



# Colour, Abstraction and Fantastic Sunsets

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This essay provides a study of colour as a dematerialised object through which to consider Blackness and art making. I ask how colour has been employed by Black artists as a critical component of their practices, proposing that a critical study of colour can help us understand how Black artists navigate the art landscape and create spaces of imagination, possibility, and life for themselves. Foregrounded by Darby English's book, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (2016), I consider Alma Thomas' *A fantastic sunset* (1970), David Koloane's *Mgodoyi III* (1993), and various exhibitions by Serge Alain Nitegeka. Although rooted in Black studies, I also consider British artist Marlow

Moss' painting *Composition in yellow, black and white* (1949). Here I'm interested in how colour can be used to expand notions of intersectional identities through a queering approach. Colour is read as an effective tool of creation, resistance, and refusal. Through this text I consider Fred Moten's riff on Fannie Lou Hamer, 'Refuse what has been refused to you,' as a potential approach and method, while considering colour as a method of refusal. That is to say, what does it mean when Black artists gravitate towards or away from a certain colour? How are these choices influenced by what they have been refused and what they choose to refuse?

*'I have made many discoveries in my painting career but I do not think I have made a more exciting discovery than that of colour.'*

— George Pemba, Diary Entry, 1987 (Hudleston, 1996: 81).

Fully emerging in the 1950s, abstract art brought with it the abandonment of the figure – the figure had been demoted...seemingly only to be resurrected today through an intense multiplication of images of Black bodies, particularly in photography and in painting. As a result of the current proliferation of the figure one has to wonder: why are there so many images of Black life being drawn, painted and photographed at this moment? Are these depictions pointing to a reckoning with the demands of Black people globally, or is the figure simply being co-opted by the market? A perverse consumption that does nothing but perpetuate harmful structures of power that have rendered Black life fungible? Within this context, abstraction and colour seem once again like interesting modes of creation through which opacity, fugitivity, nuance and refusal can be articulated.

As I meditate on enduring systems of control and the ways in which we might be able to dismantle them, or at least subvert them, I return to a phrase that was offered to me a few months ago: *refuse what has been refused to you* – a term popularised by poet and theorist Fred Moten. At the time, I did not fully comprehend what these words meant, at least cognitively, but I felt them to be true. Deep in my belly, I felt a resonance that drew me towards this new modality in the quest to live free of oppressive structures. My crudely oversimplified model of refusal is enumerated:

- 1) Refusal in time (refusing today what was denied to you yesterday).
- 2) Double/Overt refusal (refusing the refusal and claiming for yourself what the world has decided to deny you).

Each of these feels useful in different contexts, when considering how best to respond to systems of control, the art market, and capitalism more broadly. Through this text, I'm interested in the potential for colour and abstraction to function as modes of refusal in the age of intense consumption of the Black figure.

## The colour blue

*'We call on all plastic artists to use the color blue, for it has great potential in showing internal dimensions and depths – in other words, it has the ability to create a Crystalist vision. It is currently the clearest embodiment of Crystalism within the color spectrum. We must stress that the human ability to see internal dimensions in the color blue is not merely the result of a conditional reflex specific to the blueness of the sea and the sky.'*

— The Crystalist Manifesto, 1976.

I begin with the Crystalist's appeal (through the 1976 Crystalist Manifesto) for artists to use the colour blue. Conceived in Sudan, the Crystalists 'understood appearance and perception of solid objects to be mere suggestions rather than [actual] denotations; and embraced an unorthodox materialism based upon mutual contradiction' (Lenssen, 2018). Committed to inventions and new directions in art, the Crystalists believed the colour blue to possess 'the greatest potential in showing internal dimensions and depth.' Colour, of course, is visual perception deriving from the stimulation of photoreceptor cells through electromagnetic radiation. Colour is wavelengths of light or the absorption of light. And light is time – *travelling at the speed of light, faster-than-light travel, light-speed travel, 299,792,458 meters per second!* Just as there are multiple times, there are multiple experiences of the 'same' colour and so even as we speak of blue, or red, or orange... we are speaking of a multiplicity of blues, of reds, and of oranges depending on the number of viewers. This understanding of colour and the impossibility of its reduction to a singular experience points to humanity's innate ability to experience things differently and still be able to find common ground. This reading of colour is indeed optimistic, hopeful, and instructive.

