

Abstract: “Visualizing Grapheme-Color and Emotion-Color Synaesthesia to Process Mood Blocks”

At four years old, I met my newborn sister Suzanne. She was wriggling in the car seat my dad placed on the floor next to me. She glowed a brilliant, golden-canary yellow. I knew immediately, “we were friends.” Meeting Suzanne is my earliest memory of emotion-color synaesthesia. Like synaesthesia, “color does not exist... in the outside world,” it “exists only in brains” (Cytowic, “Synesthesia,” 72). In 2013 I started my art practice to give physicality to my grapheme-color synaesthesia and, subsequently, my other variants.

I’m curious about the personal and collective architecture of emotional consciousness and its relationship to time. Looking inward and outward simultaneously, I study emotional change through color, form, light, sound, and language.

For this paper, I will present the evolution of “mantra” [working title], an ongoing art series to recognize, reframe, reconnect, and remember emotional states using grapheme-color and emotion-color synaesthesia as a visual mapping tool. The series developed from an encounter with a close coworker. We asked each other “how are you?” before responding “fine” as we rode an elevator together in silence. For someone I confide in regularly, I wondered “what was keeping me from telling her how I truly felt?” My initial answer considered 1) time later 2) emotional capacity then 3) both.

I began documenting my emotions daily and discovered my emotional vocabulary was limited. I recirculated the same words from morning to evening, day to day. Taking this data into the studio, I wrote in white wax marker a spiral of daily emotion-words over a black-ink washed wood panel, the color of my mind’s eye. Then I mixed acrylic paint to my letter-color associations painted over each letter of an emotion-word covering the embarrassment of some emotions while revealing those that sat more comfortably.

As I repeated this daily exercise of similar words on black backdrops, I craved a different sequence of colors visually and emotionally; my inner color palette was repetitive, predictable, boring. I vowed to expand my emotional vocabulary to include new words and context—like weather, place, and people—for my emotions.

To further map this network, I now ask myself how my body and mind are *feeling* mentally and physically. I began including inflectional paradigms while meditating on each feeling to shift or solidify the original intent. I apply color to each word according to a day’s collective letter frequency bringing visual dimension back into my emotional being. Next, I’ll layer my emotion-color synaesthesia in kiln-formed glass, like when I met Suzanne, over the written feelings to understand how the frequency of people influences the tonality of my inner palette. The materiality of the artwork responds to this push and pull of emotional unpacking and rewiring.

Through grapheme-color and emotion-color synaesthesia documentation, I’m identifying key components of long term synaesthetic memory-making. These artworks are reminders of the temporality of an emotional state and my ability to rewire emotional fluctuations by creating a more dimensional, diverse, and, literally, colorful inner world despite word connotation.

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