

Backlit
Jeroen Nelemans,

THE MISSION
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Recurrent Color

One morning, I noticed something curious: staring at the band of blue hues with a quiet sense of elation, I shifted my gaze to the white wall and saw yellow. Goethe also studied this phenomena and found that after gazing prolongedly at a single color, the human eye will see an afterimage of the opposite color for a few seconds when looking away . . . look too long at this world and we see an inverted world. It makes me think all the more that “material form is void” and vice-versa.
—Hiroshi Sugimoto

In the exhibition *Backlit*, light emanates from display vehicles such as computers and light boxes to produce arresting and ephemeral light effects that manifest themselves as colorful images. Dutch artist Jeroen Nelemans (b. 1974) reveals the complexity of perception and the mystery of color as he provocatively deconstructs the technologies that usually deliver them.

Nelemans's series *Scapes in RGB* (2013) is inspired by *Seascapes*, a seminal body of work that Hiroshi Sugimoto (Japanese, b. 1948) began in 1980 in which he captures the sea and sky using black-and-white film. Although Sugimoto follows a tight compositional formula by always having the horizon line bisect the image, the images still vary greatly in atmosphere and mood due to changing weather conditions and exposure times. For his *Scapes in RGB*, Nelemans displays images of iconic Sugimoto *Seascapes* on his iPad and then carefully places water droplets on the screen so that they complement and integrate with the Sugimoto composition below. The water droplets act as magnifying lenses, revealing through refraction the red/green/blue (RGB) patterns of the iPad's liquid crystal display. Nelemans then takes a photograph of the device's display, and prints the image files as transparencies, ultimately affixing them to light boxes. The resulting images retain the quietness of the Sugimoto works but with a subtle animation formed by the patterned drops.

Sugimoto has said that his primary subject is time, and he has spoken poetically about the basic elements of water and air in his *Seascapes*: “Water and air. So very commonplace are these substances, they hardly attract attention—and yet they vouchsafe our very existence.” By disclosing the colors hidden in his tablet's display of a black-and-white image, Nelemans punctures any illusion of equity between an analogue (or physical) print and its digital copy, which is teeming with a different sort of potential based on its highly malleable digital form. As Nelemans explains, “Whereas Sugimoto talks about water and air as life forms, I highlight the life form of the digital image.”

For his other project on view, *Homage to the Cube* (2014), Nelemans takes artist, teacher, poet, and theoretician Josef Albers (American, b. Germany, 1888–1976) as inspiration. Over a period of twenty-five years beginning in 1949, Albers produced more than a thousand works based on mathematically determined compositions of nesting squares. Albers used these

abstract compositions to explore how colors interact, specifically what happens when various colors are combined in close proximity to one another. Although the paintings vary in size, their compositions are all the same, and certain squares appear to float, advance, or recede in space, depending on the placements of the individual colors within the overall scheme. Sometimes the colors seem to overlap, or they appear translucent. Like Albers, Nelemans keeps the underlying shape, in his case a cube, and overall composition basically the same throughout his series. But instead of being pigments, Nelemans's colors are produced by light waves, which reveal various hues depending on the amount and molecular makeup of the clear material the light is projected through. To this end, Nelemans uses a sophisticated LED panel as a backdrop, one that uses a grid system to distribute light evenly across its surface, similar to the iPad's liquid crystal display. He then creates the illusion of a cube in a decidedly low-tech way, by sandwiching pieces of layered cellophane between two polarizing filters; their colors change depending on the angle at which they are placed. Congruently, the color compositions in these works also change as the viewer's position changes. Akin to M. C. Escher (Dutch, 1898–1972), who created an impossible cube—a drawing of a cube that could never exist in real life—Nelemans produces an illusion based on how the human eye interprets two-dimensional pictures as three-dimensional. The image appears to be constantly shifting, making clear the subjectivity of our stance and the delicate nature of the interactions between light and color.

In *Homage to the Cube* and *Scapes in RGB*, and in all photography for that matter, images are made with technology, but they depend on elemental principles of physics and simple interactions between materials and light. By investigating and deconstructing basic materials, some that produce light and others that alter it, Nelemans deals in the enduring mysteries of photography, color, and perception, and deftly conjures the magic they make possible.

--Karen Irvine

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