This text seeks to deconstruct and analyse how colour has been employed by Black artists as a critical component of their artistic practice, drawing attention to a deep investment in colour as both object and method. I propose that a critical study of colour is useful in understanding the ways in which Black artists have been able to navigate the art landscape

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The study of colour as object is part of a larger investigation into various methods of creation employed by Black contemporary artists, against a backdrop of an art market and art world that was not made for them. Colour is read as an effective tool of creation but also of artistic resistance and refusal. Through this text, I am considering the quote ‘refuse what has been refused to you’<sup>1</sup> as a potential approach to making. That is to say: what does it mean when Black artists gravitate towards or away from a certain colour? How are these choices influenced by what they have been refused and what they choose to refuse? This examination of colour, travels alongside the use of abstraction not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a strategy to render things opaque and complex.

In her seminal text, ‘The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner’, writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman introduces us to Esther Brown, a wayward coloured girl with no social constraints (see Okeowo, 2020). Esther Brown – ungovernable, riotous, an embodiment of anarchy – refused what she was given and got ready to be free. Hartman writes:

‘Esther Brown never pulled a soapbox onto the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to make a speech about autonomy, the global reach of the color line, involuntary servitude, free motherhood, or the promise of a future world, but she well understood

that the desire to move as she wanted was nothing short of treason. She knew firsthand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free.’ (Hartman, 2018)

Even as she understood the dangers of reaching towards freedom, Esther continued to live on her own terms. She refused what she was given and lived only on what she needed. Taking instruction from Esther and thinking with her on varying notions of what it means to be free, one could read refusal in the works of Black artists who choose not to participate in representational exchanges of Black life or who choose to do so in interesting ways. Like Esther Brown did, what would it mean for Black artists to refuse the assignment of representing themselves? What other modes of creation and making become possible? In refusing to hold on to their own image (own nothing) and refusing what the canon is giving (its old white masters and its violent erasures), could Black artists begin to move towards ‘a kind of freedom’?

### **Refusing man’s inhumanity towards man through fantastic sunsets**

‘Color painting was a loosely arranged formalism that accommodated many painters’ fervent exploration of hue, depth, density, texture, shape, and color relations’ capacity to mutually inform pictorial structures.’

— Darby English, 2016

Born in 1891, Alma Thomas was an American painter and teacher. Considered a brilliant colourist by her contemporaries, her practice is characterised by abstract forms articulated through the bold use of colour. The first graduate of Howard University’s Art department, she was one of the earliest Black modernist painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Created in 1970, eight years before her death at 87, *A Fantastic Sunset* is a 121 x 121 cm acrylic painting. Colours are painted next to each other, creating circles that morph into a smaller circle resembling a very bright, very hot sun. The work is a study in colour theory and is demonstrative of the artist’s philosophies on colour. In her autobiographical writings, she is cited as saying: ‘Color is life, and light is the mother of color.’ She goes on to elaborate: ‘The use of color in my paintings is of paramount importance to

me. Through color I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness in my painting rather than on man's inhumanity to man.' Here, we see Thomas locating her practice outside of what she refers to as 'man's inhumanity to man', which can be read as the oppressive structures of racism, classism, and sexism. Although her paintings seem apolitical when considered purely from an aesthetic view, Thomas' writings stretch their meaning to speak of resistance and refusal of man's inhumanity towards her.

