

“...When somebody says ‘When you take these two colors they will have this effect,’ I will tell him or somebody else, he has no idea. Color is cooling us all the time, all the time. Like woman do, you see, life is Interesting.”¹ This is a quote by Josef Albers, a man known to be the “father” of color theory; Albers is all-knowing of the unfathomable qualities within the color spectrum we can see. His passion for the palettes he creates and the process of mixing pigments on canvas is something any artist like myself would idolize. Studying how natural light affects brushstrokes, the emotion provoked by his process, and his comfort with his method are all characteristics that allowed Albers to be the successful artist that he was.²

Albers mastered the study of how color can be an agent in the release of comfort for our bodies and how it provokes an emotion, not only in the artist but in the viewer as well.³ As a viewer myself who experiences emotions when looking at Albers’s artwork, I am inclined to question why I feel this reaction. The palettes he uses aren’t random, nor are they limited to whatever color is pushed out of the tube. There are ways of manipulating pigments to create colors that, when used with others, can be read by the brain in an organized manner, resulting in an experience of comfort.

In my own artwork, I create certain colors over and over subconsciously, making similar mixes to ones I have previously made. There’s comfort for me in a salmon tint as it’s layered on top of a crème with blue undertones, surrounded by a neutralized blue-beige and subtle burnt orange that make the yellow pop out of the background of the lightest white mixture. The process of mixing these colors results in a mental reaction as well as a physical one.⁴ Muscles begin to relax as my paint flows together and the colors work harmoniously; my head tilts as I view my work in satisfaction. I create my own world by mixing color, just as Albers did; as artists, we manipulate pigments to our own advantage.

What stimulates a physical or emotional reaction from color? As the viewer glares a painting down, following a brushstroke from the top of the canvas in a fluid movement until they reach the bottom, there’s an involuntary reaction in the body. There could be a feeling of comfort and ease, or possibly disgust if the color choice is unharmonious. A viewer could walk right by a piece of art in an inattentive manner, or could stand and study a work of art as time is passing unknowingly fast as each blending of different colors grabs the attention.⁵ Whether there is a physical or emotional reaction to a sequence or collection of color schemes, there is something triggering the reaction we feel. There is a reason why some people feel ease in neutral palettes—the response in the brain is chemically similar to what happens when we feel pleasure after eating refined sugar or are in the presence of a loved one.⁶ As an artist begins to understand these reactions, they are able to manipulate their viewer’s reactions through their color choices.⁷

Interest in color theory dates back to Greek philosophers such as Democritus and Aristotle, and Roman writers like Pliny the Elder and Vitruvius who documented recipes for different colored fabric dyes. Blues, reds, yellows and the rarest purple were all made from combinations of herbs and minerals to create the vibrant colors used in ancient fabrics. Later, in 1666, Isaac Newton studied color as he examined the way rays of lights dispersed color through

¹ "Interview." *Josef Albers Interview*. N.p., n.d. Web.

² "Content." *Color Content*. N.p., n.d. Web.

³ *Infoplease*. Infoplease, n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

⁴ "Brain Chemicals." *Brain Chemicals*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁵ "Color Lessons." *Incredible Art*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁶ "Brain Chemicals." *Brain Chemicals*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁷ "Color Lessons." *Incredible Art*. N.p., n.d. Web.

a prism, ultimately creating a “color of the sun.” Newton’s studies defined light as a physical entity, and solidified the perception that no color is finite: each human eye perceives it slightly differently.^{8 9}

When color theory is discussed, one most commonly thinks of a color wheel. This is a circle where the three primary colors are all set out in equidistance from each other around the wheel, and colors opposite of each other are known as complements. Between each of the three primary colors—red, blue and yellow—there are secondary colors, which are purple, green and orange. Then again between the secondary colors there are a set of tertiary mixtures, yellow-orange, red-orange, red-purple, blue-purple, blue-green, yellow-green, and so on creating a simple organized wheel that makes up our spectrum of visible colors. From examining the color wheel to creating a palette and then painting on a canvas, color theory is prevalent through an artist’s entire art-making process. Color harmony is known as the organization of the colors you use, or the usage of specific colors to create visual balance. When a viewer looks at artwork, the brain will reject anything it cannot make sense of, resulting in the viewer liking or disliking the piece. Whether the color corresponds in a pleasing way is determined by each viewer’s eye, and the response can vary dramatically from viewer to viewer. Common harmonious formulas include analogous color schemes, the use of three to four colors that sit next to each other on the color wheel. Complementary colors that are directly opposite on the color wheel are also known to be widely recognized as harmonious colors when used together in paintings. Along with color harmony there is also color context, which is dependent on placement of colors in the artwork. If a harmonious result is desired, each color should be surrounded by complements, thus they all work together to create a pleasing result.¹⁰

