

Susanne Nørregård Nielsen

Red Yellow Blue

INTERVIEWED BY DCA

What sparked your interest in Modernist artists like Mondrian and Malevich?

I originally trained as a painter although more recently photography has taken an important role in the ideas I wish to explore. These ideas are often rooted in painting but use other methods and materials to convey the work. My working process often references pre-existing artworks - for example, works by Malevich and Mondrian.

Before I came to Scotland, I studied in Poland at the Academy in Poznan. While there I became interested in the Polish artist Władysław Strzemiński, whose work led me to Malevich. I was drawn to thinking about Piet Mondrian and his relationship with nature during a fellowship I undertook at the Pier Art Centre in Orkney in 2000 when I came across a photograph by Andre Kertesz called *Chez Mondrian* in which a single artificial tulip can be seen in the artist's studio with its stem and leaves painted white. I became interested in the myth about Mondrian's relationship with the colour green; "that impossible, naturalistic green" being his description which goes some way to explaining his decision to whitewash the green parts of the plant. I talked to the Pier Arts Centre Director Neil Firth about this and he commented "Maybe Mondrian really liked the flower". As part of this Orkney residency I created *Mondrian's Greenhouse*, in which the glass panels of a greenhouse in Stromness were changed using coloured tissue paper, to recreate Mondrian's signature abstraction.

This was the starting point for the work which became *Mondrian's Flowerbed* which I made for a exhibition entitled *What in the world is more beautiful?* in St Andrews in 2004. Gair Dunlop and I co-curated this exhibition which was based on dialogue and collaboration between gardeners, naturalists and artists. The flowerbed was located in the Botanic Gardens and the intention behind the work was to put a focus on Mondrian's floral painting by transposing each of the flowers which he depicted during his life span to this 2.5 x 5m flowerbed setting. I was interested in applying the idea of cataloguing actual plants, playing with notions of classification in botany and art history. Coming back and forth every fortnight to do the weeding, I became very aware about the transformations that had taken place between my visits. And in a way the Mondrian flowerbed linked to the whole tradition of flower painting - and especially the creation of memento mori. I documented their growth and as time went on, their death. *Flowerbed* was a way of paying homage to Mondrian and his secret passion. All the flowers he depicted were planted in the flowerbed. Chrysanthemums, sunflowers, lilies, irises and roses were harmoniously arranged according to colour and height. In particular, I was drawn to the chrysanthemum, which Mondrian painted time and time again. When you think of the different '-isms' of art, it is not that different from the gardening world's obsession with different species of plants.

Stile (2002) also refers to nature and was originally installed at the intersection between tall grassland and a wildflower meadow. In his later work Mondrian was striving for "the totality of nature expressed by the intersection of two lines" and the idea of using the form of a stile as the basis for a piece of work was arrived at in part as a play on words (Mondrian was a key player in the art movement known as 'de stijl' - pronounced 'stile').

Are you a keen gardener as a result of your interest in the nature works of Mondrian?

I grew up on a farm in Denmark; helping out in the garden and in the fields was a part of daily life and my interest in the garden and horticulture has always been a part of my daily life. For *Red Yellow Blue*, I have been working with the University of Dundee Botanic Gardens, where I have been watering and feeding the chrysanthemums that they have been hot-housing for this exhibition.

The locating of the greenhouse into the DCA Gallery space really interests me as a new point of departure in my work as I believe its structure will start to make connections with the architecture and glazed features of the gallery. I think of Mondrian's quote from a pamphlet he made in 1942 entitled *Towards the True Vision of Reality*: "Even at this time, I disliked particular movement such as people in action. I enjoyed painting flowers - not bouquets, but a single flower at a time, in order that I might better express its plastic structure."

Within the rigorous systems in your work there is also a strong sense of play. Can you describe this component within your work?

The element of play takes different forms in my work. With the *Stile* it is a word play on 'de stijl' - the art movement which the work visually references, and which is reminiscent of the visual poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay. Being Danish, and operating between two languages, 'stile' was one of those words I was intrigued about. Also it is my own presence that often animates the works I make, such as jumping whilst wearing the Suprematist dress, or flying a kite I have made. The removal of things from their original site or purpose is also visited in my series of kite works. The kites play on the idea of the Constructivist art movement and its affinity with aviation and the interrelationship between abstract art, textiles and the body. With this work I reanimated individual paintings by the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, flying them in kite form. The kites are the same size as Malevich's original paintings. I think there are two important things here, firstly that the kite is removed from being perceived as painting and secondly the notion of play in order to open up or create a new dialogue. It would have been impossible for me to have used the medium of painting to do this, the dialogue would somehow close things down. In the past I have exhibited photographs of me flying the kites. For this exhibition I will also show the kites themselves in the gallery. Their positioning in the gallery is also reminiscent of the irregular heights that Malevich often chose to install his paintings. In particular I am thinking of the first Suprematist exhibition in 1915 called '0-10'.

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152 Nethergate
Dundee DD1 4DY
01382 909900

www.dca.org.uk

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Open late Thu until 8.30pm. Admission free

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