For Tina Campt – a Black feminist theorist and a member of the Practicing Refusal Collective – refusal is not just a simple act of opposition or resistance, but a fundamental renunciation of terms of impossibility defining certain subjects. For the Sudanese Crystalists, refusal came in the form of pleasure (see Lenssen, 2018). Pleasure was considered the sole measurement of man's essence, functioning as both a means and an end, as time as well as space and direction – containing the multiplicity and duality of truth. If the goal was 'trying to live free', then pleasure was the manner through which to achieve it. I think of pleasure as joy. It is this joy that I am reading in Alma Thomas' fantastic sunsets – because refusal can also be gentle and warm.

But of course, refusal is also an insurgency. It is also an insurrection. Recalcitrance. Disorder. Withdrawal. An errant path. Oftentimes, acts of refusal are small, unseizable and repeated over time. In an essay entitled 'At Daggers Drawn with the Existent, its Defenders and its False Critics', an anonymous anarchist notes:

'If we refuse centralisation we must go beyond the quantitative idea of rallying the exploited for a frontal clash with power. It is necessary to think of another concept of strength—burn the census lists and change reality, what we're trying to do here is to not act en masse. Carry out actions in three or four at the most. There should be as many small groups as possible and each of them must learn to attack and disappear quickly.'

— from The Anarchist Library, n.d.

The collective NTU, composed of members Nolan Oswald Dennis, Tabita Rezaire and Bogosi Sekhukhuni, is perhaps an example of working in small groups,

doing the work and disappearing quickly.

Described as a 'South African based family and creative agency concerned with the spiritual futures of technology', the collective was founded in 2015 to disseminate and raise awareness of African sciences and technologies. Through a multi-disciplinary approach, the collective produced a series of works that were often abstract and relied on materiality. UBULAWU (2017), for instance, is a mixed media installation that includes mounds of earth. The work sought to encourage an experience and significance of dreams and practices of divination. A lot of the works by the collective tends to take this form of splicing, splintering, and collaging through a language that is material and often abstract.

These insurrectionary principles of carrying out small unseizable actions over time are visible in the methods of many artists and artist collectives across the world. Through his most recent body of work, Nolan Oswald Dennis gestures towards possible ways of refusal through the act of care (see Goodman Gallery, 2021). The globe is abstracted and the colour black is invoked. Dennis begins with the model of a globe – used to map and organise the world. Refusing the systems that come with the singular mythology of the globe as an organising unit, Dennis draws on Black geographies and Black cosmography to investigate world endings. Through his body of work from his exhibition, conditions (2021), Dennis engages both colour (albeit indirectly) and geometry to reach new possibilities of creation.

Through the instruction of old and new, far and near ancestors, practices of refusal run in our blood. I return to American abolitionist and women's rights activist, Sojourner Truth, and her powerful speech delivered at the Women's Convention in Ohio, in 1851. Being refused humanity and womanhood, Sojourner Truth responds with a question that isn't really a question: '*Ain't I A Woman?*' She notes:

'If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!'

— Sojourner Truth, 1851

This was one of many instances when Sojourner had practised refusal in order to liberate herself. Hers was a double refusal (refusing the refusal) as she also manipulated the extractive postcard industry (which at the time was used to further the colonial empire) to her advantage, selling images of herself taken in a photographer's studio in order to fund her activism and support her abolitionist agenda. When we think of Sojourner Truth, we can think of refusal as a route of escape from hegemony. It is the stubborn refusal to conform – the embrace of odd constructions and the oddly constructed. One might have expected Sojourner to protest the use of her image through postcards, but instead she used the industry through what she described as 'selling the shadow to support the substance.' This type of refusal is not obvious. It runs toward crossroads, pathways, and intersections, where things contradict and surprise – it is the beginning of queerness...perhaps? Before it was co-opted by Harry Styles, Billie Eilish, and Gucci. This is when being 'outside the norm' was a fugitive strategy of survival used by those who were cast to the margins and who understood the power of the space between resistance and capitulation, between subservience and subversiveness.

