

family in which there is a kinship, a closeness, and at the same time enormous diversity. Presenting a selection of pieces from a collection involves, in a way, highlighting what we have chosen from within it and which, however unorthodox and diverse it may seem, constitutes a defined whole. The light greys I have used are part of this desire to highlight the art and to be able to contemplate it within this interplay of subtle shades that will accompany them and create harmony among its tones, within a scheme of white light and warm grey.

Politically speaking, grey is often seen as emblematic of a lack of commitment, the absence of a firm stance, almost a symbol of apathy or indifference – much as we might describe a ‘grey’ time, devoid of light and contrast, lacking in substance and character. It is the predominant colour in representations of bureaucracy, state forces and totalitarian regimes, such as those of the Soviet era in Eastern European countries, a sign of moral and political ambivalence. It was the colour of the uniform of the Armed Police Corps under Franco’s dictatorship from 1941, and people called them the ‘greys’, until

following the change of colour in 1979, they were quickly renamed ‘cops’. However, in the political parties of liberal democracies, as Peter Sloterdijk points out⁴, “the shade of gray rises or falls depending on a party’s proximity to or distance from its strategy for seizing power”, and it shares with dark blue, as in the financial sector, its ability to symbolise seriousness and, once again, commitment.

I believe that today we might view this colour in a different light. Returning to the falsely neutral exhibition convention of the white cube, we can see the significance that the colour white has acquired as a visual symbol of domination and colonial hierarchies, rendering the power structures that underpin them invisible under the guise of formal purity or objectivity. We can therefore interpret the value-neutrality it entails as an active rejection of categories that conceal a system of domination. Just as life is composed of the constant proliferation of differences, not identities, grey versus white can thus express an active desire: that of an egalitarian coexistence of diversity, based on the model of cooperation rather than that of authoritarian imposition.

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *If you have never thought gray, A Theory of Color, Polity, 2025*. This book has inspired some of the reflections in this text.

Miquel Mont
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PATIO HERRERIANO
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Español

ZONAS GRISES

UNA PROPUESTA DE MIQUEL MONT

FONDOS PERMANENTES DE LA ASOCIACIÓN COLECCIÓN
ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO Y NATURGY ENERGY GROUP

A museum is probably one of those exceptional places where you can experience the social, collective and subjective dimensions that shape our visual perception, through both the framework imposed by the museum itself and through the breadth of interpretations suggested by the objects on display. The pictorial approach I have employed to present this selection of pieces from the collection seeks to gently shift the boundaries of these factors that shape our perception. I have used the colour of the walls and surfaces on which the pieces are displayed as a tool, changing the most widely adopted international convention for exhibiting modern and contemporary art: the white wall. To this end, I have deployed a range of six shades of light grey, of similar luminosity but with slightly different tones. The range extends in an ordered sequence that repeats itself, covering all the gallery walls. Each shade of grey establishes a dialogue with the tones and dominant hues of the others, just like in an independent mural, as well as with the colours and materials that make up each of the pieces on display.

The choice of this colour is primarily due to the subtle visual tension it creates with its surroundings and the other colours around it. This seemingly contradictory

tension stems from a clash between the perception of how grey behaves in relation to contrasts and its very nature, which arises from mixing black and white in varying proportions. On the one hand, grey as a colour tends to soften or slightly accentuate contrasts, thereby facilitating a harmonious coexistence between different tones, particularly in the case of simultaneous contrasts. Michel-Eugène Chevreul, who so greatly influenced the Impressionists, explained in his theory that we always perceive colour in relation to other colours; so when two colours come together, they attract or repel each other to a greater or lesser extent depending on whether they are primary, secondary or complementary colours. His law of simultaneous contrast states that each colour therefore tends towards dynamism in this relationship because it is inevitably attracted to or repelled by its complementary colour. Within this two-way relationship, grey allows the other colours surrounding it to vibrate with the subtle shades it implies. This quality is used extensively in fashion, for example, to enliven pale colours, such as skin tone (or light eyes, blonde or light brown hair) characteristic of Caucasian people in northern Europe, for whom overly strong tonal contrasts are unflattering. Paul Klee, who used grey extensively

in his palette, described it as “discreet and elegant”, as it visually recedes to allow other colours to shine in its place.

On the other hand, grey is the physical result of a mixture of opposites in terms of light – black and white – which lie at opposite ends of the spectrum. Both opposites contain, each in their own way, all colours, depending on whether we view them through an additive lens – where colour is light – or a subtractive one – where colour is pigment or matter. In the former, the addition of all colours produces white, the ultimate expression of luminosity, whilst black consists of the total absence of light, a black pit of energy. In subtractive logic, on the other hand – which is the approach that prevails in the material practice of painting – the sum of all colours theoretically leads us to black, although in our physical and material experience of colours through painting this does not actually happen, supposedly because of the lack of purity in the pigments. They are two distinct logics which nevertheless share the same opposition of adversaries in terms of values, both of luminosity and of nature, and which, when combined, can also be found in different semantic realms. They are values of our perception of light and matter that are highly symbolic and shape our perception in the cultural sense, as they bring the colour grey closer to the universe of symbols and concepts.