Aside from aesthetic appeal, color can also be used to imply or to convey specific messages. Color meanings used for messages vary widely in the changes from cultural to circumstantial situations.¹¹ If you think about a color, there might be a mental reaction where an emotion may be easily related to the color you are thinking of. Or vice versa, if you are feeling a specific emotion, you may be able to relate a color to the emotion. Red is known for its relation to anger or being mad but also its connection to passion. Orange is seen as a social, communicative color, and yellow is seen as relating to intellect, optimism, and cheerfulness. Balance and growth can be correlated with the color green, and blue is the color of peace and trust, but also conservatism and frigidity. Indigo is used to convey intuition and structure, and purple represents royalty and creative imagination. Communication and clarity, as well as idealistic thoughts are conveyed through turquoise. Brown is the color of comfort, and security or protection, as well as earthly possessions and nature. Silver can be used to convey a womanly sense, fluidity and sensitivity, and is also slightly mysterious. White is the picture of innocence, the color of perfection and completion, while gold is the epitome of wealth, prestige, and sophistication.¹²

There are specific formulas to create messages or attraction to the viewer that many artists use in pieces we see in museums. Color is one tactic that may be used by an artist, though not the only one. Annette Messager, a French installation artist who uses children’s objects to

⁸ "Color History." *Hyper Physics*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁹ "Understanding the Meaning of Colors in Color Psychology." *Empowered By Color*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

¹⁰ "Mobile Color Matters." *Basic Color Theory*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

¹¹ *Infoplease*. Infoplease, n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

¹² "Understanding the Meaning of Colors in Color Psychology." *Empowered By Color*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

create a sense of innocence or a playful tone in her work. Sometimes there's a subtle twist as she knits pastel sweaters onto taxidermy animals. She has one piece that conveys the emotion of purity with subtle darkness—it consists of three white dresses pinned and framed in flat cases. She also plays with controversy or darker images: in one of her pieces she hangs up guns on a clothing line in a decorative order with a dead animal in the middle.¹³



Massager goes very colorful with her childlike pieces, and uses many very bright colors to create a kid-like ambiance successfully. When she does create the sense of purity, the white of the dresses really creates a sense that one can visually comprehend just by what colors are chosen.¹⁴

Joan Mitchell is a great example of an artist who uses color context to her advantage. In her piece “Rose Cottage,” she uses complements surrounded by neutrals to exemplify the complementary colors vibrancy against each other:¹⁵



Mitchell's brush strokes move your eyes around the piece with fluid movements, another tactic she successfully uses to engage the viewer. As an engaged viewer, I feel emotions and feelings are easily provoked. In her pieces “Plate 15” and “Plate 25,” Mitchell uses more of a color-blocked style, and color harmony is obvious:

¹³ "Annette Messager." *The Guardian*. N.p., n.d. Web.

¹⁴ "Annette Messager." *The Guardian*. N.p., n.d. Web.

¹⁵ Livingston, Jane. *The Paintings Of Joan Mitchell*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.



Mitchell mixes specific complementary tones to create a harmonious combination of colors. Artist Gillian Ayres also focuses on color harmony, though in her work she goes for a very chaotic feel. Ayres uses a variety of stroke sizes that would normally be very hard for the brain to process, but her carefully selected color palette allows the piece to work together very nicely.¹⁶

Jennifer Bartlett actively uses color theory in her piece “The Garden,” but also uses knowledge on how to create an ambiance of comfort for the viewer. As I was viewing this piece (an installation using mostly the color blue and a mix of windows for natural lighting), I had an emotional reaction of ease. The color choice of blue is so easily relatable as a sleepy or cozy color that when confronted with an excess amount of the color, moods can instantly change into a calmed vibe and the viewer can truly feel relaxed. Bartlett uses mixed media and painting to portray scenes of gardens. It seems like the garden, for Bartlett, was a safe haven, and she depicts that in her work.¹⁷



Gillian Ayres was a contemporary artist in the 80's who focused on chaotic strokes in a large range of sizes and so many colors it could at first be confusing to the viewer. Her realm of expertise was the repeated layering of her personalized mixtures. She filled her canvas with so much information and movement that as a viewer, I felt as though I could see her moving her body, painting the canvas in a rhythmic dance.¹⁸ I see Robert Rauschenberg as a little scavenger, as he creates beautiful mixed media paintings where it seems to be a large mass of just “stuff” on

¹⁶ Livingston, Jane. *The Paintings Of Joan Mitchell*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

¹⁷ Beckett, Wendy. *Contemporary Woman Artist S*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

¹⁸ Beckett, Wendy. *Contemporary Woman Artist S*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

canvas paired with aesthetically pleasing palettes. In his piece “Canyon,” oil paint mixed with his array of “stuff,” I found just one small corner of this icy, creamy blue with a somewhat yellow tint, to be so beautiful. I feel that any viewer can really find parts of his work to relate to or enjoy because there are just so many parts. I imagine his process of creation to be very rhythmical and impulsive as he sticks one thing after another to the canvas. This process is a common style of his, one that he repeats many times in different ways—it must have led Rauschenberg to find comfort in his art.



