

# Gemma Smith on the persuasion of colour

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TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

Hello, and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. In our conversation series, we delve a little deeper to hear directly from artists. And for this episode, I spoke with Gemma Smith. For almost two decades Gemma has been creating paintings that explore what she calls the language of painting, with the artist investigating form, space, illusion, and most pivotally color. Working within abstract painting Gemma initially created geometric pieces before moving onto more gestural works. Gemma talks through the shift in her practice, as well as discussing why colour is so meaningful to her, what insights she's gleaned from her continuous investigations into painting and the experience of having a current survey show at the University of New South Wales Galleries. Titled 'Rhythm Sequence', the show will also head to QUT Art Museum later in the year.

TM

Let's start with what I think is the most apparent, but also the most complex part of your practice, which is colour. It's such a pivotal force in your work. And I'm wondering where does that interest come from?

GEMMA SMITH

So I'm mostly interested in colour and its interactions. This has kind of kept me pre-occupied for a number of years now. I think I first brought colour into my practice in about 2003, before that I was working in sort of gray tones. And I've just been completely compelled by it. I think it's just fascinating the way that it operates relationally. And I've just been exploring this through, I mean, I guess, especially through the use of neutral grades and in relation to the way that, you know, positioning of colour can just change the way that it operates entirely.

TM

Was there any influence from your childhood or when you were at university? Was there any moment when you, you just kind of realised how important colour was to your practice?

GS

It's something I came to almost suddenly. It's something that started, as I said in about 2003. So prior to this time I've been making monochrome paintings using kind of non-art materials in a way. So stitching, working with textas, I made a painting series with Art Line 100 textas where the textas would—I'd play out a painting across a number of boards. And it was dictated by the lifespan of the textas. So when the texta died, the painting was over in a way. And so this sort of mark-making was of interest to me. And in fact, I played at a whole series of sort of paintings that were made with grey textas, and very interested in the kind of variations of colour within one colour in a way. And I went overseas to the Venice Biennale in about 2003. And I remember being extremely influenced by a painting show that I saw at the, I think it was the Museum Cora in Venice. And I saw a whole bunch of paintings—I remember specifically seeing a group of Luc Tuymans paintings, and just being just very fascinated in that moment about the use of colour. But it's something that was also very much part of my childhood. I used to go to my grandmother's painting group when I was in preschool that she was always talking about colour, but not something I'd sort of come to use until much later.

TM

What do you think you find so fascinating about colour?

GS

It's sort of become the content of my work in a way. I feel like there's just so many possibilities for it. So, for example, there's a painting in my survey show called 'Flow' that I made in 2017. And it's a painting from this series that I call the 'Shadow Paintings' and this one's a reverse shadow painting. And it's made sort of by taking a painterly gestural ground. And then I have come back in with sort of opaque, flat colour and painted out the negative space around a single gesture on the, on the painting. It's a really large painting. It's 180 by 180 centimeters. And basically the

gesture that's left behind is a kind of, moves between a kind of a grey gold and a dark maroon. And the out painting that I made to remove the sort of negative space behind the gesture was originally done in a neutral grey.

And so, when I'm making these paintings, I kind of make a decision around trying out something and then have to play that out, to see what will happen. And have to play that out across the whole canvas. And so with this particular painting, I tried a neutral gray because I think a neutral gray is very interesting when playing around with colour because it's almost scientifically shows what colour will do. Because it's apparently sort of pitched right in the center between cool and warm. And so when it's positioned like next to a yellow, it'll kind of look purple and when it's positioned next to a purple, it will kind of look yellow. And so I tried painting this whole sort of negative space across this whole painting in a neutral gray and the painting didn't kind of work somehow. And so I sort of tried that again with a darker, neutral grey and sort of, it's a very sort of slow painstaking process because I had to paint the whole thing and that kind of wasn't so interesting.

And then I did that again with the paler neutral grey. And once again, it wasn't working. And I think it was at that point that I kind of decided to sort of shift, incrementally shift, the grey towards a khaki kind of yellow. And it was really interesting to me, it sort of like just held the painting together in a way. It started to operate in this really confounding manner where it sat very deeply behind the gesture at sort of first appearance. And then I would look back at the painting and then these grey sections would float well into the foreground. And then I guess I tend to—so this is a long way to answer what fascinates me about colour—but at that it can be so kind of magical in a way. And that, I mean, when I was talking to a few people about that painting in the exhibition, there was absolute disbelief that it was a single colour as well.

