



Joseph Marioni

«liquid light - portraits of color»

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“When I say then that every visible is invisible, that perception is imperception, that consciousness has a ‘*punctum caecum*,’ that to see is always to see more than one sees—this must not be understood in the sense of a contradiction.”¹

– *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

Art has been widely acknowledged as the ultimate trope of visibility: in a deep-set urge to render all things visible, art seems to be deeply rooted in the visual realm. In his final oeuvre *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted, however, “that to see is always to see more than one sees”. The French phenomenological philosopher thus aimed at translating the unseen into something that is no longer necessarily hidden. He made us aware of an innate coexistence between the visible and the invisible world that translates to the artistic disciplines as well: Anything beyond our immediate perception has been intriguing to artists all along. As an act of showing something and purposefully bringing it into our view, artworks often comprise aspects that are imperceptible, yet essential to their comprehensive understanding, whether that be through highly symbolic contents, anamorphic figures, veils, and curtains, or through conceptual emphasis, materiality, and abstracting processes.

Ever since Pliny the Elder shared the tale of the dueling artists Zeuxis and Parrhasius, the painted curtain has been an integral part of artistic mastery and has cunningly interfered with the painting as an open window, blocking our view onto the depicted world. It seems far from coincidental that particularly portraits have a long tradition of including curtains and, thus, inviting us to critically reflect on the claims and limits of realism and representation. The curtain suggests something that lies beyond it, it suggests depth that is not construed on the painting’s surface, but instead through its layers. The curtain alludes to something that takes place beyond the visible, beneath the superimposition of the painted layers. These layers, however, are not necessarily opaque, but are discernible and diaphanous: palpable layers of paint that gently cover the canvas, palpable layers of paint with their own texture, depth and materiality that refract and diffuse light.

The correlations between concealment and revelation, depth and surface, material and sensation seem to be firmly embedded in the practice of painting. It comes as no surprise then that Joseph Marioni, an artist who has been closely investigating the very essence of painting for more than fifty years now, does not only engage theoretically and formally with such a delicate balancing act, but also manages, by means of his chosen media, the paint and the canvas, the color and the light, to create a way of painting that oscillates between the visible and the invisible—a way of painting that closes in on its own being.

Without exception, color and light lie at the very core of Joseph Marioni’s work. For the seven paintings on show at Galerie Mark Müller, the New York based artist takes a similar approach: To each of the canvases he applies multiple layers of fluid paint—or what Marioni himself calls *liquid light*, thus alluding to the colors’ specific property of refracting light—that flows down and gathers onto itself due to the way he crafts his own supports. The artistic process of reducing painting to its essence emerged as ‘Radical Painting’, when a group of painters, including Marioni, came



together in the early 1980s to discuss the fundamental qualities of painting. Aiming to find its very being, detached from all pictorial or representational elements, 'Radical Painting' sought to get to the very source of painting by allowing the work to be completely absorbed in the color and texture of its own manifestation and phenomenological presence. To "let the paintings be paintings", sensory perception became a new starting point, whereas the artistic reproduction of information through mythologically or socially mediated signs and symbols was pushed aside.

The perception of the seemingly monochromatic colors and their interaction with light are particularly instrumental in Joseph Marioni's works. His canvases come to life through his specific application of liquid paint as a dense, yet simultaneously translucent surface. The fluidity of the different layers of paints and glazes create a distinct surface texture: a topography of color, whose geological strata are oftentimes legible through the visible drippings at the lower corners of the painting. The growing awareness of the eye to the physical presence of different colors is a slowly unfolding process. However, the colors themselves, such as yellow, blue, red, and pink hues in the luminous gallery space, carry no inherent meaning but acquire significance instead, for instance through the viewers' own projections and associations. The artist describes his colors as *archetypes*, for we recognize light only by the division of its wavelengths and thus distinguish four primary color groupings within the light spectrum that serve as his basis. Our sensory experience is, moreover, greatly impacted by continuously changing light conditions caused by weather, time of day and given infrastructure that interact with our perception of the painted colors. Apart from the light that reaches the color surface externally, the colors—Marioni's *liquid light*—emit a certain luminescence that emanates from within. By means of these two different 'light sources', the artist builds an environment in which the paintings can be experienced as ever moving and changing entities. To study the paintings of Joseph Marioni is, ultimately, to study light.

In Marioni's work both light and color touch upon the horizon that divides the visible and invisible realms. His artistic aim, in turn, seems almost secular. Fundamentally, he presents color in a similar way as classical portrait painters presented us with a one-to-one image of an individual, a sovereign subject that was deemed portrait-worthy. In Joseph Marioni's paintings color is not only presented and showcased, it is portrayed as his main and primary subject, it is portrayed with a matter-of-factness that is capable of representing more than itself.

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