

Painting Potentials, Enframing Perception

Gregory Carlock, August 2008

Daniel Lergon's paintings do not document what has occurred, so much as enable something to occur. They unite material, form, viewer, method, and light in a system of potentials that demands the most from both spectator and critic. Lergon's surfaces raise questions about perception, experience, and intuition, simultaneously with those of optics, cosmology, and theory. They allude to a unique form of knowledge—an irreducibly human knowledge, which for all its dependence on the vastness of universes both internal and external is just the marriage of the scientific, the experiential, and the emotional. Antonin Artaud referred to such knowledge in 1936, when he wrote of his hunger for “a human truth, human without deception.” While Lergon's work might be labeled “deceptively simple,” I prefer to follow Artaud and assert that his paintings are entirely without deceit. They incline neither too rigidly toward rationalism, aesthetics, nor metaphysics, but join these tendencies in a self-determined balance of material, light, and form.

Lergon crafts a rich phenomenological space around each of his surfaces. One can imagine this *eigenraum*—or “own space”—as a cone extending in both directions from the plane of the painting, up to and including the spectator. Here, the spectator initially experiences the play of light across a painting's surface, as well as its size, shape, color, forms, and material quality. Lergon knows that long before the viewer recognizes something familiar or disturbing in a work, he or she will enter its *eigenraum* and be affected by a battery of sensual and perceptual stimuli. He further understands that such stimuli will continue to influence the viewer through any conscious reflection in which he or she might subsequently engage. Lergon, therefore, aims less to merely paint a surface than to sculpt an experiential volume; an *eigenraum* that interacts with its surroundings and enfolds the perceptual faculties of those who enter it.

The retroreflective paintings of *Re* (2007) and *Nimbi* (2008) speak forcefully to the experiential dimension of Lergon's work. They consist of transparent lacquer

applied to highly engineered retroreflective surfaces, which, unlike conventional materials, reflect incoming light rays directly back to their point of origin. The resulting works marshal light, material, and shadow in a phenomenological order that radically departs from the classical definition of the painting as a window. Heavily dependent upon prevailing lighting conditions and the location of other works in the exhibit, these retroreflective surfaces subtly render the relationship between light, surface, space, and the observer. They generate a variety of interdependent visual phenomena, evoking a state of being that is neither concrete nor abstract, but grey and liminal.

A viewer moving in front of one of these surfaces is profoundly aware of his or her motion, as a few steps in any direction cause the painting's lacquered forms to grow, shrink, invert, or disappear entirely. Likewise, a stationary observer situated between light-source and painting sees his or her shadow superimposed on the fabric, perhaps surrounded by a halo. Such a glow (known in English as the *heilighenschein*) arises from the retroreflective surface's scattering of incoming light rays back towards the viewer's eyes.

The only constant in this ballet of light, spectator, and surface is the rich phenomenological ground laid by virtue of Lergon's shrewd material selection and studied execution. Loaded with variables, his works require each viewer to actively construct his or her own *eigenraum*. The painting as phenomenological plane is but a spring from which the imagination may draw the raw materials of its invention. In the *eigenraum*, reflective consideration and non-reflective experience participate in an alchemy of inversions that stimulates perception, provokes thought, and establishes the spectator as primary architect of meaning.

As in this balance of thought and experience, Lergon's paintings often capitalize on the imaginative potential of opposing pairs. His work touches on the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the scientific and the spiritual, the implicit and the explicit, as well as color and form. Verifying the claim of the tenth century Iraqi poet, al-Mutanabbi, that "things become clear by their opposites", Lergon's surfaces are sites of pregnant tension, in which traditional aesthetic, scientific, and philosophical oppositions are recast in a play of light and thought on material.

The fluorescent yellow paintings of *Ultra* (2007) and *Cold Fire* (2008) demonstrate Lergon's ability to mine the potential of such oppositions simply by choosing the right materials. They consist of transparent lacquer applied to fluorescent fabric—which achieves its super-luminosity by transforming ultraviolet radiation into visible light. The transparent lacquer dulls the portion of the fabric to which it is applied (in a transformation of its own), rendering obscure yellow forms on yellow ground. Neither distinctly of, nor distinctly independent from the fabric, these forms are obstacles to perception, emphasizing nothing so much as the brightness of the surrounding fabric. As dullness clarifies luminescence, a previously invisible energy bathes the gallery in otherworldly yellow light, altering the perceived architecture of the space and endowing Lergon's work with an unmistakable spiritual quality—one that derives, in the first place, from a rational material selection.

The material savvy on display in these paintings encourages thought at the level of both matter and metaphor. By contrasting the brash hues of sensational advertising with darker, more enigmatic forms and lines, Lergon raises numerous questions about light's relationship to matter, architecture, the human eye, and the human spirit.

