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# Stuart Davis's Theory and Practice of 'Color-Space': Resisting the Irresistible Attraction of Line

*Stuart Davis's theory and practice of 'color-space': resisting the irresistible attraction of line*

15 December 2022.

**Kamila Benayada**

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PREO

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1. Colour subservient to line
  2. Towards a centrality of colour?
  3. Autonomy of colour: Colour as difference

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1 Stuart Davis (1892-1964) was one of America's chief early modernist artists. He is remembered as having americanized European aesthetics of the first half of the 20th century, while trying to develop an American visual idiom. This led him to produce his own pictorial theories, and to write sometimes virulent criticism of competing aesthetics. Although Davis was a painter, towards the end of his life, and looking back on what he had tried to achieve both on paper and on canvas, he himself defined his work as 'Drawing'<sup>1</sup>. His work as a painter was as much about finding lines that could define a drawing, as about creating space on the canvas or in his works on paper, which he did through both lines and the use of colour. This he called a 'colour-space event' (Arnason 1957 : 44). Colour seems to be secondary in his theory inasmuch as colour contributes to the experience produced firstly by the drawing; it is silent and lets line speak. How-

ever, in Davis's serial work, colour also escapes line, it acquires autonomy as it contributes to the redefinition of the experience produced by drawing as Davis re-examines his paintings and produces new versions of them in different colour combinations. So colour, ultimately, makes the painting as much as line does. But at the same time as it resurfaces as a central element of the composition or the painting, it also works against the painting and its fixedness, its shape, its eloquence, as much as it works against Davis's own art theory.

## 1. Colour subservient to line

- 2 Towards the end of his life, Davis painted several large black and white paintings composed of lines on canvas. These are often later versions of colour abstractions. He also included lines in his color abstractions. The *Little Giant Still Life* series for example was started in 1950, and the black and white version was finished three years later. Here, the earlier paintings in the series (*Little Giant Still Life*, and *Study after "Little Giant Still Life"*) are different colour combinations of the same design, though Davis's palette remains limited in both. In these earlier versions, colour is used as a tool to define spaces or shapes on the canvas, and Davis does not seem to have used drawing to initiate the painting. In the later version, colour is reduced to black and white, to thin lines of black on a white background. This looks like a sketch, but if one looks at the titles given to the works, the study is in colour, and the black and white painting is a finished work. So Davis inverts the codes of drawing/sketching and painting, and gives line drawings (or painted drawings in this case) the same importance as colour paintings. The black and white version completes the experiment that the colour versions initiated. This seems to give line, or drawing, pre-eminence over colour. The last version of the series acts as an ultimate step in what the artist was trying to achieve, a full stop to a process that has come to a conclusion. And in this case, as elsewhere, the final moment is a work without colour, a configuration of lines, which makes colour redundant, inexpressive, mute. Drawing acquires autonomy, and even supersedes colour.
- 3 This is unexpected if compared to Davis's paradoxically obsessive work in colour. For Davis, line and drawing are equated, and, as in the

*Little Giant Still Life* series, they take over the composition. This central place of drawing and line in his work is made clear in his many notebooks which work as both sketchbooks, as he makes initial sketches of what later become paintings, and a compilation of theoretical reflections, as Davis wrote down his thoughts about the compositions he was working on. In 1945, he wrote:

In a pencil drawing, all of the areas involved take their proper sequence in relation to the whole. This is so because, having equal definition, they are equally visible. The mind organizes them without difficulty. When the drawing is developed in color however a new phenomenon arises, which can destroy the drawing unless it is consciously controlled. (SDP 13 March 1945, reel 7)<sup>2</sup>.

- 4 Drawing, therefore, organizes the space of the canvas, so that it takes precedence over colour, and colour is perceived as a possible threat to drawing and to the spatial balance the drawing allows in the work. All of Davis's paintings originate in drawing, whether a pencil sketch or a more elaborate watercolour painting which works as a drawing that has been coloured over. Here, colour only intervenes after the lines have found their place on the sheet of paper or the canvas. His colour theory, which he formalized in 1940 in his 'Color-Field Space Cube' (SDP 17 March 1940), looks for relationships between colours, and goes from extremes of black and white, and inserts colour in between these polarities, as the artist tried to find how juxtapositions of different hues led to differences of perception<sup>3</sup>. But colour is placed between the extremes of black and white, just as it acts as an additional element in a structure established by lines. The final work, in that it was essentially an organization of the space on the paper or canvas, depended on the drawing. As Davis wrote, 'space is a matter of linear direction and all other phenomena – size, color, texture – are the result of it'<sup>4</sup> (SDP 1932, reel 1).
- 5 It is also drawing that produces experience, rather than colour. Davis wrote, 'Drawing is a method for giving permanent Form to experience with subject matter. The drawing is the form of the experience, not of the subject'<sup>5</sup> (SDP 27 September 1948g, reel 8). It is the drawing that changes the subject matter into something more permanent, which for Davis is the object of art: escaping the variability and transience of the experience of subject matter, to go towards fixedness

and permanence. Davis, here, writes that colour plays no part in producing that kind of experience. Colour, it seems, is neutral, it is silent; it is also, possibly, unable to transform the experience of ordinariness into something else. Only lines speak, only line can do that.