Canyon, 1959

While Bartlett uses color to channel emotions to the viewer, in my own work I am recording the emotions that are conveyed through the work I create to see where my color choices lead the viewer. I am creating an installation—a room of color—that anyone can walk into and have an emotional or physical reaction. I am trying to create a feeling of comfort, but since the individual perceives color very differently, I’m not exactly sure how many people will truly feel this comfort I have made. The room is comprised of three canvases that are built into a triangular stand-alone structure. When someone walks into the structure, the specific palette I have mixed up is surrounding them and the paintings are intended to provoke specific emotions. In the installation I have used a large variety of color choices and layers so there are many aspects that could evoke many different emotions. Along with different textures and colors, neutrals are easily read as contented due to their specific hues that are easiest to read by our brains. Personally, I find much comfort in specific color choice, such as the neutrals. I really find ease when I’m mixing the neutrals because I can manipulate them so well; pastels are also a very comfortable color set for me to use. These colors for me are soft and they represent coziness. When painting I can fluidly make strokes without thinking and my work feels easier to complete. As I research more on color theory, I find myself subconsciously paying attention to my own usage of colors, and to where I place my colors in my work. After looking through many artists work I find myself coming back to Bartlett’s pieces and to Albers’ color choice, trying to create a developed and knowledge-based piece of my own.

I conducted a small experiment among my peers to find out what kinds of things make them feel comfort, and I compared their results with my own experience. I set up two cups, one for comforts and one for discomforts. I asked everyone to write down what personally applies to his or her emotions and put it in the cups. The results I found were interesting: most things people identified as sources of comfort were common, everyday aspects of life. Results ranged

from home, friends, drugs, the sound of ocean waves, socks and sweaters, snow and sleeping, as well as waking up early. As discomforts, people wrote drowning, confronting people, awkwardness, racisms, close-minded people, and people that can't see both sides of a story. The discomforts seemed to be situations the subject was not usually confronted with. So could comfort in color just be a color someone sees the most in his or her daily life?

After I conducted my experiment, days of research on color theory, and looking for relationships between color and comfort, I found that it's a process unique to the individual. Perception of color begins in the open world and ends in the mind; there are no specific "comfort colors." There may be colors that commonly can be applied to the realm of comfort, like blues and warm hues, though I don't personally believe it's a concrete science. I studied many artists to find out what in their styles they kept repeating in their work to see what was contentment for them personally.¹⁹

When I relate comfort in an artistic sense, repetition that creates the style we know an artist by is their comfort zone. What creates that comfort zone in a specific art style is the repetition over and over where the style becomes the norm for that artist. That commonality in something is what makes the comfort, as I found out in my experiment on my peers. In regards to my own art I find color usage to be my comfort zone, experimenting with different mixings of colors, but always with a base set of familiar combinations. Layering these mixtures in a specified way creates my style. I have specific palettes I like to use over and over again; my colors are my comfort.

I like to relate some of my pieces to Joan Mitchell's work in terms of her fluidity and attention to brushstroke. Her color choice is impeccable, and I could just stare at her canvases and imagine her painting on them. She too has specific palettes that she is comfortable with and enjoys using over and over again. As an artist learns to manipulate color theory to their advantage to engage a viewer, I feel their art can become more exciting and engaging to the people viewing it. Albers once said, "A painter paints because he has no time not to paint."²⁰ I feel I can relate to both of these artists in terms of passion for work and mixing colors to see what I'll get. While working with whatever medium an artist chooses, passion for your work is a crucial characteristic that allows for an artist to work and rework their pieces until they are successful. Art should be an experimental process where you learn through the development of the work. When love for your work is evident, the work can easily develop into a successful piece the artist feel pleased with. As Rothko, an American painter and graphic artist said, "I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotion."²¹ Though I feel he is more concerned with the viewer's perception of the piece than I am, Rothko is a prime example of someone who makes artwork based off of his own little art-making world.

The process of color mixing is incredible in itself. As I mix colors, I feel the need to record each one, due to their own personal beauty. There are so many colors I have yet to explore, and while at times I know I limit myself to my comfort zone, I feel I haven't yet reached the full potential of this comfort zone, so I stay there. This is not to say I won't ever venture out, or that I refuse to change, but I stick to what I like because it accurately conveys my emotions.

¹⁹ "Minimal Group Paradigm Study: Two Experiments by Henri Tajfel & Colleagues." *Minimal Group Paradigm Study Experiments Henri Tajfel*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2013.

²⁰ "Oral History Interview with Josef Albers, 1968 June 22-July 5." - *Oral Histories*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

²¹ "Mobile Color Matters." *Color & Culture Matters*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2013.

My process is very isolated; I must enter my own world and have music on to block out the world around me. My work is just as much about color choice as it is about the process of creation.

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