

# Magdalena Parnasow-Kujawa

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Ph.D., b. 8 August 1975 in Poznań. Graduated cum laude from the Fine Arts Academy in Poznań, Faculty of Art Education with two majors, as art critic and promotor and art educator. She has also studied at the Faculty of Graphic Art of the same Academy. She graduated with honours in graphic design and studio painting. Since 2003, she has been working at Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań. From 2010 to 2016, she was the head of the Third Age University of Arts. In 2012 she earned her Ph.D. from the Faculty of Graphic Art and Visual Communication at the University of the Arts in Poznań. She is active in painting, drawing and lithography, combining the various disciplines by exploring the interfaces between them. Interdisciplinarity is close to her heart. She is involved in education in its broadest sense. She cooperates with cultural and educational institutions, schools at all levels of education and numerous partners in a diverse range of activities.

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# **Not everything can be organized**

The concept of colour is close to everyone's heart. It evokes a vast range of positive and negative connotations. From the perspective of everyday life, it is not very controversial and is often based solely on aesthetic preferences. On the first level of perception, it appears to be a simple, natural matter that leaves no doubts whatsoever. This is but an appearance, though. Since antiquity, artists, philosophers and scholars have been trying to find out what colour actually is. They wondered whether colour defines an objective property of a given form or whether it is a subjective impression of that form.

Colour is a very complex concept, which requires a thorough analysis from many perspectives. The deeper we investigate colour as a physical, chemical, physiological, and psychological phenomenon or as a means of artistic expression, the more helpless we feel towards it. Admittedly, over the centuries, a gigantic effort has been made to create taxonomies of colour from the perspective of its physical (colour) and psychophysical (hue) properties concerning, for example, intensity, brightness, potential for "readiness" of synthesis and the generation of new invariants. Colour has been addressed terminologically. A question arises, however, whether these efforts, studies and analyses have succeeded in coming to grips with the concept of colour holistically, encapsulating it in every respect of current needs? It might be worth starting from the beginning, perhaps? What is colour, then?

Following Maria Rzepińska's observation from *her Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego (History of colour in European painting)*<sup>1</sup>, we seamlessly shift from the notion of colour to hue and the other way round, without explaining their interrelations. In the Polish language, both terms are seen as synonymous, yet they are differentiated in painting. The whole is made up of two values. Colour is interpreted as the matter of paint, which has a given colour feature, and the hue is the visual perception of the eye, a psycho-physical phenomenon based on one's

» 1 M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1989.

individual perception potential. *Mały słownik terminów plastycznych* (*A Little Dictionary of Art Terms*) indicates that both notions are: “[...] one of the fundamental sensory qualities perceived by the retina, conditioned by objective causes [...]”<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, they can be physically specified by taking the values of a fixed numerical range; codes composed of figures and letters subsume them into specific models. On the other hand, it is impossible to contain their subjective perception, which results from the unique capabilities of the individual. Elaborate colour models and schemes have been set up to navigate the world of colour and hue. Without established ‘rules’, we would remain lost in the nuances of tones, shades, intensity, and brightness. Every culture has been developing its own systems of symbolic qualities assigned to colours and hues. It is worth remembering, however, that by spinning tales about colour and hue, we are creating stories that are conventional in their own way, perhaps out of touch with the truth and having an unlimited number of interpretations. The context in which colour and hue are placed actually renders us helpless and unable to harness these values, as it significantly affects their coordinates. What appears to be familiar, when placed in a different environment, can dramatically change preliminary assumptions. It is worthwhile to look closely at colours and hues, to address their mystery and their potential, while being aware of the difficulties, limitations or even impossibility of mastering the whole. In this way, we can be active in breaking down stereotypes. Colour and hue challenge us to be permanently intellectually and mentally alert, so that we can develop our sensitivity, broaden our knowledge and change our views.

It is worthwhile to look at the Congo and the African continent, for example, from the perspective of colour and colour analysis. We can do this on the basis of a research and artistic project entitled *Memory – Image – Interpretation* and its analysis of the literary output describing the Congo and Africa as well as an exhibition of contemporary Congolese painting: *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese. Congolese Painting 1960–1990* from the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren from the collection of Bogumił Jewsiewicki. This project is a multifaceted encounter between human and human, human and image, the written and spoken word. It is an interdisciplinary narrative involving intercultural and intergenerational exchange. It is a grappling of past and present, theory and practice. It is also a platform for an internal dialogue that enables development, as well as the verification of stereotypical thinking resulting from the process of institutional training and schematic education.