- 6 But on closer examination, lines become colour as they thicken and take over space within the canvas. They not only delimit space, they also occupy it. The two black and white versions of *Letter and his Ecol* (1962-64) show how Davis experimented in line thickness. Again, these works were finished after the colour version of 1962, they are the same size, and can be superimposed or juxtaposed to see the variations from one to another. In the black and white versions, one sees the organization of space that underlies the colour version, but also the way in which black lines acquire a different meaning as they thicken. As they fill the space rather than delimit it, black and white become colours that interact and produce relationships that differ from the spatial organization that drawing is supposed to create. Line, therefore, can work in the same way as colour, and the two come together just as colours interact on the canvas. Colour, rather than being silent to allow line to come forward, works with line.

## 2. Towards a centrality of colour?

- 7 Davis's notebooks are full of contradictory annotations. Whereas at one point he denies colour the leading role in the translation and transformation of emotion, at another, colour is central to that process: 'Only through the employment of color shapes and scales would one get the closest approximation of the strength of emotion originally felt by the artist'<sup>6</sup> (SDP 5 March 1923). Davis seems to hesitate between giving line the leading role in his works, and seeing in colour a medium that contributes to the balance of the work and the emotion produced by it.
- 8 In the *Little Giant Still Life* series, what both colour and line do is define, or construct shape. At the end of his life, he wrote 'Letters LOCK Scale/ Letters LOCK Color'<sup>7</sup> (SDP 2 May 1962). The shape of letters acts as a contour for both colour and scale; the lines shaping the letters delimit areas on the surface. Drawing, or line, defines spaces within the work, as Davis tries to establish spatial relations in his work. Lines divide space into planes, which can then be coloured

in. They make planes apparent; they produce them by making out a 'contour'<sup>8</sup>. It is these planes which then become the space of colour. But both colour and lines have a similar structural role in that they act to define shapes or spaces, and contribute to the production or transmission of emotion.

- 9 In the late 1930s, Davis developed a theory that he called 'color-space', which combined drawing and colour. Colour was used to define space relationships within a drawing. So colour was still subjected to line: its function was to complement the structure defined by drawing. But colour was also explored for its structuring qualities as Davis juxtaposed colours to suggest space. The abstract space he obtained through line compositions was transformed or reinforced by the use of colour. Colour coordination contributed to the space structure created by line. For Davis, colour and space, or color and plane are one and the same. Davis wrote in 1957:

Every time you use a color you create a space relationship. It is impossible to put two colors together, even at random, without setting up a number of other events. Both colors have a relative size: either they are the same size or they are not. And they are the same shape or they are not the same shape. They also have, always and automatically, a positional relationship to some necessary, basic, coordinative referent. So the notion that thinking of color as a thing in itself seemed inadequate. For my own personal use I simply called the things that happen when you use two colors, and the process of drawing and painting, a color-space event.<sup>9</sup> (Arnason 44).

- 10 Here, Davis's conception of colour is similar to those of Hans Hoffman or Joseph Albers.
- 11 So Davis rejected the idea that colour could have a function of its own. He used colour to define space relations which replaced Renaissance perspective, by making use of the advance and retreat of colours which resulted from the juxtaposition of different values and warmth and coolness of hue. In fact, in 1940, Davis produced his own version of Philipp Otto Runge's 'colour sphere' of 1810, which he called the 'colour-field-space-cube', to explore these colour relations. In this, he achieved a study of the push and pull effect of hues, with cold colours pulling into the background, and warm colours pushing out, which he then applied to his paintings. This was the result of many

years' research into the effect of colours on canvas. As early as 1923, he wrote:

If the artist is working in colors every color that he puts on the canvas represents a degree of relief or recession. There is no such thing as a two-dimensional picture. For if it has not at least two tones it cannot exist and the mere presence of these two tones means that a statement of light and shade has been made. Light and shade means third dimension.<sup>10</sup> (Notebooks 31 January 1923, in Kelder 1971: 40).