So where it sat positioned next to the pale yellow, at the top right of the painting, it actually looks a lot darker. And where it's sitting down near the sort of maroon-y dark darker section, the bottom left, it looks really bright. And the disbelief was that it was a single colour and that it wasn't the kind of gradiated colour between the two. And so, yeah, I think that it's these kind of small, interesting moments with colour that are totally compelling to me. But they're all, it's not a very easy question to answer as a single idea.

TM

Do those kinds of moments come out of a lot of research, or does it also come out of a lot of experimentation in the studio?

GS

So I think, I was told fairly early on in my practice that the only way to really learn colour was to use it and to practice. And I totally believe that. You can read, you know, as much as you like about colour, but it's until you kind of like are actually physically moving it around that I think you really get a deeper understanding. And so it's, it's definitely kind of heightened the understanding I've come to through the process of experimenting.

TM

Backtracking a little bit, you first studied at Sydney college of the Arts. Did you know that you always wanted to be an artist?

GS

Yes. So when I was really young, I was very keen and, you know, making and drawing. And spent hours and hours painting and collaging and drawing. And was really encouraged by my family. My sister is an artist as well, and my mum was exceptionally good at sort of early childhood art teaching. And my grandmother was at National Art School as a painter. And my dad was an art director at a record company for many years and paints as well. So it was kind of inescapable in a way. I think when I was in high school, I kind of remember feeling a little bit sort of gloomy about the fact that I had to give up science and history and all these other interests of mine in a way, because I inevitably knew I'd be an artist.

TM

Haha it sounds like it. Who were the biggest influences on your practice—I guess artist-wise?

GS

That is such an epic question. And I always answer it just in like such a very like of the moment manner, because there's so many different artists. So I guess, you know, I had influences through my art school. So I was taught by Mathias Gerber and Maria

Cruise at Sydney college of the Arts. There was, you know, influences of like artists that you come to and you read their writings, like someone like Bridget Riley. And there was artists I met through my gallery in Brisbane that I started showing with when I was living up there, Milani Gallery. So artists like Robert Hunter and Eugene Carchesio. And yeah I've been influenced by hundreds of artists over the time. Right now, I think of Albert Erlin and Bernard Frieze. And artists like Joan Mitchell.

TM

So when you're first creating a work, is colour the first thing that you start with?

GS

So I think the way that I start painting sort of changes depending on where I'm at in my practice. I guess the impetus for me, for making a work is to really to see what will happen because I never really know what's going to happen in a, in a work. I might have a general idea of approach, but I don't have a preconceived outcome. And so, I mean, in the sense that all my paintings are made with colour, then I do start with colour. But I've used colour in a way to sort of disrupt or to challenge myself. So for example, at the very beginning of my painting practice, I used to start a painting by building up a framework for the work with pencil, pencil lines, and almost like compulsive doodles. And that would form the kind of compositional scaffold for the painting.

And from that point I would colour and then build up painting piece by piece in quite a slow process, quite incrementally making small changes along the way. And I found that I was accumulating quite a few rules around the way that I was approaching making the work. And so I guess in order to shake those rules or sort of like become free of those limitations, I found myself, you know, making changes with the palette I had on offer, or changing paint brands. Or specifically, say for some paintings in 2008, I decided to paint the surface of the base layer of the surface of the painting with colours that I found extremely difficult, in a way to sort of stop relying on any colour interactions or decisions I had been sort of like defaulting to.

TM

When you say you work with colours that you find extremely difficult, what makes a colour extremely difficult for you?

GS

Well, that would change over time. In fact, I think the colours that I made those paintings with were from memory like a cornflower blue. It was kind of, I didn't like at the time, one was like a really dark bandaid color. And one was kind of, I think it was like a, quite a light bluey gray. And so in a way, it made me sort of stop and really pay attention to the interactions that were happening. I guess I've used that strategy in a way when I find that I'm becoming too competent with a type of paint or too... I guess I'm finding something sort of so easy that I'm not really paying attention to anymore, then I tend to try and change something to... I must be in that moment of like paying more attention or learning. So I used to change paint brands on myself all the time, or jump to like, you know, a water-based oil or some other kind of unusual paint that I hadn't encountered before. Or actually change surface as well. So between something more textured to a paper, to something more sort of like slippery. And it's, I think it was a strategy to pay more attention, to be almost learning and not fully in control in a way.

