

MATERIALISM THREE WAYS

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEON PHILLIPS

What do you mean by the materiality of colour?

When I think about colour, I'm really thinking about pigment. It's the whole material aspect of colour that gets left out of the equation because typically, colour is thought of in terms of hue, value or chroma.

When I'm making decisions about colour, I'm thinking about the material body of the pigment, its opacity and weight.

What something looks like as a colour label on a tube of paint is only the beginning. Once you squeeze it out, it's about how it feels, the weight of it, how it breaks down, how it goes on. How are the pigment properties activated in different mediums such as watercolour? gouache? oil? Each medium changes the refractive index of the colour.

A lot of the pigments invented in the 20th century are quite powerful – like the phthalos and the naphthols. One that's really strong is PR 170, a naphthol red. It's the neon-like pinks I'm getting in my gouache paintings. It is very light fast, which neons are not. I call it 'the demon pigment'. I joke that you need an exorcist to get the pigment out of your brushes. It's really powerful.

Pigment has visual and material agency. You have to respect your pigments.

What do you mean when you say your brushes are a dynamic medium?

After I stopped doing pour paintings, I started using a brush. I had to learn a lot and realized how important the brush is for my practice.

What I'm looking for is the uptake of paint and the distribution of colour to get an extended gesture. I'll try a number of different brushes before I find the brush that I want and work with that specifically for a series. For example, with my oil paintings I needed a big, flat bristle brush to hold the paint.

What would happen is that I'd dip my brush in the paint, walk to the canvas, and go to make a gesture – but not enough paint was left on the brush. A lot of it had fallen on the floor. The brush wasn't holding the paint.

Then I discovered Maestro brushes by Da Vinci. They soak up the colour and hold it so it can get to the canvas and be deployed on the surface.

Da Vinci developed a technology called Duroplus for their big brushes. A brush has three parts: the bristle, the metal ferrule which clamps the bristles, and the wooden handle. Da Vinci came up with this new technology in the last four or five years: a double ferrule that strengthens the brush for longer life.

There's something about Da Vinci brushes and the way they chisel the tips. They're just beautiful.

What do you mean by an embodied experience?

When I'm making my work, I'm not making by only looking and thinking. I'm working it through my body and using the intelligence in my body.

The traditional way of viewing tools and materials is that the artist is the subject, the centre of things, and the canvas is a screen to project onto. If you start thinking about your tools having agency on par with yourself, then it becomes about allowing them to have voice and allowing them to be expressed.

It becomes less about you as the subject and more about this exchange going on between the subject and the object – there's give and take. You're talking to the objects, your tools and materials, and they're talking back to you and they're telling you what they need to be, what they need to say.

I see my materials as dynamic. They're like beings in the world. They're not human, but we interact. We have this exchange and my labour is part of that exchange. The brushes are an extension of my sensory system. They're not just an inert tool. My body, brushes and paints are part of a colour delivery system.

I'm thinking about art as an embodied experience. We see with our whole body, not just with our eyes and mind.