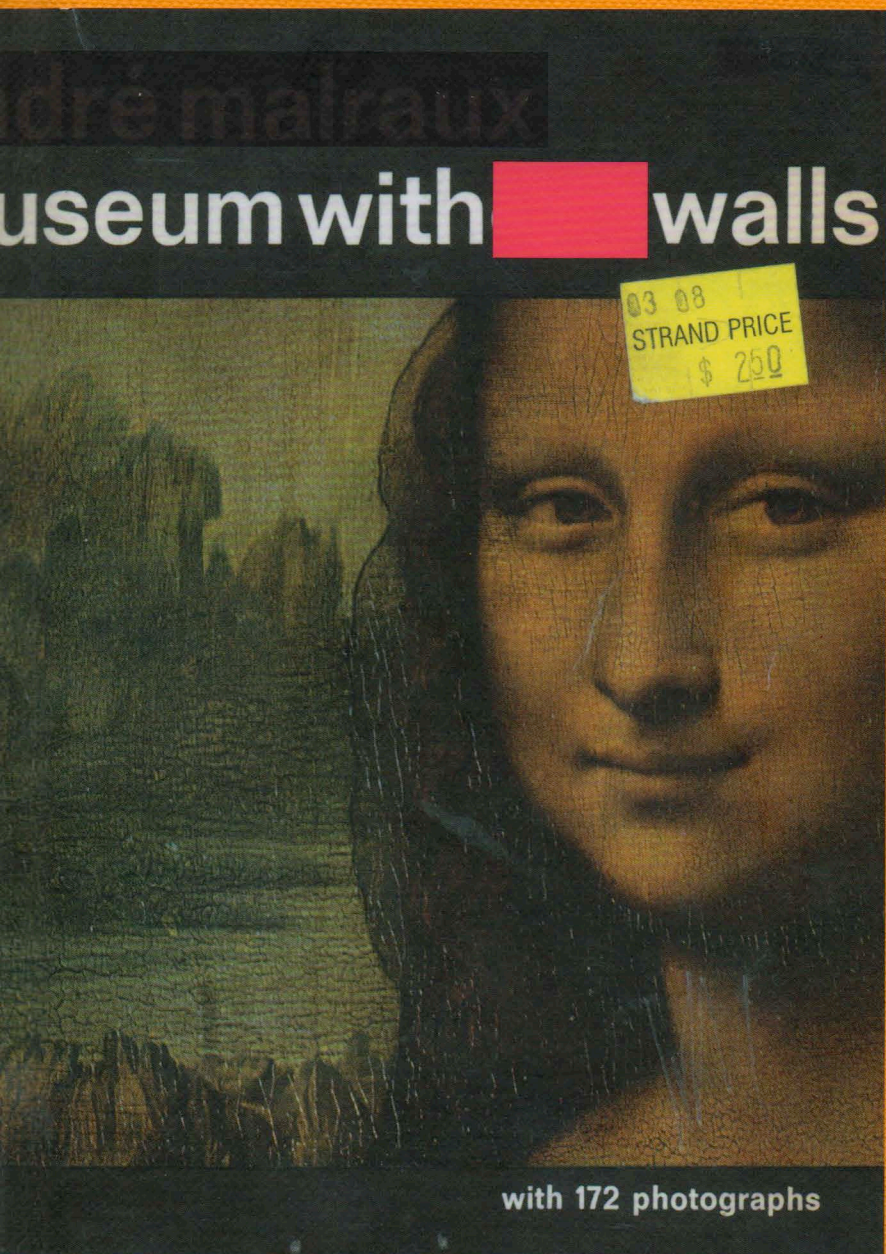


**rachel harrison**





## A Few Remarks on Rachel Harrison's Use of Color

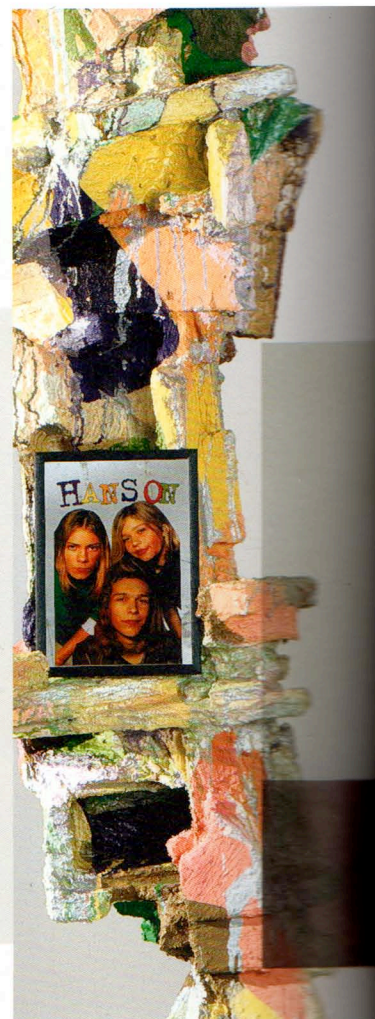
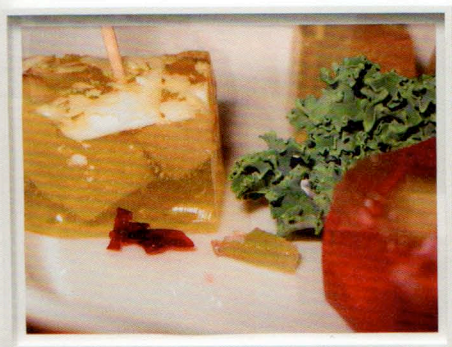
Amy Sillman

**A naked color...is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being...but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open...less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors...not a thing but a possibility, a latency, a flesh of things.**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining, The Chiasm"

**"The lobster is pugnacious. His manners are thoroughly unpleasant. He is always prepared to have a row."**

Voiceover from Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Lobsters*



**1.** Color plays a forceful character in Rachel Harrison's farcical situations. Absurdity generally prevails over gravitas: yellow trumps green and lady-shape mugs man-form. A phallic green sculpture is goofed up by a blonde wig. A bunch of dumb, dark-green trash bags hunker down lugubriously on the floor, concealing something ominous, but their weight is cheerfully rigged up to a pulley system made of canary yellow ropes. And the only words you could really use to describe the shape loitering over in the Sheetrock corner would be hot orange or boobs.

**2.** Harrison sets in motion a pugnacious and almost mechanical dynamic between three forces: the concealed, the sensate, and the discombobulating absurd. As components in this system, her colors are roughly equivalent to shapes. These colors are forms-in-the-shape-of-colors, or colors-in-the-form-of-shapes. She throws in merchandise, manufactured surfaces, and jokes to further scrapple with the proceedings.

**3.** It strikes me that Harrison's colors strike me. Little jabs and punches.

**4.** The Greek word *pharmakon* means remedy, poison, substance, charm, artificial color, and paint, all of these. Harrison's colors are jabs, spells, fast-acting drugs that kick in briefly and then are over. They are little hand grenades that detonate meaning.

**5.