- 12 This exploration of colour relations led Davis to rework the same pattern, or drawing, in different colours. For example, *Gloucester Harbour*, a work in watercolour and crayon of 1924, is the base structure for *Art Space No.1* of 1940 and *Triatic* of 1941/51. The works in oil are the same size (10 x 14 in./ 25.4 x 35.6 cm), which contributes to link them and places an emphasis on colour variation as everything else remains the same. The first painting combines figurative elements and rectilinear design, where the pencil work dominates. The old town above the roof of a factory stands in the background without the use of perspective, as Davis already achieves depth through overlapping flat planes. In the later versions, colour takes over in the overlapping play of vertical and horizontal shapes. Colour, then, contributes to an optical geometry, where coloured shapes abut or overlap, and the juxtaposition of hues creates 'relief or recession'. In both these works, Davis limits his palette to varying shades of the three primary colours combined with black and white.
- 13 Colour, then, starts to become independent in that it produces the same effects as line or drawing, but differently: line and drawing can produce illusionistic space through diagonals, while colour produces illusionistic depth through the juxtaposition of different hues. Paradoxically, colour was used by Davis to counter the illusionistic three-dimensional space that lines create. Colour, while maintaining the eye at the surface, creates a tension between depth and surface, perspective and flatness. Colour is both an obstacle to the three-dimensional illusion, and it can create that illusion by contrast and juxtaposition. It leads to new perception, where optical sensation is combined with intellectual knowledge, as the brain reorganizes the overlapping and abutting planes into successive planes.

- 14 Yet Davis himself recognized the fact that lines could play the same role as colour, in that they themselves produce areas of colour and delineate contrasting negative and positive spaces:

The drawing of a design involves its definition by a Line. In its simplest form the Line is of equal width and of a single color in contrast to the ground color. The Line itself, internally, by its width becomes part of the scale sense. Its width is as intuitively determined as the areas which it divides.<sup>11</sup> (SDP 4 Oct.1943, reel 7).

- 15 So line and colour are intertwined. Line and colour work towards the same effect; both delimit shapes or space, and link the different parts of the painting. Lines can be autonomous, as they become colour. So the structural role attributed to line and drawing can be transposed to colour.

### 3. Autonomy of colour: Colour as difference

- 16 But colour has yet another voice. Colour not only structures the work internally by creating relief and recession, and by defining space and spatial relations, it also restructures the work by giving the design another identity. In his serial work, Davis uses different colour combinations which introduce instability: the work is no longer fixed, it is process, movement. Colour brings time into the painting by multiplying the work. Whereas the title *Art Space N°1* shows Davis's interest in spatial relations obtained through colour combinations, *Triatic*, the title Davis gave to the third version of *Gloucester Harbour*, links the different versions into a triad or a triptych. Cryptic titles work in the same way as colour combinations, with overlapping words that lead the mind in various directions. Both the triad and the triptych are combinations, they bring together without canceling difference. Colour here is difference, while drawing is repetition or continuity; colour creates distance or fragmentation, and line brings continuity to the series, creates unity, closeness. Just as colour planes overlap within works, works (different colour combinations) overlap within a series. Colour introduces displacement of meaning, from narration or representation, to optical, compositional, aesthetic relations. Colour



variations suggest fluidity of meaning, through escape from the shape created by line, and ultimately loss of identity as the new colour combination exists both in relation to the other versions, and independently of them. Colour goes against the fixedness of narrative figuration, which drawing, paradoxically, contributes to, and it also goes against the fixedness of words. By recomposing the drawing in different colours (and giving them different titles), Davis makes rigid interpretation impossible; colour escapes the violence of imposed meaning. Moreover, colour and line do not always match. From one version to another, Davis introduces changes in the shapes themselves, both in the size of the shapes, and by adding new shapes/colours. New colour combinations seem to call for a deviation from the original "frame".