The ideas and principles of the project have not only become an in-

» 2 “Kolor”, [in:] *Mały słownik terminów plastycznych*, ed. A. Piskadło, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo „Wiedza powszechna”, 1993, p. 134.

valuable experience, a source of knowledge about the African continent, its relationship with Western culture and an inspiration. At the same time, they have raised a number of very important questions, the answers to which may not be immediately obvious. They have provided a pretext for analysing the African world from the perspective of interpretations of colour and hue. The literature we possess has valorised Africa within the framework of black and white. On the surface, this may seem surprising to us, as we tend to associate Africa with an abundance of colours and hues, their energy and diversity. However, white and black have been used to 'simplify' and 'order' a world that has been full of tension; its history is difficult, fraught with pain and despair. The strong contrast creates clarity, of which black and white are the most intense depictions. They were needed to show Africa as dichotomous, as a space of good and evil. In the interpretation of Western culture, whiteness was reserved for the colonialists, and everything associated with their arrival. In contrast, the African people and their reality is blackness, the absence of light.

The current dispute is whether white and black are colours. Opinions vary. In line with the above reference, colour and hue trigger a wealth of interpretations. White and black do not seem to evoke as many invariants. Their combination in the form of greyness is a different matter. The task of writers was not to multiply interpretations of reality; they were to show the biased world clearly, succinctly and without doubt. Whiteness – brightness (the colour reserved for the sky), symbolically associated with light, lightness, purity, innocence, joy, breath, and openness was assigned to the 'rightful' side of the colonialists, whose opposite extreme was black Africa, full of 'dirt' and 'backward', without intellectual space, without memory, akin to hell. It is natural that the unknown, the unfamiliar and the distinct arouse anxiety and the need for order. Nothing introduces 'order' more effectively than a zero-sum take of white and black. One could argue that this distinction is almost fundamental. To quote Adam Zausznica: "Some researchers (Geiger 1872) express the view that at the beginning of the development of human speech, the designation of colours was very limited and amounted precisely to the designation of 'light' colours as white and 'dark' colours as black"<sup>3</sup>. Literary interpretations were made from the outside, from the perspective of an observer seeing the whole rather than the detail. The lesser themes of colour, however, were not completely ignored. They were rendered in reds, greens, golds, yellows, blues, and browns. We find their very strong interpretation in contemporary Congolese painting, a voice from a different perspective describing the African continent.

» 3 A. Zausznica, *Nauka o barwie*, Warszawa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1959, p. 442.

The paintings on display during the exhibition, arising from the needs of the local communities, are a message about functioning in a colonial culture supported by ritualised performative actions. The works moreover evidence the indications of an appropriate path, a way of functioning and a socially internal voice. They attempt, through their complex structure, narrative and richness in colour and tone, to capture the diversity of everyday life, to grasp what constitutes the past and its memory contrasted with the present and a prophesy of the future. The world from the Congolese perspective is not a zero-sum game. The contrasts that occur are those of colour and hue, the juxtaposition of warm and cool tones. Motifs that are often reproduced (for example, scenes of flogging) are rendered in different tones and saturations. Their seemingly 'light', cartoonish style is at odds with the presented content, which is often an expression of trauma. In terms of the means of artistic expression used, the paintings are intriguingly composed. They come in a large number of forms and demonstrate attention to detail (the women's clothes have patterns: dots, stripes), but their colours and hues do not give the impression of 'heaviness'. The strong contrasts of red with shades of blue, for example, i.e. warm with cold qualities, just as dark with light, intense with subdued, make Congolese painting full of space. This space is not understood as building the illusion of depth in the painting, but rather as room for interpretation, an attempt at understanding and wide reception. The representations are full of mystery; their atmosphere created by colour and hue seems gentle, positive and builds tension in the context of the content conveyed.