TM

That reminds me of when writer and curator Julie Ewington wrote about your work. She talked about how your experimentation reveals, how you—and I quote here—“could persuade colour to construct shape depth of volume and emphasis on the surface of a painting.” And I really liked that idea of persuading colour because I feel like it gives colour a kind of sensible autonomy and you have to work with that autonomy. Is that what it feels like when you're in the studio?

GS

I think I'm always trying to allow for some sort of level of chance or kind of mistake or something to play, play off as well. So I find colour quite difficult as well. It doesn't necessarily do exactly what you would want it to do. And so you can look at a color on a really small scale and think that you know how that will operate on a large scale and it completely changes. And I think that sort of has a bit to do with the way that I never can just make a decision and play that out and know what will happen. I actually have to see what will happen and then decide how to sort of tackle it from there. And so it's constantly surprising to me. And I guess that's part of the interests in a way.

TM

Even with that element of surprise, would you call yourself a meticulous painter?

GS

Yes, definitely [laughs]. No, I, I do get very finicky with my painting. So for many years I would incrementally sort of shift colours and make very small changes and work towards a balance in a way. I think more recently I've been working in a, in a kind of faster way and sort of almost trying to not be too involved compositionally somehow, and then hoping to be happily surprised. And then when I am, it takes me a long time to sort of decide whether a painting is worthy in a way. So I like stare at it for a long time in the studio. So whether it's either it's had that sort of long, slow, incremental kind of making approach or it's happened kind of quickly. And then I've taken a long time to kind of come to terms with it. And of those ones of those paintings, that a lot of them are failures, actually, most of them, like very high percentage of them.

TM

Is that when the surprise doesn't go the right way? Like what kind of constitutes a failure?

GS

Oh, it's just like, not an interesting painting. It's a very intuitive thing actually. And it sometimes takes a really long time to come to. It's an impossible question to answer.

TM

The style of painting that you clearly work both within and beyond is modernist abstraction. And it's a very particular kind of painting with quite particular styles and codes. Why did that particular style appeal to you?

GS

I would say I'm working in abstract painting and I see a lot of possibilities for abstract painting. And I'm sort of playing, playing them out as I go. I started off with abstraction in a way, because I was interested in making a painting that didn't relate to the world in any way. And then my practice has led on from that point at one time point.

TM

In your practice, you moved from painting to sculpture. And with, particularly with the Adaptable series, what made you decide to do that move?

GS

So the, the first sculptures really, yeah, were these adaptable sculptures that came out of a very particular headspace I was in when I was making some paintings in about 2004, I think. So as I was working with the paintings, I was finding it increasingly difficult to sort of like arrive at a completion point, or, to put it another way, as I was working through the possibilities for a painting at the beginning, it was sort of really open-ended and it would kind of be more and more closed off towards the end. And I felt like a slight anxiety around finishing a painting. And so I had this idea to make a three-dimensional painting that would sit in infinite positions. So I like quite literally translated one of my paintings to a flat surface made of plywood and with painted facets. And it had an internal hinge so that all these pieces, say there was like 15 pieces or something, could be maneuvered into multiple positions by the viewer. So it turned out that when I finished the work, there was an, you know, many possibilities for the composition of the work that were not dictated by me. So it was sort of a way of relinquishing the process of completion in a way. So this sculpture was looking at questions I was having in painting. And I kind of, I still see those works as paintings themselves actually.

TM

Your early work lends itself to more geometric forms. And then you later moved to broad brush strokes and more softer almost ethereal forms. There's still a very strong use of colour connecting the two, but I'm wondering why that shift came about?

GS

That shift that I saw as quite a small incremental shift in my studio actually seemed to be, it was regarded as quite a big jump in a way that I was quite surprised about. But basically I was working on these chessboard paintings, which were quite literally paintings on chess boards, and the chess board paintings were sort of almost taking the idea of the rules and the sort of the game around painting to a more explicit end in a way. So I was making geometric paintings that were sort of rule-based on these grids that were the chess boards. And then from there, I think I remember being in the studio and I'd had like a, like a really old sort of dry brush. And I made a very kind of, I don't know, gestural sort of nonchalant gestural painting on a board. And

I kind of was staring at this painting for a really long time and then just approached it in a similar way that I'd been working with the chess boards, kind of quite intuitively in a way. So instead of pulling the composition from the grid, I just use the kind of lines on the gesture of the paintbrush as the sort of delineation of spaces and flattened out areas that were sort of based on these delineations and in different colors and made a composition in that way. And kind of felt like it was, it was really closely linked to the very previous work I'd been making, but it obviously looked quite different.