- 17 Davis's theory itself seems unable to come to terms with colour and its function in the painting. He remains within the Cubist framework, while at the same time moving towards a different, independent use of colour. Like the Cubists, Davis saw that shapes could have the same properties as colour as they relate to one another in the same way as colours do. The black and white versions of paintings show just that: the colour versions explore how different colour planes interact, and the black and white versions place shapes next to one another and locked into one another to produce other effects of contact. Rhythm is created as much by juxtapositions of colour as by juxtapositions of shapes. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, in an article about Cubism, explain that shape and colour have the same properties in that they alter as they come into contact with another shape or colour (Geizes/Metzinger 1912)<sup>12</sup>. Davis saw that himself when his notes moved from stressing line to stressing colour: just as, in some cases, he puts an emphasis on line and drawing as the basis of space organization, he switches to colour as that very basis in other parts of his notebooks and sketchbooks. In 1948, working on his colour-space theory, he wrote: 'A Drawing is an Idea formulated as a reality of Color-Space Ratios'<sup>13</sup> (SDP 16 Nov.1948: reel 8). Colour, then, and not line, grounds the space relations that form the drawing. In 1951, Davis confirmed this, writing: 'To think Drawing is to think Color. The two have no existence apart'<sup>14</sup> (SDP 30 Aug.1951). Already in 1923 Davis had pointed to the central role of colour: 'The elements that go to make the picture on your panel are [...] SHAPE, COLOR, and the SIZE of the colored shapes in relation to one another and to the size of the panel.'<sup>15</sup> (Davis 2 March 1923).

18 The serial work that Davis produced over and over again contributes to this reaffirmation of the central place of colour in his art theory. Colour changes the basic structure in a way that drawing might not. It also transforms a painting into a moment in the movement from one version to another. Colour introduces difference, and difference points back to the original structure as the viewer sees new combinations and new relationships between the coloured shapes. Each shape, each space acquires an identity through colour, in relation to other shapes and spaces on the canvas, and also in relation to the same shapes or spaces in the other versions. Colour adds new perspectives. It places the individual painting within a dynamic process which is both unstable in that it is multiplied in the various versions, and also stable as each work is locked into the others. Colour brings repetition alive; it cancels the mechanical aspect of reproduction of the same or the similar. Colour makes each painting new. This heterogeneity is internal to the series, which retains the same external structure.

19 Colour, then, is far from silent. For Davis, it works to create spatial relationships just as line does. If Davis insisted on the importance of line in his paintings, it was to control colour, and maintain it within the limits he imposed on his art: a painting had to be an organized structure. Davis was worried that colour might lead the painting into areas where he refused to let his work go: painting had to be objective, and he was very critical of non-objective art or of the subjective focus of Abstract Expressionism. Colour could speak, if it spoke the same language as line or drawing. As he wrote in 1942:

I can work from Nature, from old sketches and paintings of my own, from photographs, and from other works of art. In each case, the process consists of a transposition of the spirit of the forms into a coherent, objective color-space continuum, which involves a direct sensate response to the structure.<sup>16</sup> (SDP 11 Feb.1942: reel 6)

20 His theory of color led him to invent a 'Color Cube' in 1940, which allowed him to explore colour relationships in a modern way, appropriating Philipp Otto Runge's 1810 Colour Sphere to his form of Cubism. That led him in a similar direction to that taken by Hans Hoffman and his interest in the push-pull effect of colour combinations. But Davis saw colour as part of the structure of his art, as artists of the second

half of the 20th century did, although Davis never let colour escape structure and become autonomous (indeed, he was critical of Abstract Expressionism). But colour does escape this 'coherent, objective color-space continuum' in the questions it raises about difference, repetition, and continuity.

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Gloucester Harbour, 1924, watercolour on paper, 12 ¾ x 18 in., Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio.

Art Space No.1, 1940, oil on canvas, 10 x 14 in., Collection Mr. and Mrs. Perry J. Lewis.

Triatic, 1941-51, oil on canvas, 10 x 14 in., private collection.

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1 "A Drawing is the correct title for my work," (SDP 14 Oct.1954, Reel 14). He also wrote on the sketch for *Little Giant Still Life*: "A Drawing and a Painting are Identical" (SDP 1950).

2 « Dans un dessin au crayon, toutes les zones concernées ont un ordre en relation à l'ensemble. C'est le cas car, ayant la même netteté, elles ont la même visibilité. L'esprit les organise sans difficulté. Cependant, lorsque le dessin est en couleur, un nouveau phénomène apparaît, qui peut détruire le dessin à moins d'être contrôlé de façon consciente. »

3 Davis explored relations between colours over several years, and he looked at how colours worked side by side, or together, in a colour circle diagram, and later in the cube. (Harvard Art museum, Fogg museum, Drawings Department).

4 « l'espace est une question de direction linéaire et tous les autres phénomènes - la taille, la couleur, la texture - en sont le résultat. »

5 « Le dessin est une méthode permettant de donner une Forme permanente à l'expérience d'un sujet. Le dessin est la forme de cette expérience, pas la forme du sujet.

6 « Ce n'est qu'à travers l'emploi de formes et d'échelles de couleur que l'on peut se rapprocher le plus de la force de l'émotion ressentie à l'origine par l'artiste. »

7 « Les lettres enferment l'échelle. Les lettres enferment la couleur. »

8 "By drawing I mean following the contour of planes" (Sketchbook # 9, 1925-1932).

