

Sprigs of Color

Gunnar J. Árnason

1. Color, Material, and Earth in the Work of Hildur Bjarnadóttir

There is something very familiar and immediate in the work of Hildur Bjarnadóttir. Her varicolored cloths, in solid colors or checked, have a texture and weave that all but ask us to touch, to feel how the fabric handles. Cut in simple shapes and arranged on the wall, the cloths all come across as paintings unassuming canvasses veiling the great concentration and thought that went into their making.

Hildur Bjarnadóttir creates her works from the ground up in an almost literal and physical sense. Her raw materials are linen, wool, and silk yarns and silk fabric. She weaves or crochets the linen and wool, hand-dyes her yarns and fabric, and moreover makes her own dyes. As paintings, these are extremely unusual works. Neither the canvas nor colorants are purchased or ready-made. It is scarcely possible to imagine getting closer to the origin of a painting than to weave the canvas and color it with one's own dyes.

Modern art is built on a clear separation between fine arts such as painting and sculpture and applied arts, the so-called craft and design fields, which involve useful activities such as weaving and embroidery. Hildur Bjarnadóttir dissolves this boundary by turning applied-art techniques into methods of painting. These works may be termed woven paintings, as the basic form of each is inseparable from traditional textile methods practiced by people in Iceland and elsewhere for centuries. Hildur Bjarnadóttir does not begin with the empty canvas or cloth as the starting point and ground of a painting. The ground itself has been taken apart and put back together. In a certain sense this is a reminder that the free, fine arts rest on the work of those never valued at full worth, the skill and training of craftspersons and industrial workers. Women's crafts have not been awarded a high place in art's ranks of honor.

A certain ambiguity resides in the composition of the picture surface. The monochrome ground gains new meaning through the patterns resulting from different methods of weaving and crocheting threads. A multicolored pattern of vertical and horizontal bands may be seen as either a colorful table linen or a geometrical-abstract painting. The familiar checked tablecloth that is sometimes allowed to peep from the still-lives of French Cubists or Icelandic abstract painters here takes center-stage and assumes independent life. The roles are reversed. We are invited to view an abstract painting in a checked cloth, not a checked cloth in an abstract painting.

Yet in one respect Hildur Bjarnadóttir goes further than even the most dedicated craftspersons. For some of her works, which may truly be called investigations given the research and experiment involved, she has made her own natural dyes gathered the plants, boiled them down, and extracted their juice as the basis of natural dyes.

For a 2011 exhibition at the Hafnarfjordur Centre of Culture and Fine Art, Hildur Bjarnadóttir gathered raw material in Hvalfjörður on land belonging to her grandmother, who had begun to cultivate a diverse plant flora there some seventy years before. Bjarnadóttir collected plant species—bilberry and other heath plants, rhubarb root, meadowsweet, dandelion heads, chervil, angelica, lady's mantle, tea-leaved willow, and many more and developed a particular dye from each for dyeing yarn. From the yarns she crocheted cloths of various sizes; each separate rectangular cloth corresponded to a given plant. Thus we may say that Bjarnadóttir painted with colors that belonged to the land itself, that were linked to it with material bonds. The exhibition included watercolors with color samples of the herbal dyes true specimens in that the shades in the color samples were matter derived from plants on the land.

In a work from 2012, *Urban Colour Palette, Reykjavik*, Bjarnadóttir worked with plants she gathered within the Reykjavik city limits, varieties of weeds, grasses, and flowers that yielded different shades of yellow. This experiment gave rise to 21 monochrome, rectangular woollen cloths that, by physically alluding to their origin, forged a physical as well as imagined link to a place and an environment.

For her 2014 exhibition at Hverfisgallerí Bjarnadóttir gathered the material for her dyes at Þúfugarðar, her five-acre landholding in the Flói area, east of Selfoss. She systematically recorded, photographed, and collected the wild plants growing on her plot of land. From some of them she developed the dyes used for the colored silk and linen cloths in the exhibition. The other cloths in the exhibition were woven from yarns colored partly with herbal dyes and partly with acrylic paints ready-made, mass-produced synthetic colorants pertaining to our modern world.

