour-spaces in the

---

15 SDP, 5 Feb. 1962

coloured version. The black and white version with thick black lines reveals a clear difference between the contours and the white spaces between the black lines, and shows how these spaces interlock. But Davis was clearly looking at something else as well: he did not stop at one black and white version, he made two, one with thick lines and one with thin lines. The thinner lines almost recede into the background, as the white shapes come forward for the eye to see, while the thicker lines stand out more, share the space with the larger white spaces, and become spaces themselves. As they do so, they transform into colour spaces.

In either case, the black and white versions, like the colour version, point to equality of the spaces or shapes, and equality of space and contour in the first black and white version. So while colour seems to introduce instability, process, and movement, through variation, it also introduces permanence and equality: the different versions are equal, they share the same titles, the same shape and size, and they are all about spatial relations, where each space is equal to the others. Our perception of space is renewed through Davis's use of colour, but space actually remains the same. Colours change from one version to another, but in the end, colours, like subject matter, are less important than what Davis does to them. The word ANY on the right side of the coloured version of the painting and in both black and white versions indicates equality as any subject matter will do, any shape, any colour: colours, like shapes, are freed from meaning outside the world of associations that Davis creates. Like the ready-made of Marcel Duchamp, they offer visual indifference. Shapes and colours only exist as they interact with one another, through superimpositions and juxtapositions. This visual indifference is also indicated through words: Any, Ready-to-Wear, Cliché are all indications to the viewer to look for the event outside representation, in composition.

### **3. Color and race: *Odol* and other black and white paintings.**

Davis uses black and white as spaces and lines, as colours or ground and line. But just as colours and shapes are juxtaposed and superimposed, so a sub-text of contemporary events can be taken as a background to Davis's paintings, forming another layer of meaning, giving the compositions another colour or tone. In an interview of 1957, Davis explained:

[My paintings] start with a simple impulse to make something, which is always specific, something outside myself. It could be a box of matches on the table, it could be a news report, it could be the recording of the pianola rolls that Fats Waller made when he was 20 years old, it could be a political event. It could be anything that would be the initiation

of an impulse to draw something. The emotional energy, so to speak, would be brought about by something external.<sup>16</sup>

In 1924, Davis worked on compositions using everyday consumer products. Two of his paintings use a bottle of Odol mouthwash as a starting point. These works use shapes, colours, and words taken directly from the artist's visual environment: advertisements, readymade images and brand names, bridging the gap between high art and the consumer society, re-contextualising painting within the global field of culture. Just as colour exists and has meaning in a certain context, created by the artist on the canvas, so the painting itself has a meaning that depends on the context in which it was produced.

Here, Davis reproduces the stylisation of the Odol advertisement and the Odol bottle, keeping the same colours (black and white, with a blue ground added). The letters work as specific colour spaces that are superimposed on the shape that re-presents the bottle. But the colours are smudged: the D of Odol has traces of black on the left; and the P and the U of 'purifies' have traces of white on them. There are also traces of black beneath the white paint that frames the bottle. The phrase 'It purifies' on the bottle of mouthwash seems ironic as the colours are not pure, they are either a mix of black and white, or the white surface covers up (inefficiently) a black background or undercoat. While purification is a question of hygiene, cleanliness, disinfection or bad breath, on the painting Davis also probes the culture of purity by offering 'impure' associations: unclean, mixed colours, but also, the impure world of crass consumerism. So, just as Davis draws attention to the surface and the layers of paint, opacity and transparency (or texture), the interpenetrating planes and colour-shapes, he also draws attention to non-visual elements: the cultural context, or sub-text, in which the work is produced. Looking at the black and white words, we see the Odol letters forming interlocking shapes, with the black shading giving the illusion of depth, bringing the white letters to the foreground. Looking beyond traditional interpretations of positive and negative grounds, black surrounds the white shapes, supports them, and underlies them (as black appears through the white surface of the letter D). And conversely, white is the ground which offsets the letters forming the phrase 'it purifies', allowing the viewer to read the words, allowing the words to be accessible as words, and again the white ground resurfaces in the letters P and U.

The contrast produced by using the extremes of black and white (the two poles of Davis's Color Cube) also creates unity as the colours, like the letters, are included in a web of spatial relations. The painting as a whole is composed entirely of mixed colours: the light blue ground on which the letters Odol are painted is blue mixed with white, against a white background (that again is apparent

---

16 Interview, in *Stuart Davis*, exh.cat., Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minn., 1957, pp.44-45 (Kelder p.147).

through the thin layer of blue paint), and the other colours are green (blue mixed with yellow) and purple (blue mixed with red); even the illusory frame around the composition is dark grey, so black with some white in it. And here, Davis again uses the extreme poles of his Colour Cube, black and white, combined with the three bottom colour.