It is highly likely that, for both these reasons, throughout the history of our understanding of the phenomenon of colour, grey has always given rise to very different perspectives and approaches. For Plato, the perception of colour was understood as the result of three simultaneous phenomena: the fire emanating from the object, the fire emitted by our eyes, and the daylight that affects them. He divided the spectrum into three different groups: black and white; brightness; and the ten colours related to the natural elements – fire, earth, water and air – and blood red or reddish brown, the colour of the sun¹. Black and white, representing

light and darkness, were therefore inseparable in his philosophy of the world of ideas. We might add that for us, this conception also carries its own darkness, including grey. For Aristotle, the author of the first theory of colours known in our Western tradition, all colours arise from the mixture of these four natural elements. And yet to explain their profound differences, he introduced the idea of transparency: the eye is a watery element and we perceive the colour of an object according to the degree of transparency it has for us: white entails the maximum and black implies absolute opacity. Grey thus remains trapped between the scales; it is merely a gradation of transparency with no personality of its own and is therefore excluded from his list of seven colours². Much later, Isaac Newton first put forward the idea that colour is found in light and not in objects, separating colour from the material world and defining each by its place in the spectrum of wave frequencies that make up light. A century later, in Goethe’s fascinating theory of colours, colour is actually the result of shading, the outcome of the darkening of light or of brightening black, an illumination of darkness. Grey thus arises from a mixture of black and white, which on the one hand produces the *phaion* (which illuminates, or allows to be seen) and on the other the *muinon* (which reduces value). It is the latter that defines grey. What essentially constitutes this colour is a function that diminishes, lessens, weakens or degrades, but also moderates. Perhaps for this reason, at a time when the German poet’s writings on colour were influencing countless painters, Eugène Delacroix quite literally declared it an enemy of painting and a colour that should be banished from a painter’s palette.

This logic of opposites means that grey is often referred to as a ‘non-colour’, as it is said to be indifferent to the intrinsic qualities of other colours, which are based more on hue and saturation than on brightness. However, in our surroundings it is rarely absolutely neutral in hue,

and grey tends more or less overwhelmingly towards one colour or another. Indeed, it is sometimes extremely difficult to identify the degree of grey in a colour presented as semantically grey, and language quite literally falters when attempting to define it. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his book *Remarks on Colour*, says that “the impression of white or grey comes about under such-and-such conditions”³, that is, in the context which helps us to interpret it in one way or another and in which language plays a fundamental role. Even when it appears neutral and impartial to us, it nonetheless exhibits great variability depending on the light that illuminates it, the temperature of which will alter it, colouring it slightly with a subtle ambient hue.

Grey thus combines gentleness and delicacy in its interaction with the environment and with others, but it adds neutrality and indifference, both of which are integral to its definition as a colour. These latter qualities have broader meanings within the realm of values, and this is probably why there is a general consensus in regarding it as the colour of compromise. To take another example from clothing, this kind of chromatic neutrality is interpreted as a representation of sobriety, and by extension, when worn with a suit, a symbol of seriousness and commitment. It is no coincidence that it is one of the two colours most widely used by people working in the banking and financial sectors.

If we keep on thinking of grey in terms of value, we might recall Cézanne’s particular stance; in conversations with his friend Dr Gachet, he declared that “You’re not a painter if you haven’t painted grey, [...] that is to say, a grey that matters aesthetically because it comes close to the truth”. For Cézanne, grey was a significant colour because it conveys and mediates dominant tones and tonal values, and thus becomes indispensable for the construction of reality in painting – a task that seeks to reveal the truth about things through pictorial means.

This is an ambitious task that involves considerable difficulty in integrating it accurately into the canvas, due to its infinite capacity to vary according to its surroundings. There are also colour values and nuances inherent in grey that make it exceedingly difficult to find the exact shade that will allow for this coexistence, this dialogue with other colours which fosters the approach to truth. Hence he speaks of it as a colour that attests to a painter’s quality, because “it reigns in nature”.

It is not easy today to associate this colour – or any other – with an idea of truth, or an ideal of truth, now that the proliferation of falsehood and copy has overwhelmingly permeated representations of all kinds. Furthermore, whilst we now accept that the perception of colours is governed by certain laws and on the whole tends to function as a paradigm, we do not in any way regard this process as a natural phenomenon in itself. All perception is not only physiologically subjective, but is always situated within history. Nor can we define it exclusively as an individual activity, since it actively participates in a cultural context that is by definition social and collective. Perception also transcends the strictly visual and constitutes an active process in itself, in which it interacts with a whole range of diverse cognitive processes. It is a complex organic and mental activity, in which what we see is reinterpreted alongside what it suggests to us as meaning, all framed by a paradigm subject to perpetual change. The mutable nature of grey thus resonates powerfully with the fact that any truth within the perception of a colour is always negotiated in a specific place, from a particular position and at a specific moment. We therefore see this colour floating in meaning, drifting, associated with an idea of indeterminacy, a lack of direction or decision, as if it were permanently up for auction.

The other major reason for choosing grey is that, for me, it corresponds to a very wide range of colours; it belongs to a large

¹ That is, blood red, reddish brown (the colour of the sun), purple (the colour of the night), brownish grey, yellowish red, grey, ochre, dark blue, blue-green and pale green.

² White, yellow, red, violet, green, dark blue and black.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, Blackwell, 1977, p. 9. See also hinge propositions 36, 37 and 38.