Hildur Bjarnadóttir's work is remarkable for the way it evokes the complex relationship between color, material, and earth. In our modern world natural colors live in constant close quarters with the synthetic color-systems that surround us. Natural colors have lost ground to synthetic colors and the endless possibilities that technologized color-production offers. But the symbiosis of natural and synthetic colors in Bjarnadóttir's work raises questions about the nature of color and how to describe the relation of color to substance that her images express but which is so hard to put into words.

The foundation of the color theory that is taught in art and design faculties around the world was laid out at the beginning of the twentieth century by the masters of modern art, artists such as Kandinsky, Itten, and Albers. The idea of color theory, derived from Newton's theory of light, is that every color may be assigned its proper place within a system in which all colors fall into place on an interrelated continuum, the color wheel being the most familiar form of such a system. Various systems of color have been developed, such as the Pantone Color-Matching System used in the print industry and also to distinguish shades, find matches, and facilitate the coloring of substances in manufacturing. But where does the color of the dandelion from Hildur Bjarnadóttir's grandmother's land fall in such a color-system? Has its color been abstracted from the thing, its physical source, and assigned a proper place in the realm of color? Various questions arise here that demand a closer look at what this phenomenon 'color' means in our day and how that meaning fits into received ideas about the material world.

2. Colorful Times

Modernity is the most colorful cultural period to date, a glutton for color, certain that it has color completely in hand. In a cultural-historical context this period is relatively short; it is only in the last 150 years that ever-more-perfect chemical methods to produce and use color have been developed. Yet modernity is biased toward color: Color is superficial, faddish, unstable, and perishable. The dominant idea today is that color is a subjective and psychological phenomenon, dependent on sensibility and taste. Color is somehow a cultural phenomenon, a technical creation testifying to skills developed over centuries and culminating in the color frenzy of mass media in all its physical and virtual forms. At this point there are few limits to what we can do with matter and light to influence perception. We can even modify an organism's genetic material to make it glow in the dark. A phenomenon that can be manipulated and governed with such ease can scarcely play all that important a role in nature.

The dominant ideology of the last 300 years or so has not been particularly advantageous for color. Colors do not exist in the world in the same way as palpable physical things. The colors we perceive are an effect of radiating photons and if creatures had not arisen with faculties sensitive to that radiation it would be a mere scatter of particles.

Artists have always taken a more complex stance, obliged as they are to contend with color on two fronts, as a phenomenon both material and subjective. But since artists were long absorbed in creating their own world, one that transcended material limits, they tended to coax from their materials qualities that conjured a realm of imagination. In this, color played a key role.

It is difficult, however, to imagine the world without color. Colors do have meaning for our perception and experience of the world. They seem to fall between mind and world, to some extent subjective and to some extent physical. How does the relation between color and objective reality work?

3. A Colorless Earth

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* depicts a gruesome vision of the future. Gray ash covers everything; sunlight cannot shine through this cloudage to brighten a wan world. All vegetation has withered; the relics of human habitation have burned. A colorless world is a lifeless world. Yet so long as people exist who have not lost the ability to perceive color, the possibility of color and the hope of life can never be excluded. So what is a world without color like? The unusual story of a color-blind artist comes to mind. In 1986 a 65-year-old American painter suffered a car crash, hit his head, and lost consciousness. When he came to he had lost all color vision. He was not color-blind in the usual sense of a diminished ability to distinguish certain colors; rather he saw everything in shades of black, white, and gray. His dog was lead-gray; tomato juice was black; he could hardly bear to touch his ash-gray food. His wife and everyone around him had rat-gray faces. He had difficulty watching TV, as the image would dissolve into grayscale specks. The only silver-lining to this strange handicap was that he gained an eagle-eye and saw much better than before, distinguishing far-distant objects as no one with normal color vision could, unaided. In the dark he saw like a cat and could far more easily perceive the smallest gradations of light.

As one might expect this was a heavy psychological blow. In an attempt to create a normal environment in which things had their normal colors he outfitted a room with contents walls, furniture, and equipment all in white, black, or gray. He was troubled by the gray haze of daylight, felt better in the dark, and ended up reversing night and day. Before his accident he had painted colorful abstract paintings, but these had now become an incomprehensible muddle; so he turned to drawing and tried with pencil and chalk, black on white, to portray things as they now appeared to him.

