

Glowing Colors as Metaphors for Light

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“La lumière de la peinture n’est pas celle du spectre solaire. Les plus grands, toujours à la poursuite de son secret, ont tous compris qu’elle demeure un mystère. Alors, il existe cette sorte de nostalgie, malgré les quelques bonheurs des réussites passagères – ce sentiment d’insuffisance devant l’ampleur du but à atteindre: C’est toujours de la couleur. Ce n’est pas encore de la lumière (...)”¹

In 1946 Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) wrote this rather confessional insight in his correspondence with art historian Jean Leymarie. By that time, he was probably the only artist who had spent his entire working life unravelling the complexities of light. By carefully reproducing them on canvas, he almost turned the traditional palette into self-luminous colors... although, something was still lacking. Deeply moved by the art of his spiritual ancestor and driven by a similar motivation, Richard Bowman dedicated his artistic life to the search for the possibilities of capturing nature’s radiation on canvas. By the time he was in his early thirties, he discovered daylight fluorescent alkyd paints, from the *DayGlo* brand, in an art supply store in Palo Alto. By finding these innovative, very bright shades, Bowman could start where Bonnard had ended the experiments of painting light with traditional colors.



Figure 1: 'Wall with Clippings', an impression from the Richard Bowman's workshop. Photograph taken in May 2012 ® author

¹ “The light of painting is not that of the solar spectrum. The biggest, always in pursuit of her secret, have all understood that it remains a mystery. So, there is this kind of nostalgia, despite the few joys of passing successes - this feeling of insufficiency in view of the scale of the goal to be attained: It is still color. It's not yet light (...)” (Bonnard, Pierre, Alain Lévêque, and Antoine Terrasse. *Observations on the painting*. Contemporary Workshop, François-Marie Deyrolle Editor, 2015: 22.)

In a statement of 1959, Bowman considered fluorescent paints as natural media. These hues carried the potential to express his concept of the great, unseen, but known forces of the universe.² Entering Bowman's well conserved art studio, provides a definite glimpse of his inspiration. The open walls are decorated with clippings and images from scientific magazines, betraying his particular fascination with the micro- and macrocosms (Fig.1). His artistic attraction towards the visualisation of radiation in general, parallels the glorification of something much greater, which, throughout the existence of humanity, was often been depicted through 'light'. Light as spiritual metaphor, has been expressed by many cultures, through specific materialities: divine sculptures and interiors loaded with jewellery and gold, icons illuminated with gold-leaf, even the subtle shimmer in holy representations was obtained through the use of led-tin-yellow. By using mirroring and reflective materials, artists tried to integrate light into their creations, but none of them had the capacity to glow from within, like *DayGlo* colors can.

