

Tauba Auerbach

Malmö Konsthall

Peacock feathers made Charles Darwin sick. He said so himself in a letter to Asa Gray: 'The sight of a feather in a peacock's tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick!' It seems the bird's plumage taunted his inability to account for beauty; he ascribed gorgeous feathers to sexual selection, but was acutely aware that his theory of evolution didn't adequately deal with aesthetic experience. The biological function of the peacock's cumbersome, iridescent tail was an aid for seducing a mate, but this told Darwin nothing about how or why the colours were appealing in the first place. Since then, biologists' efforts to theorize ornithological colour have failed because birds usually possess ultraviolet vision as well tetrachromacy, and therefore see hues completely differently to how we perceive them. Any attempt to consider a bird's exuberant palette is a projection of our limited optical capacities onto a perceptual system unlike our own.

The notion of seeing colours outside the standard human RGB spectrum has preoccupied American artist Tauba Auerbach for years. The title of her current touring show, 'Tetrachromat', refers to the speculative theory that there are women alive in the world today (only women, because they have two X chromosomes) who have four instead of three retinal cones, giving them radically increased chromatic perception. Through a series of highly considered explorations of chromacy and topology, Auerbach's work proposes an analogy between the spectral fourth dimension and the spatial fourth dimension – both of which are beyond normal human perceptual capacities and thus remain in the realm of the hypothetical.

In a series of book sculptures titled 'RGB Colourspace Atlases' (2011), Auerbach attempts to bring us closer to tetrachromatic perspective by slicing into the volume of the RGB-cube and situating our bodies outside this trichromatic spectrum. Also on show are her recent experiments with woven canvas monochromes, in which she burrows into the material of the pictorial surface to facilitate the co-existence of two planes that continually intersect and change places. By creating optical distinction where normally none would exist

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Tetrachromat, 2012, installation view

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(on a blank white canvas), these monochromes return to the idea that the tetrachromat can see great variation in colours that look the same to us. Uniting all the works in the exhibition is the notion that there are spectral possibilities and hyper-spatial territories that are inaccessible to our senses but might be made accessible to the imagination. By merging the properties of two- and three-dimensional states, her work makes room for thinking about crossing the boundary into four-dimensional space – and four-dimensional colourspace – even if perceptual experience of this remains a physical impossibility.

For her 'Fold' paintings, many of which – such as *Untitled (Fold)* (2010) – are on display here, Auerbach crumples up her canvases and spray paints directly onto their creases, before flattening them out on stretchers. As two-dimensional territories bearing traces of their former folds, they appear as scintillating pictures that move back and forth between graphic and plastic. In contrast to the *trompe l'oeil* tradition of constructing illusory depth on a surface, this is a creation of optical three-dimensional space on a flat plane that refers to pre-existing actual depth, so the pictorial space is at once on, in and of the canvas. Distinctions between abstract/concrete and presentation/representation become irrelevant: there was no abstraction involved in their making, since each crease is a physical index of the canvases' previous spatial configuration. So they may *look* abstract, but in this way they're more representational than anything from the history of figurative painting.

None of which says anything about how beautiful they are. Especially when grouped together, the 'Fold' paintings have an arresting and dynamic radiance that is almost entirely lost in reproduction. With previous bodies of work having dealt with aspects of semiotics, causality and chaos theory, the braininess in Auerbach's art is never a cheap appendage to the visual splendor, nor the other way round. With deep reverence for craftsmanship, fine-tuned aesthetic intuition and an admirably broad curiosity about the world and the universe, the former commercial sign writer seemingly works with left and right brains tightly fused. 'Tetrachromat' is an audacious display whose beauty remains somehow inexplicable. Darwin would spew.

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Frieze

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