** Shapes are things whose outlines hit you in the eye. Color and shape are bright tools for perception and contradiction, and Harrison uses them as you would the white keys on the piano, to set the dominant pitch. Then she adds black keys, undertones, the minor emotions, like neurotic concealment, lowered expectations, disappointment, giggling, snide laughter, estrangement, or annoyance. The result is not thoroughly unpleasant. As Gertrude Stein notes, "Merchandise is always a pleasure."

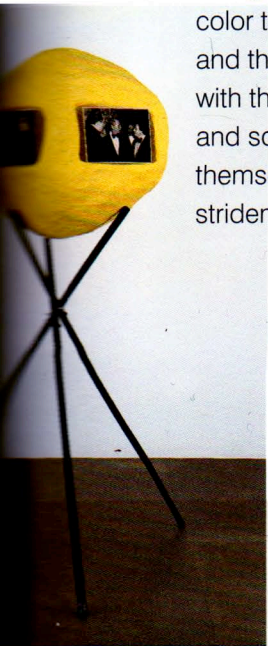


6. Harrison deploys colors with the scale and force of bodies. Her colors do things: they loom up, they come at you in big corporeal patches, as blobs and façades and silhouettes that confront you like an encounter with another person or their shadow. These colors constitute shapes and are constituted by shapes. Rarely in Harrison's work is a color used in a way altogether different from how a shape is used.

7. Bodies, shapes, colors, and sizes therefore achieve equivalent objecthood in Harrison's work.

8. Is there such a thing as a subjective semiotician?

9. Traditionally in sculpture, color took a subordinate role because color is surface, the literally "superficial" coating for the more important function of form. But since Harrison deploys manufactured objects to mean (or represent) everything in the world that is really superficial (or perhaps, artificial), then color is free (as it is in painting) to be a formal player and to engage in the formal relations that are the very visual "flesh" of the world. We can therefore take note very specifically of how Harrison works as colorist. First of all, she seems purposefully to avoid tonal shading and to make her colors legible always as individual shapes. Second, though she continues to develop her color vocabulary, she consistently uses color to delineate specific edges and to indicate relations between those edges and the shapes that lie near them. Third, she uses color very specifically to play with the idea of depths—sometimes as the traditional thin coating of a form, and sometimes colors that seem to soak in, stain, imbue themselves, instantiate themselves into or as a form. Fourth, her specific choices of color are often strident or aggressive, almost to the point of being vulgar.