9 « Chaque fois qu'on utilise une couleur, on crée une relation spatiale. Il est impossible de placer ensemble deux couleurs, même par hasard, sans provoquer un certain nombre d'autres événements. Les deux couleurs ont

une taille relative : ou elles ont la même taille, ou non. Ou elles ont la même forme, ou non. Elles ont également, toujours et automatiquement, une relation de position à un quelconque référent nécessaire, de base, coordinateur. Donc l'idée de penser la couleur en tant que chose à part entière me semblait inadéquate. Pour mon usage personnel, j'appelle simplement ce qui se passe quand on emploie deux couleurs, et le procédé du dessin et de la peinture, un évènement couleur-espace. »

10 « Si l'artiste travaille en couleur, chaque couleur qu'il place sur la toile représente un degré de relief ou de recul. Une image à deux dimensions, cela n'existe pas. Car si elle n'a pas au moins deux tons, elle ne saurait exister et la seule présence de ces deux tons implique un constat d'ombre et de lumière. L'ombre et la lumière sont la troisième dimension. »

11 « Dessiner une forme implique la définir grâce à une Ligne. Dans sa forme la plus simple, la Ligne est d'épaisseur égale et d'une seule couleur en opposition à la couleur du fond. La Ligne elle-même, de façon interne, à travers son épaisseur contribue à l'impression d'échelle. Son épaisseur est déterminée de façon aussi intuitive que les zones qu'elle divise. »

12 Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger : “ La forme apparaît douée de propriétés identiques à celles de la couleur. Elle se tempère ou s'avive au contact d'une autre forme, se brise ou s'épanouit, se multiplie ou disparaît” (1912). Jean Metzinger : “Des quantités de lumières et d'ombres répétées de telle sorte que l'une d'elles engendre les autres justifient plastiquement les brisures dont l'orientation crée le rythme” (Metzinger 1911).

13 « Un Dessin est une Idée formulée en tant que réalité faite de Rapports Couleur-Espace. »

14 « Penser le Dessin, c'est penser la Couleur. Les deux n'existent pas séparément. »

15 « Les éléments qui contribuent à créer l'image sur le support sont (...) la FORME, la COULEUR et la TAILLE des formes colorées en relation les unes aux autres et en relation avec la taille du support. »

16 « Je peux travailler à partir de la Nature, de vieux croquis et de mes propres peintures, de photographies et d'autres oeuvres d'art. Dans chaque cas, le procédé consiste en la transposition de l'esprit des formes en un continuum espace-couleur cohérent, objectif, qui implique une réaction directe sensible à la structure. »

### English

Stuart Davis's paintings include both lines and colour planes. Lines define these colour planes, enclose colours, and in them originates the experience produced by the work. But colour, especially in Davis's serial works (*Little Giant Still Life series*, *Letter and His Ecol series*, *Gloucester Harbour series*), becomes autonomous in redefining the painting. It opposes stability and introduces movement and time in the work. Through colour, the work becomes process. Colour is difference, it is fragmentation, deviation from the original design, whereas line unifies a series, brings individual works together, creates continuity. The difference brought about by colour gives fluidity to meaning, the work escapes the fixedness of words, titles, and even the artist's theory, while raising questions about difference, repetition, and continuity.

### Français

Les peintures de Stuart Davis sont à la fois lignes et plans de couleur. Les lignes définissent ces plans, enferment les couleurs, sont à la source de l'expérience produite par l'œuvre. Mais la couleur, notamment dans les œuvres sérielles (séries *Little Giant Still Life*, *Letter and His Ecol* et *Gloucester Harbour*), devient autonome en redéfinissant l'œuvre. Elle s'oppose à la stabilité de l'œuvre, y introduit le mouvement et le temps. L'œuvre, à travers la couleur, devient processus. La couleur est différence, fragmentation, déviation du dessin/dessein initial, alors que la ligne unifie les séries, rapproche les œuvres individuelles, crée une continuité. La différence qu'introduit la couleur rend le sens de l'oeuvre fluide, la toile échappe à la fixité des mots, du titre, des explications théoriques du peintre lui-même, tout en posant des questions sur la différence, la répétition, et la continuité.

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### Mots-clés

couleur, dessin, peinture, expérience, autonomie, différence

### Keywords

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### Kamila Benayada

Maître de Conférence, Polen-Cepoc, Université d'Orléans, 10 rue de Tours, BP 46527, 45065 Orléans cedex 2