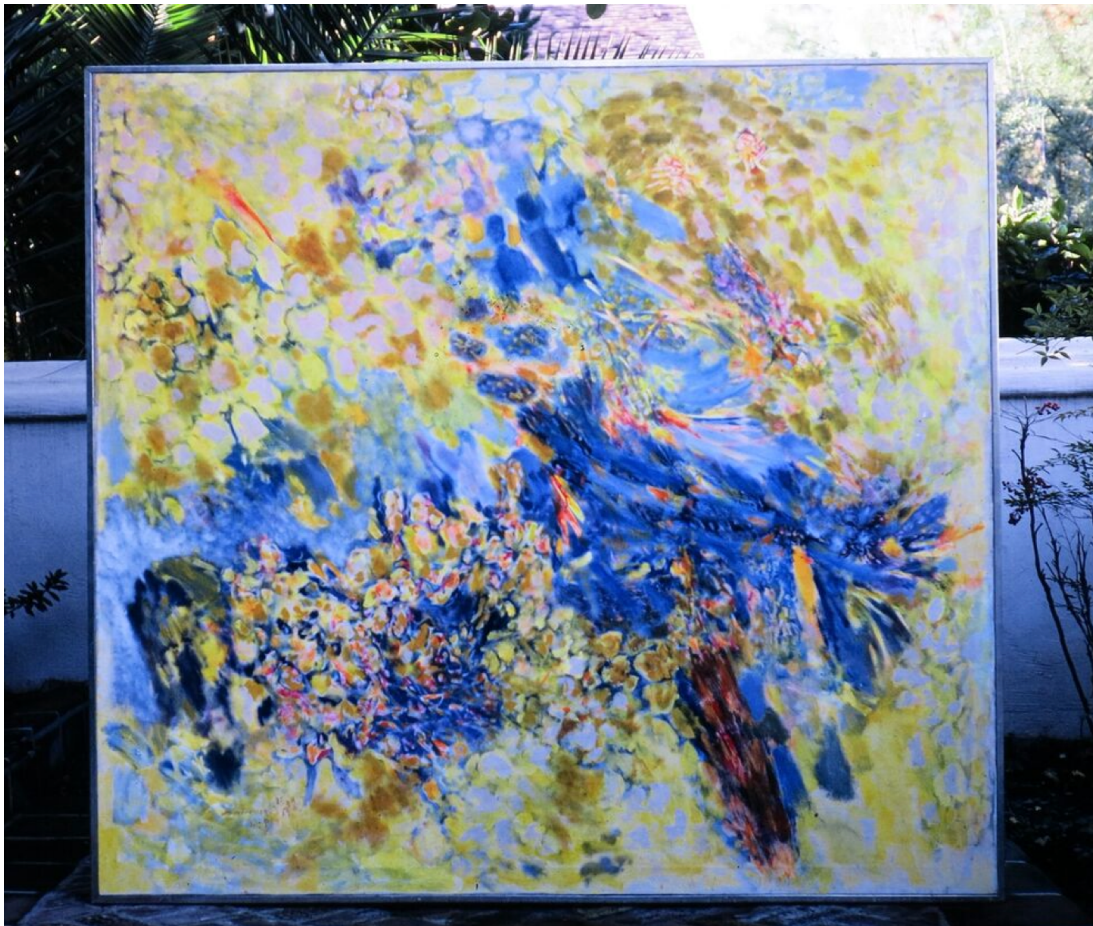


Figure 2: Richard Bowman, *Kinetogenics 38* (1960), Oil and fluorescent oil on canvas, 70" x 76". © ? (year). The artist made this photograph outside in daylight shade, in order to capture the maximally possible color effect with a regular camera. Unfortunately, the fluorescent effect cannot be captured by camera or digitalized.

Daylight fluorescent hues, like conventional colors, appear through absorption and reflection of light. In addition, through their interaction with ultraviolet rays, they have the capacity to make the reflected color

² Bowman, Richard, George D. Culler & Onslow Ford, *Richard Bowman, Paintings and Reflections, 1943-1961*, San Francisco Museum of Art (1961).

glow. Their curious appearance arises from complex chemical structures of organic dye compositions embedded in polymer resin matrices. The specific materiality of these luminous paints requires a specific application manual, especially when combined with a conventional pallet. These difficulties in use were thoroughly understood by Bowman. The transparency of the luminescent pigments doesn't allow any form of traditional mixing. He knew that they would inevitably get lost in the opaqueness of inorganic paints. In order to obtain a harmonious, vividly colored surface, such as in the *Kinetogenics 38* painting (figure 2), he first had to apply the fluorescent paint and then work around it with the regular pallet. Furthermore, *DayGlo* paints, which appear much brighter than white, affect the appearance of neighbouring conventional colors, because of their strong contrasting intensity. This 'graying-out' of the regular shades of color often caused Bowman to tame the fluorescent paint skin by sporadically retouching it with white paint and conventionally colored *glazes*, until the right effect was obtained. All his works reveal new dimensions of color by almost scientific combination of both paint types. He developed his own kinetic painting technique, in which he emphasized a radiance effect, by applying color with the fragmentation techniques he borrowed from the cubists and futurists. Starting from shapes found in scientific imagery, he positioned the fragmented color vehicles in such a way that from a distance, a holistic visual explosion instantaneously dilates the visual field of any spectator.

The development of the camera, which has often been the subject of discussions about the relevance of painting, has never been able to replace the eye of the artist, especially in terms of color perception. In that respect, Bowman's work is a perfect example of how an artist with his intuition, better succeeds in capturing nature's phenomena than any sophisticated machine. Although formally inevitably correct, when it comes to communicating the worlds' unique color pallet, let alone nature's radiation of light, compared to a painting, a photograph remains nothing more than a lifeless resemblance. As science and technology evolved through the 50s and 60s, the capacity of human perception expanded exponentially, bringing into view both the sub-atomic world and the cosmos at large. Bowman, however enchanted by these new scientific accomplishments, remained critical. Through his creations he reminds us of the fact that what suddenly became visible is still far away from its reality.

Color, like in Bonnard's oeuvre, remains the leading factor in Bowman's transcription of his environment on canvas. A two-dimensional liveliness is obtained, because of his careful combining of the classic pallet with the new *DayGlo* hues. Although Bowman painted rather lyrically abstract images based on scientific imagery, they taught us more about the secrets of radiation than any clipping one could find in his studio. At first glance, the rushed spectator can enjoy a feast of color, however, those who stare longer will notice a curious luminosity. It is the glow of these colors that provides the eye with a slight push in the direction of the awareness of what 'lifelike' might be, more than was ever possible before within the two-dimensional medium. In short, we could say that Bowman opened up a virtual door towards a better understanding of the inscrutability of the visual effects of light.