In despair the man sent renowned neurologist Oliver Sacks a letter describing his predicament and asking his advice; all his doctors were nonplussed by his problem, which was all but unheard of within medicine. There were cases in which people had been born with no color vision but Sacks knew of no one with perfectly normal vision waking up one day with all color erased from sight.

Strange and disturbing as the thought of enduring such a shock may be, even the color-blind painter perceived color in a certain limited sense. Color-blindness has long been recognized; it caused seventeenth-century philosophers much perplexity. One who does not perceive color can distinguish objects and get by, but can we imagine a person who perceived only an object's color but not its form or motion? In this regard there seems to be a disparity among the properties of objects, indicating that the material world is neither black-and-white nor grayscale, that in it there is no difference between light and darkness. Toward the end of the seventeenth century the British philosophers Robert Boyle and John Locke came to the conclusion that the properties of objects could be divided into two camps. On the one hand are what they dubbed the primary qualities, including form, size, and motion; on the other are secondary qualities, namely color, sound, flavor, and scent. Locke and Boyle's notion was that all our

knowledge of the world derives from our senses, which receive external stimuli and elicit in us given sensory images. The primary qualities of the objects we perceive cannot be traced to anything other than the objects themselves, whereas the nature of secondary qualities is such that they can be explained by the effect of the primary qualities on our senses. Locke's explanation of how the qualities differ is that secondary qualities "do not exist in the objects themselves, but rather are nothing but the power of the primary qualities of the object to produce an idea in us of a certain kind." He considered whether it might be possible to explain secondary qualities, for example the yellow color of a dandelion seen on a bright summer day, through the plant's primary qualities, i.e. its form, size, and motion, but concluded that it was probably impossible, that there was no relation. All subsequent forays into this problem have run into difficulties, despite the great advances in neurobiology and the physics of light.

Locke was among a group of philosophers who considered that all our knowledge of the world relied on perception. But the problem is that perception can be awfully fallible, depending on who perceives, in what circumstances. Primary qualities are superior to secondary qualities in that they do not depend on how they are perceived and it ought not to matter who perceives them. An object's size remains the same regardless of who perceives it, as can be verified by measurement or other means. The methods that prove most reliable in establishing form, size, and motion with certainty are the so-called scientific or experimental methods. But the qualities 'red' or 'sour' cannot be verified or measured by any means other than the senses themselves. Therefore our knowledge of the world as derived from the scientific method cannot rely on secondary qualities. The colors of objects add nothing to our knowledge of them. Locke and Boyle's view has changed little over the centuries and has established itself as a dominant ideology of the scientific worldview.

4. Where Are Colors?

Do colors not exist, then, except as imagination or psychic disturbance? Is the world as it appears to us, the world the color-blind painter pined for, illusory? Photons and light frequencies are not the problem, as they are measurable phenomena and can be described with mathematical precision. But what about yellow? What sort of phenomenon is 'yellow'? Is a dandelion yellow? Can we ask such questions at all?

The dominant ideology of color, the one descended from Boyle and Locke, may be called subjectivity of colors: The world is colorful because the mind (or brain) has the ability to paint it in bright colors. The color-blind painter has lost that ability; his mind (or assumedly brain) cannot manage color. Indeed for subjectivists he serves as fine proof that color depends on how the mind or brain functions. Human beings have basically similar vision, while other organisms see things in other colors. Until organisms with specialized senses enter the picture, there is little point in mentioning color as part of reality at all.

Most twentieth-century artists appear to have been subjectivists of some sort. Kandinsky famously described both the physical and spiritual effects colors have on us in his pivotal work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Matisse once said, "Colour helps to express light, not the physical phenomenon, but the only light that really exists, that in the artist's brain." Jón Stefánsson writes in the same vein of the spiritual reality of color: "We see the glory and nobility of certain shades of color, that some shades are more noble than others, more beautifully nuanced and fuller; they speak to some 'mystical' sense in our souls."