For example, in most of the paintings (except for the portraits), the blue sky tones down the entire painting and evokes an idyll. The Congolese blue sky, softer or more intense, more or less varied, is not a closing frame. Instead, it is a screen reflecting the events depicted, opening up the composition and bringing depth to it. It is like an 'insensitive' witness to reality. Interestingly, the sky, when depicted in blue, often comes close to kitsch, but in contemporary Congolese paintings it retains a peculiar quality and is not trivialised. In addition to the blue sky, the red roofs of the painted houses and the green of the permanent forest are also familiar to our culture.

Many of the elements employed are almost universal and provide a link between many cultures, without creating a specific depiction of the African continent. The paintings are only seemingly naïve representations, as they are surprisingly 'balanced' in terms of colour and hue combinations. Each of them represents a peculiar individuality, but all of them together make up the uncommon, very coherently constructed whole of the exhibition. The resulting quality is based on the creation of general-


isations and stereotypes that are useful in curbing reality. They serve to develop the ability to function in it, combining such opposites as colonial social reality and postcolonial awareness of being a free individual. The way in which the image is constructed is also intriguing, especially the soft way in which the forms are developed. Soft tonal transitions are evident, while the patches are laid flat, without much expression. They seem static and compositionally balanced. This remains in great tension with the story depicted, which is steeped in violence, despair and pain. Chiaroscuro is sometimes built without regard to colour perspective, which somewhat impoverishes the painterly quality. From the inside, the Congolese account does not narrow down the colour scheme and the hue scale used; it seems to remain in opposition to stereotypical Western perceptions of the African world and does not capture the subject matter depicted only in bright warm tones filled with sunshine.

Contemporary Congolese painting invites non-standard modes of interpretation. At first sight, it deceives us with its peculiar lightness and rejects associations with the virtuosity of the art of painting. In fact, underneath the layer of apparent simplicity, it hides a multifaceted quality about which we have long been asking numerous questions, seeking analogies, complements and contrasts to our culture. Just as the perception of colour and hue is not a fixed quality, but rather depends on the individual's powers of perception, so too is the exhibition *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese. Congolese Painting 1960–1990* received differently by each visitor, even if we can identify certain common denominators. There are many aspects we will not be able to grasp and many elements we will not be able to interpret, because they are beyond our ken. Not everything will ultimately become simple, clear and unambiguous. The search for an up-to-date colour and hue identification of Africa not only requires knowledge, experience in the visual arts, but also requires a readiness to interpret historical facts philosophically, emotionally and psychologically. It burdens one with the need to ask questions analogous to the one raised by René François Ghislain Magritte when he painted a pipe and provided it with a caption on the painting stating that it is not a pipe. If we want to fathom even partially the essence of Congolese and African colours and hues, we should first activate our sensitivity and memory, look at the paintings, and then try to interpret them, asking what they actually represent, what they are, in what context they have operated, what stories they tell and for what purpose? Why do we think they carry these rather than other colours and hues, what do they symbolise, what are they equivalent to, what field of association do they evoke in a universal sense, not only under Western eyes? The question of Africa's colours and hues is a very difficult question with gigantic potential embedded in the process.

In situations of intellectual ‘chaos’, an excess of question marks and a sense of inability to mentally wrap my mind around the whole, I am invariably helped by the words of Prof. Grzegorz Leszczyński, who once told me in a private conversation: “[...] not everything can be organised”<sup>4</sup>. The statement, so naturally obvious, is of great support for me and offers a sense of security. This is because it creates a new category of order: disorder. By nature, we like to be in control of what surrounds us and so we create our own personal bespoke order.

I don’t know if we need to completely order our interpretations of the colour and hue of the African world? Maybe it is useful to apply the category of disorder so that we do not become biased, like writers describing Africa? Perhaps it is uplifting to live with the knowledge that we do not know and understand everything. The mysterious, the unknown and the unknowable builds our future, our vision of what lies ahead. It is imperative not to close off, but to open up, so that the world seen from the perspective of black and white can also appear to us as infinite invariants of colour and hue. Isn’t it marvellous that, when we say the word red, each of us probably imagines a different red... Moreover, the colour red, the red hue, the written word red, and the heard word red are so much different from one another... ●

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» 4 The words referred to come from my private conversation with Prof. Grzegorz Leszczyński.