If one takes this further, and looks at the political background against which the painting was produced, black and white take on a different meaning. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 1924, the Virginia legislature passed the Racial Integrity Act, also known as the ‘one drop rule’: the racial description of every person was to be recorded at birth, thus dividing society into two, the white and the coloured (the legislation was overturned by the US Supreme Court in 1967). The Act also confirmed the 1691 ban of mixed marriages. This legislation had been called on by various groups lobbying for racial classification and an end to ‘amalgamation’. It therefore aimed at maintaining a ‘pure’ white race. It was another legal means to separate the races, to ‘purify’ the American race, to bring it as close to 100% Anglo-American stock as some groups were lobbying for. Painting the phrase ‘It Purifies’ on a canvas in 1924 cannot be innocent. In his writings on race relations in the US and depictions of African Americans, notably in Regionalist art, Davis was very critical of racial discrimination; he also criticised what he saw as racist art in the works of Thomas Hart Benton, the leading Regionalist painter:

Are the gross caricatures of Negroes by Benton to be passed off as ‘direct representation’? The only thing they directly represent is a third-rate vaudeville character cliché with the humor omitted. Had they a little more wit, they would automatically take their place in the body of propaganda which is constantly being utilized to disfranchise the Negro politically, socially and economically.<sup>17</sup>

Davis himself was inspired by jazz, which he considered to be the true American art form. Jazz did to popular music what Davis was aiming for in painting: he said that it was ‘a tin-pan alley tune turned into real music’<sup>18</sup>. About his own work, he wrote: ‘They all have their originating impulse in the impact of the contemporary American environment.’<sup>19</sup> In the end, for Davis, colour on the canvas was very much like colour in society: an element in a unified whole, working together, juxtaposed to or superimposed on other colours to form a harmonious whole. Jazz, the African American voice, was a background to Davis’s painting, just as black was the under-layer of the white spaces in his *Odol* painting.

---

17 ‘The New York American Scene in Art’, *Art Front*, Feb. 1935, Reviews.

18 Quoted in Blesh, *Stuart Davis*, p.11.

19 In Davis : ‘The Cube Root’, *Art News*, 1 Feb. 1943.

So colour works as signifier and signified, meaning and shape, medium and symbol or metaphor, both present, and in the background, creating shifts in focus, disruptions of space that deconstruct meaning, but also add meaning to a picture. 'Painting is the vehicle for the expression of an ideal. [...] The only vital principle today, bad or good, is the ideal of democracy, every man is the equal of the other hence the man's personal reaction(s) to a given scene is the ideal.'<sup>20</sup> Davis's art theory is very much an expression of his ideology. Colour-spaces are equal, colours themselves are interchangeable, subject matter is equal to any other; the painting is where colours interact with other colours to produce art through formal invention. What gives colour its meaning is the way the colour shapes interact with other coloured shapes. But it is also the way the viewer interacts with Davis's writings. Text is there to explain Davis's colour practice, and it also gives an ideological and political meaning to colour. Text acts as another layer for image, transforming the way we perceive image in the same way as our perception of a given colour changes as the background, or the under-layer changes. Davis's paintings are juxtapositions and superimpositions of colour-spaces, but also of image and text. Colour-shapes are never just that, as colour is equivocal, ambiguous, fleeting, its meaning is fluctuating. Yet in the end, it is precisely this ambiguity, this fluidity, this interface between colour and text (text within the colour combinations, text in the title, in Davis's writings, and the cultural sub-text) which creates the colour-space events, and our perception of them.

---

20 *Notebook*, 23 March 1923.

Paintings cited:

- *Summer Landscape*, 1930, oil on canvas, 29 x 42 in., repr. In *Stuart Davis, American Painter*, exh.cat, Lowery Stokes Sims, ed., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1991, p.202.
- *Summer Landscape N°2*, 1940, oil on canvas, 8 1/8 x 12 1/4 in., Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, partial donation by Marion Grudin in memory of Shim Grudin.
- *Ready to Wear*, 1955, oil on canvas, 56 1/4 x 42 in, The Art Institute of Chicago.
- *Cliché*, 1955, oil on canvas, 56 1/4 x 42 in., The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
- *Letter and His Ecol*, 1962, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 1/4 in., The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.
- *Letter and His Ecol (Black and White Version No.1)*, ca 1962-64, casein on canvas, 24 x 30 in., and *Letter and His Ecol (Black and White Version No.2)*, casein on canvas, 24 x 30 in., Collection of 'The Estate of Stuart Davis', copyright courtesy VAGA, NY, NY, repr. in *Stuart Davis, American Painter*, exh.cat., Lowery Stokes Sims, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991, p.307.
- *Odol*, 1924, oil on cardboard, 24 x 18 in., Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Works cited:

- BLESCH, Rudi: *Stuart Davis*, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960.
- DAVIS, Stuart: 'The New York American Scene in Art', *Art Front*, Feb. 1935, Reviews: 6.
- DAVIS, Stuart: 'The Cube Root', *Art News* 41, n°18, 1-14 Feb. 1943: 22-23, 33-34.
- KELDER, Diane, ed. *Stuart Davis, a Documentary Monograph*, Documentary Monographs in Modern Art, New York, Washington and London: Praeger, 1971.
- SIMS, Lowery Stokes, ed. *Stuart Davis, American Painter*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991.