Admittedly these statements need to be placed within their art-historical context. All these artists were resisting the tendency to view the colors in a painting as an imitation of the colors found in nature. They were interested in how colors worked on the canvas, within the totality of the image, apart from what was

being depicted. "People have it in their heads," Jón Stefánsson said, "that grass for example is green. But grass varies greatly by the colors that go alongside it." The interrelation of colors affects the way we perceive individual shades, and those shades can have utterly different effects depending on context. Therefore one must examine colors within their rightful context without fixating on how they correspond to the qualities of a particular object. The natural next step, from this way of separating colors from things, was to locate colors in the mental sphere and segregate them entirely from material objects.

What other possibilities does the situation offer? The opposite of subjectivity would assumedly be objectivity of colors: Colors do not depend on the perceiver but are objective qualities of things, which really means that knowledge of color exists and can be investigated, that we can propose theories of color that may be debated and refuted. Color systems and color theories exist; discoveries are made and new ways found to manufacture and manipulate colors. For objectivists the color-blind painter proves that colors are independent of perception because his handicap prevents him from perceiving them; if colors did not exist except in the mind, then what is he blind to? We tend to speak of color this way: some people see colors better than others, painters have a more trained eye than others, one must learn about colors and how they behave, just as one must learn about other objective qualities of things.

Although much of what artists have said for the record about color suggest that they as a whole subscribe to subjectivity, on closer examination their declarations imply that they are dealing with a phenomenon that to them is palpably real, something they need to study and discover. In modernist painting, at least since Cézanne, we see a certain ambiguity toward color. In Cézanne's painting we see him emphasize the physicality of pigments on canvas with discernible brushstrokes and discrete patches of color; he even leaves chinks between them through which bare canvas gleams. The viewer must himself take on the task of weaving together the fragments and seeing in them blue mountain haze or a breeze in the thicket. Cézanne takes care to retain the physical qualities of the pigments he works with in order to increase their subjective impact.

In Pollock and Polke it is as if the pigments come even more to the fore. Their substance takes on a life of its own that does not obey the precise and tempered control of the artist. On the canvas unforeseeable events occur that seem to obey laws other than those pertaining to the color wheel and intercontinuity of shades described by artists of the Bauhaus school. In the 1960s, as abstract art loses influence, the exaltation of color becomes less prominent. As artists begin to work with objects from their environments, taking them as they are, colors become more grounded, so to speak; natural characteristics come to the fore and the characteristic colorants of mass-produced objects are left unchanged. Even those who work with insubstantial and non-objective light, such as Dan Flavin or James Turrell, do not do so with the aim of getting us to turn inward toward a spiritual or psychological realm but rather to create a phenomenon that occupies space, has dimensions, and affects its surroundings. Turrell's works in light certainly affect our senses strongly, and it is not just the eye that senses and perceives; it is the whole body, which needs to locate itself in the lit space and acclimate to it.

We cannot avoid considering the third possibility: We may well ask whether we must inevitably choose between objectivity and subjectivity. Must we divide reality in this way? Does doing so jibe with artists' experiences? The third path would be to steer clear of dualizing reality. Such ideas can take several forms within philosophy and are too involved to detail here, but one version is of interest in that it corresponds to a notion within art that we might call a pluralism of color, to give this ideological bent a name. It entails looking at color as a cultural phenomenon. It might be briefly summed up as follows: Within cultures certain "systems" develop around objects, as manifested in names, manners of speech, symbolism, classifications, rules, skills, behavioral norms, etc. Such systems are basic to understandings

of given phenomena and determine what is taken as valid about them. Each phenomenon has a certain value and role in daily activities.

There are many such systems, constantly evolving, and between them rages a fierce battle for survival that can result in some systems gaining the upper hand and pushing others aside. The hard sciences, indeed, are one system that has proven hugely powerful in this way. Then again in some cases systems may have internal discrepancies, making it impossible to simply choose between them. Then people say that given systems have gained dominance within a culture not because they are necessarily better or more correct but because they accrued power for various historical reasons, due to tradition, resistance to change, vested interests, or even political reasons. Pluralism of this sort has been fairly prominent within post-modernism.