TM

And with the more gestural works, you can feel a painterly presence and I've read that you consider them to be almost like a record of yourself or of your arm's reach or gesture. Can you explain that idea?

GS

So I think that sort of happened naturally. I'm quite sort of particular about the scale and the ratios of the sizes of canvases and boards that I work on. So for example, I don't really like the typical landscape or portrait offerings at the art store—they're too long and sort of tall or long and thin for me. I tend to like more of a five to six ratio or a square format to paint on. And then I guess the extension of that is that I kind of like working on a space that I feel—this happened very intuitively as well—I tended towards this size, it was like 180 by 180. Which actually turns out to be quite a good bodily size where it's almost my width and height arm reach. And similarly the sort of adaptable sculptures were about the size of like a tabloid newspaper. And also I've been working on this scale that's about 34 centimeters by 27 and a half, which is almost like a space to think through ideas. It was quite like a sort of tabletop, small painting, almost diary-esque sort of space. So it's just something that has crept into the practice and it's just been part of it, but it became obvious to me at a certain point that it was a bit about the body relationship to the canvas.

TM

At this very moment you have your first major survey show at the University of New South Wales Art Gallery, which has collected works from 2003 onwards. When you first had a sense of all the works together. Did you have any initial thoughts?

GS

I guess it's important to say that all of these works were made at different times throughout that sort of 17 year period, and they have never really met before. And so it was surprising to sort of see them in relation to each other. And it was something I was a little bit apprehensive about.

TM

How come you were apprehensive?

GS

Well, all of the paintings were made at, yeah, very different times with different headspaces. And I guess I had showed them in, you know, amongst their peers in a way. And I guess it's—there's an unknown element to bringing them all together. What happens then? So it was, you know, it was—I was curious as much as apprehensive, I guess. And then seeing the work was actually very joyful because I hadn't seen some of it for like 15 years or something like that. And I was struck by the memory of some of the kind of moments of making, like making the works, but also it dawned on me that it was really such a privilege to have the opportunity for a survey show at this stage in my career. I think it will have an impact on my practice moving forward. And I think it's been incredible to be able to show this sort of arc of my practice so far to audiences in Sydney

TM

Throughout your practice, there seems to be an importance on keeping the viewer looking and not to foreclose any opportunities. And also to get to something really elemental about our sense and experience of colour. But I wonder, are you thinking of an audience or even just a single imaginary viewer when you paint?

GS

Not at all, actually.

TM

I think there was a quote from you that it is, you do feel it's important to keep the viewer looking.

GS

Yeah.

TM

I mean, is that maybe that you feel like it's important to keep yourself looking?

GS

Yeah, I guess I should qualify that. So when I graduated from art school, I had a job as a gallery attendant at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. And I had the job of watching people watching art for seven hours a day or something like that. And I think that had kind of quite an impact on my practice, at least early on. In the sense that I was concerned with the way that people engage with art. And certainly that's been there. And I think a presence in my practice. More recently though, I guess I'm probably more concerned about the struggle with the painting or the sort of like the relationship that I'm having with the work, then what happens after that.

TM

Your work has spanned almost two decades now and through your experimentation with colour, form, line and illusion, it seems like you're trying to figure out something about painting and form and the experience of these two things. Through all of your work, what would you say you've discovered about painting?

GS

Well, I think the more that I make work, the more elusive it is in a way. It's an interesting form because it's—words really can't speak to it entirely. It's, there's an experiential, you know, force with painting. Yeah. I think language can't do painting justice in a way. I think, yeah... After two decades of making abstract paintings, I actually think it's a harder task than I would have imagined when I started out and it's more elusive as well.

TM [CONCLUSION]

And that was Gemma Smith discussing her painting practice. We hope you've enjoyed this episode. And remember, you can subscribe to our podcast on iTunes as well as checking in with Art Guide online. Or pick up a copy of the print edition to keep up to date with art-related news articles and features from around Australia.