

Notes on Pastel

When the hand moves holding the stick of pastel, it may hover, but when it lands to spread the crystalline color of the stick, it is all improvisation, weight of hand, tooth of paper, shock of color next to neighboring color.

Pastel is the unforgiving medium—there is no going back, every move indelible. Although known earlier, the medium fully developed in the eighteenth century, as in the work of the master Jean-Étienne Liotard. Later, as modernism dawned, artists such as Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and Odilon Redon explored pastel's qualities in new ways. Today pastel survives in the hands of very few artists.

Color radiates from a pastel in a remarkable way. My favorite sticks are those made by Isabelle Roché of La Maison du Pastel. Roché's pastels are made to exactly the same specifications as those used by artists of the late nineteenth century, including Degas, who was a client of the Roché family, which has been producing pastels for almost three hundred years. The purity of the colors, their luminosity, never fails to feed my eye as my hand roams above an area of the surface, ready to strike. Even when cross-hatching one color through another in swift movements, you can see the submerging color still holding its own, recognizable as an echo of itself. In the studio, when all the colors of Isabelle Roché are laid out in their freshly opened boxes, it is as if you are looking at an indoor rainbow; the color is so intense and concentrated. It is magical. It takes days to dare to spoil this beauty by beginning to work, plucking one stick, then another, to launch a new series on the sheets of paper that have been waiting on the wall.

On the waiting sheet, a very slight drawing in charcoal stands by until the first touches of color land to “set the table” for what's coming. The hand plays a kind of game of leaving little points of color here, and there—defining the spacial distances between things and the overall scale of the world coming into being on the sheet.

This charcoal template of hints, lures, and openings guides the work. The sheets of paper may vary in size, but these first faint marks tell me the scale of the work to be. The crystalline structure of the brilliant color against the paper's light-throwing capacity creates a particular kind of space—a universe “huge,” on a surface “small.”

These traces of charcoal also herald the subject of the work. The genesis of this current series after Redon was mysterious to me; the first faint marks were made by my hand moving faster than my mind. As the series progressed, accumulated intuitive energies were released with little conscious deliberation.

With pastel, color vibrates and heaves as it navigates the complementary relationships. The chromatic expansion, even of a small dot, has to do with the utter crystalline dryness of the material, which transmits a glow far out of proportion to its relative size on the sheet of paper and which guides the hovering hand in finding the next place to land.

Pastel, as I use it, is a form of dry painting. Its subtle brilliance covers nearly all of the paper's surface. Its absence in some passages is a deliberate choice that offers some rest in a surface teeming with color. Intense color and its absence set surprise in motion as an element in the picture. By surprise I mean purposeful rupture to keep the eye challenged and engaged, no matter what is being depicted. The interruption of spreading color is part of the visual theater of the work.

I am attracted to pastel as a medium because of the gamble involved in its execution. There is a fascination with the processes of control and risk enacted on a surface, a surface building toward the last plunges of color that bring everything already developed there into focus—the color bolt that finishes a picture.

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