Birgir Andr sson is a fine example of an artist who approached color in this way, as a cultural phenomenon. Rather than mulling over the psychological effects of colors Andr sson considered what colors said about Icelandic culture. As he put it himself in the preface to his 1990 bookwork *Proximity* (N l eg ), "Here are twelve specimens of colors from Icelandic culture. They are not derived from colorants in natural substances such as plant or mineral matter. Rather they are the shades that seemed most prominent to me in our nation's creative work over the centuries." Later on Andr sson simply called his specimens Icelandic. Colors within the system Icelandic might also have names within the system Pantone and be represented by certain codes for the printing process. Needless to say Icelandic is not a part of Pantone, one phenomenon assigned to different systems that perhaps have nothing intrinsic in common. Andr sson liked to say that it was enough to be literate in various systems. Yet literacy in Pantone does not necessarily convey literacy in Icelandic. The color-blind painter is in a certain sense dyslexic.

Donald Judd quotes his master Joseph Albers as saying that if a person standing in a room with fifty other people names a color, let's say 'yellow', a different image of the color yellow will arise in each person's mind. If Albers meant to imply by this that therefore color must be subjective, he erred, as can easily be seen by substituting 'dog' for 'yellow': Everyone in the room will see a different dog but naturally that does not mean that dogs are a subjective phenomenon. This example tells us that color words function like collective nouns or general terms. The word 'yellow' ranges over countless different shades, and it is hard to delineate where yellow leaves off and red (or orange) begins. In fact this also applies to the Pantone system, for each and every color word, or code, in that system is a collective noun naming every color that matches the color sample. Here one cannot avoid asking whether color words can behave like proper nouns, i.e. name one and only one yellow color in the world, for example the shade of yellow that Hildur Bjarnad ttir got from the dandelions she gathered on her land at P fugar ar in the summer of 2013 and used for dyeing yarn which she then wove into a cloth and exhibited in 2014.

This question hinges on whether the colors in Hildur Bjarnad ttir's work are unique, or whether they belong to a specific "system" which names them by their "correct" names. Where should the colors in Bjarnad ttir's work be located? Is it not possible to find matches for the colors she uses in her work among color samples in the system Pantone? Is a Pantone shade the same color as the color of the Hvalfj r ur dandelion? Should the color sample be used as a standard for the color of the dandelion? Is the yellow of the dandelion the same as the yellow on the color sample named "straw-yellow" which bears a specific color code and is blended from primary colors by a set formula?

It seems that we can ask different kinds of questions about pigments made from natural substances, for example where they come from, how they were procured, and what has been done with them. The color derived from a dandelion may vary by locale, soil, time of year, the methods used to extract the dye from

the plant and to dye the yarn, the composition of the yarn, etc. It is pointless to ask where the straw-yellow color of the acrylic paint comes from. Acrylics don't live anywhere; they have no special origin; they are the product of standardized production methods that follow technical formulae. The color in Bjarnadóttir's cloths is bound to a locale and carries meanings that the acrylic paint does not.

All told, it is clear that though physics and biology have brought us closer to understanding the relation between light rays and nerve impulses, colors remain as much a puzzle as ever. Despite all, philosophy and science have no one single decisive theory of color. The sciences of psychology and neurology see color from their own limited viewpoint, namely the bodily function of vision; but how would the synaptic response to green differ from the synaptic response to yellow if we recognized no difference between green and yellow? How would a color-blind neurologist know what he was studying?

5. To Extract Color from the Earth

Hildur Bjarnadóttir's work is interesting in this context because the relation of color to material in her woven paintings is particularly strong and striking and has to do with their origin and meaning. Here colors manifest the earth, not the colorless world of technology but the mortal earth we belong to. Bjarnadóttir restricts herself to organic colors, crushes the essence from that facet of earthly flora that thrives in sunshine, and indeed her works reveal a sympathy with the life-supporting earth that nourishes not only vegetation but man and beast. This color is something more than an impression of the countryside; it is a relic of the land in condensed and dried form.

For artists, colorants are material resources just as plaster, marble, paper, and pencil are. In Hildur Bjarnadóttir's work colors are not merely material resources but benefits of the land. Dye functions as both a visual and physical conduit to the land where the plants grow. It maps the land with color. This is quite a departure from the view of color as a technical aspect of executing an artwork or as a product to be chosen from a catalogue or color sample. Our age is perhaps jaded by the glut of synthetic colors that have strayed far from their origins and soils. If so, it rests solely in the hands of artists to rediscover the source.