10. Harrison uses color in both a narrative and non-narrative way. In her earlier work, colors were symbols—for example, her symbol for "the divine" was iridescence. Gleam equaled god, a kind of straightforward symbolic system in which shine is a symbol for something holy. But later on, Harrison seems to have become enchanted by the appearance of the iridescence itself—it went from standing for something to visually being something. This is an important shift: it's when Harrison comes to fully believe in the visual itself, without the support of a simplistic "explanation" or text. Being = appearing.

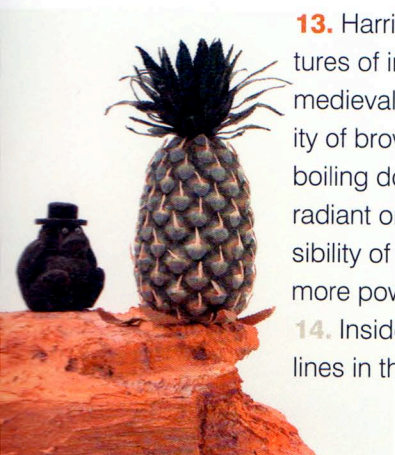
11. Brown light vs. iridescence. Ludwig Wittgenstein: "'Brown light.' Suppose someone were to suggest that a traffic light be brown."

12. Suppose someone were to suggest a world made of cardboard, a world with a monochromatic dun color and with only two dimensions. What could be revealed in this flat, matte world? Few events would be able to pierce its surfaces, to jab or cut past its folded edges.



The artist showed his table tennis and diplomatic skills in May, on the first Tokyo visit by a Chinese head of state in a decade.





**13.** Harrison sets up such a world made of cardboard, with pictures of iridescent windows hung around its periphery. It is like a medieval diagram, where the world is reduced to the stark duality of brown versus shiny. But paradoxically, the simplicity of this boiling down into a mere two-ness, the dun world versus the radiant one, offers us a way to sense more palpably the possibility of contact between two worlds, two entities, or to imagine more powerfully the possibility of their conflation or collapse.

**14.** Inside the folds of the cardboard world are little visual jokes, little punch lines in the form of figurines. Some of the figurines are brightly colored.

**15.** Harrison names three ways to cut through a two-part world: 1) color; 2) hole; and 3) joke.

**16.** In this world, then, colors and holes and jokes are one and the same. They have the same valence. What is there, what is visible, what is lacking, what is repressed, what has been removed, what is invisible, what is tactile, all render themselves in outline form.

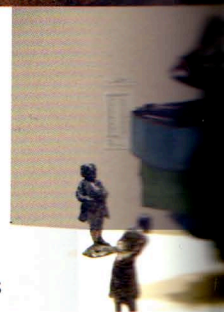


**17.** Indigenous parts. Cut-up white shapes interact with a punch list of color swatches that hit the eye: first pink, then orange, purple, green, lemon-lime, rabbit gray, raspberry, and aqua. When Harrison breaks from narrative color, she turns first (like a good modernist) to categories.