### **It's not enough to say that black is beautiful**

Artists such as Serge Alain Nitegeka have found ways to employ opacity and ambiguity through the literal use of the colour black. Through the language of abstraction, Nitegeka employs the colour black, often evoked through the titles of his exhibitions, *Innate Black* (2018), *Ode to Black* (2017) and *Black Passage* (2015). For Nitegeka, black becomes a pathway to inquiries into philosophical and political concepts. For him, it is not enough to say that Black is Beautiful, rather: 'Black is a colour reserved unto itself. It is comfortable in its own nature, unruffled and confident. It tries very hard to stay anonymous but inquiring eyes are drawn to it; spectators cannot resist it. It is not popular. It reveals little because it is neither warm nor cold. It is an enigmatic pigment' (Nitegeka, 2017).

### **Colour is obscured**

Born in 1938 in Alexandra, Johannesburg, Koloane spent his career preoccupied with what we might refer to as the human condition. Through his writing,

teaching, curatorial and artmaking practices, Koloane demonstrated modernist aspirations rooted in the questions and concerns relevant to the African artist (particularly the Black African artist). His artmaking, which coalesces painting, drawing, assemblage and printmaking, displays a keen interest in colour – how colour can be manipulated to achieve different things. Through blended colour and complex imagery, Koloane produces works that are textured, meandering and full. *Mgodoyi* (iii) is a lithograph made in 1993. The work is part of the famous *Mgodoyi* series, made on the eve of South Africa's transition from apartheid to a democratic nation. The title refers to a person or people who behave like mongrels, an insulting term offering a critique of corruption. Through a striking use of colour – blue, brown, orange, and yellow – Koloane is able to articulate stark contrasts and shadows that foreground the two fighting dogs into prominence. Combined with his ferocious marks, the colour blue loses its tranquil and orderly qualities while the yellow, brown and orange elicit feelings of frustration and anxious excitement.

### **Can colour queer?**

'I find geometry and colour more reliable categories than like a man or a woman. So in some ways, I can see myself more in a square of yellow than I can in a drawing of a woman or a man.'

— Sasha Velour

In an attempt to consider colour's queering potential, I consider British artist Marlow Moss. My reading of Moss's work relates to ideations of self as they relate to queerness. Moss' *Composition in Yellow, Black and White* (1949) is an oil painting of abstract and minimal composition. The focal point is a square of yellow at the bottom right of the painting. Through the use of colour and proportion, the painting reveals nothing about itself beyond the basic elements of art – line, value, space. It creates a sense of freedom and liberates the artist from being easily pigeonholed. Writing about her work, Moss notes: 'I only see space, movement and light' (Tate, 2019). Speaking about this work in a video recording for TateShots, LGBTQ+ activist Sasha Velour reads Moss's painting as an entry point towards a more expansive way of thinking through gender and sexuality, referring to geometry

and colour as more reliable categories of identity, even more so than the traditionally accepted binaries of man and woman. Through this work, we see the liberatory potential of colour and geometry.

Through this text, I have considered the ways in which colour is employed within various artistic practices and furthermore how it is metabolized by both the maker and the viewer. My analysis has led me to an interesting intersection of colour and abstraction as a generative combination in thinking through intersectional ways of being. A key conclusion is that colour is critical, but it will not perform all the work. I propose that colour, combined with abstraction, can in fact function as a methodology for artists and that through this combination artists continue to make work that is political and challenging – not abandoning the social, cultural, and material meanings that colour evokes. Colour and abstraction can in effect function as legitimate modes of refusal. And of course, practices of refusal are not only useful conceptual frames but are also catalysts towards constructing new conditions of Black life. They exist as grand refusals recorded and documented throughout history but also, to evoke Hartman again, as quieter moments that reflect on everyday choreographies of the possible. What continues to make refusing useful is not that it is radical or novel, but that it continues to inspire actions (and non-actions) that yield real results in our quests for freedom. Refusal against the unending ruthless crisis of anti-Blackness. Refusal against heteronormativity. Refusing Black consumption. Refusing gender and class oppression. Refusing now. Refusing together.

## Notes

1. Credited to Fred Moten through a recorded conversation (see Carter and Cervenak, 2017).

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