The superabundance of light generated by the fluorescent surface's conversion of ultraviolet radiation into visible light might evoke various metaphors of transformation, whether literary, philosophical, or religious. Conversely, it might recall light's wave-particle nature, prompting one to ask: "What is light, and how does it work?" Lergon, however, has no desire to privilege one interpretation of these questions over another. He merely provides the requisite materials for thought.

Both Lergon's material selection and exhibition titles hint at the fact that he draws inspiration from the natural world. Informed by a variety of macro- and microscopic phenomena, he loads his works with scientific subtexts both rich and otherworldly. The exhibit-title *Rotating Remains* (2008, with Jorinde Voigt), for example, refers to the radio frequencies emitted by rapidly spinning neutron stars called pulsars, while *Albedo* (2007) is the astronomical term for a planetary body's reflectiveness. Even the title of Lergon's first solo exhibit, *Oktave* (2006), alludes to the fact that the upper

limit of the visible light spectrum, violet, has double the energy of the lower limit, red—a detail that, Lergon enjoys pointing out, means that had one been present shortly after the Big Bang, one would have first seen violet radiation, followed by every other color until red, one octave lower.

Concrete as they may be in Lergon's imagination, these scientific subtexts are never didactically presented on his surfaces. Rather than illustrate such natural phenomena, Lergon allows them to subtly influence his formal and material method. Letting in something that is not part of the visible world, he establishes a tension between distant cosmic events and his own intuition.

This tension is most evident in the gestural forms that occupy his surfaces. These mysterious hand-painted marks relate directly, though not didactically, to the cosmic and/or microscopic scales that inform Lergon's process. The wavy lines, colorful forms with soft edges, and shapes that recall everything from nebulae to eggs to pyramids are responses to the material and intellectual substrata of a given work. They are determined by the complex of interactions between subtext, material, Lergon's body, and Lergon's intuition. Deployed instantaneously, through the dynamics of the brush, they are less registers of raw emotion than resolute reactions to a set of well-digested empirical conditions.

Each of the two paintings in *Rotating Remains*, for example, features a green, roughly triangular, shape. One is a line bounding a large negative space, while the other is a form, circumscribing positive space. These triangles seem to refer to one another. Perhaps one is broadcasting a message to the other, like the pulsars to which the exhibition title refers. Speculate as we might, however, the marks remain undetermined.

Neither strictly impulsive nor premeditated, Lergon's forms hover in a semantic limbo both provocative and modest. They function simultaneously as gestural marks, obstacles to perception, and meaning-laden signs, enduring in a state of visual and intellectual uncertainty. Much as the heiligenschein arises from a specific set of optical conditions, Lergon's seemingly irrational marks arise from a specific set of material and intellectual circumstances, adding an enigmatic layer to his work while furnishing the capstone of his extraordinarily deliberate method.

The history of Lergon's work speaks to a remarkable consciousness of continuity, in which each successive experiment builds on the one that came before. While his first solo show, *Oktave*, explored the boundaries of the visible light spectrum, the next exhibit, *K* (2007), exceeded those boundaries to treat the absence of color. If *Albedo* investigated the reflectiveness of certain surfaces, *Ultra* and *Cold Fire* dealt with the capacity of other surfaces to transform ultraviolet radiation into visible light. Most recently, through a series of paintings without pigment, *Re* and *Nimbi* simultaneously explored colorlessness, reflectivity, transformation, and the limits of human perception.

Lergon follows his materials, exhausting their painterly and metaphoric potential in a dialectic whose closest analogue is the scientific method. In turn, his materials follow him, enriching each successive phenomenological and semantic order that he constructs. Deep violets and reds appear in both *Oktave* and *Albedo*, fluorescent yellow fabrics and green paint migrate from *Ultra* to *Cold Fire*, and various ideas from *Re* and *K* are refined in *Nimbi*. This co-evolution of material and thought demonstrates Lergon's commitment to a set of working principles. He exemplifies the artist as explorer, opening a space in which method, imagination, material, and light combine to presence the unseen.

More than light fills the void around Lergon's surfaces. There, the cosmic fuses to the human, the scientific weds the intuitive, and viewers' expectations and experiences are reflected in the ever-shifting play of light upon the lacquer. Lergon's astute use of materials, obsessive fascination with light, and rigorous method guarantee each work's experiential and semantic fullness. But just as things become clear by their opposites, the fullness of Lergon's work rests ultimately on the semantic openness of the *eigenraum*. The variables that define this space's myriad potentials are but offerings to the perceptual, intellectual, and emotional apparatus of the spectator. Like the *heiligschein*, the *eigenraum* requires a subjectivity to bring it into being.

For what remains when night falls and the gallery's lights are dimmed? Unseen, Lergon's surfaces retain neither the wild array of psychological and semantic experience which they provoked, nor the methodical consciousness that gave them

birth. Shrouded in darkness, they are mere potential—invitations to light, to experience, and to thought.