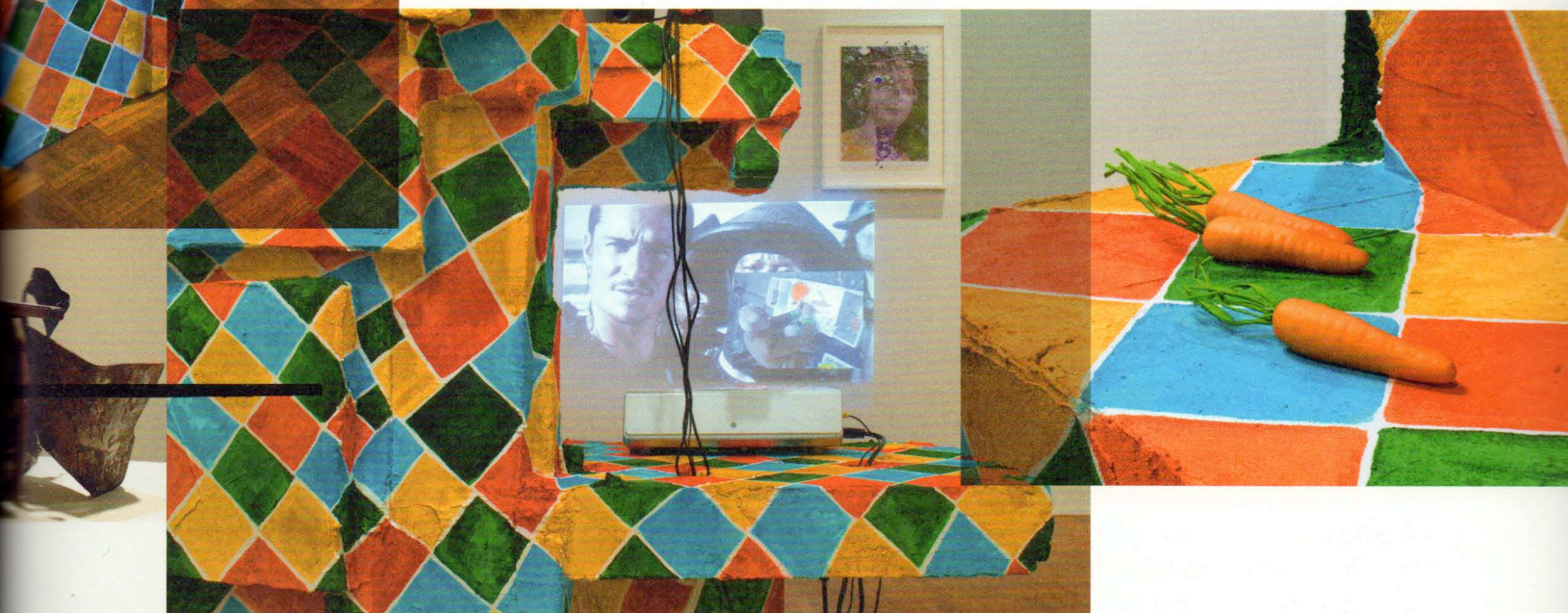
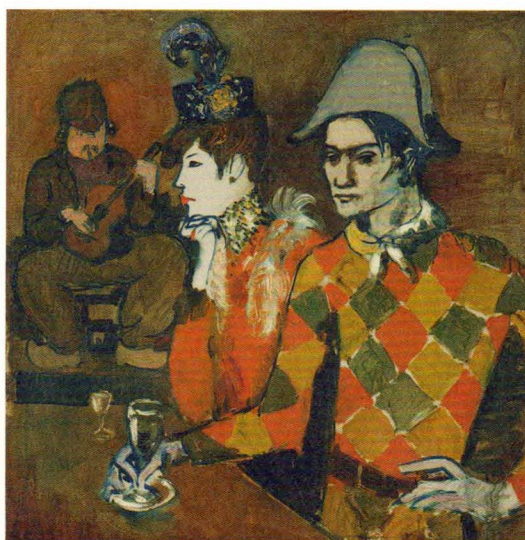
**18.** White, or no-color, attains equal status with color or material, and therefore the act of removal attains equal status with coloring in. To cut or to color, both are to delineate pugnacious little patches that punch you in the eye. In Harrison's hands, colors and cuts stay as shapes. All colors are treated equally as holes and cuts, and all the removals are treated as shapes. What isn't seen is equal to what is seen. Is this female?

**19.** Comedy. Jewish comedy? Carl Andre's famous line, "A hole is a thing in a thing it is not," could be paraphrased into the following Borscht Belt formulation: A hole is a joke in a thing it is not. How much more pugnaciously slapstick can you get than cutting a hole out of a room?

**20.** What if you withdraw from sensation? What if you cut out a hole? Is the removal of a hole an obstacle? Is a failed obstacle a way through? Can you remove the world?







**21.** I recall that Gertrude Stein is Jewish and also female.

**22.** We must also consider iridescence and patterns.

**23.** When used with irony, iridescence tends toward the profane. Ineffable shine is replaced by vulgar fluorescence. Grace becomes secretion, and the color narrative goes dystopic, almost cynical. Harrison is not above irony: she has honed her use of it chromatically. When Harrison uses iridescence this way, it comes in the form of an irradiated purplish green body blow: the color of bruises, depravity, bad sorcery, and death. This purple is like merch and its soundtrack is the sub-satanic sounds of an old, used LP of a KISS concert.

**24.** Harrison's narrative can go dark and it can go light. In some of the rooms at Bard, it gives way to cleaner refreshments, patterns, flavors, health, sports, competition. Patterns conceal and reveal surface. A grandstand is marked by ochre and violet patches. A room is marked by a lumpen mash of pearl and chocolate. A dotted pattern gives a sustained tickling or itching sensation to the eye that confuses irritation with pleasure, that collapses surface and interior.

**25.** We have not yet fully considered the meaning of surfaces concealed and revealed by patterns but we'll get to that later.