

## Jean-Maxime Dufresne and Virginie Laganière *Chromatopia*

March 13 – May 25, 2025

### Exploring the territories of colour

Contemplating the mystery of colour is an ambitious and courageous project. Many scientists, philosophers, artists, and theorists have attempted to understand its origins, its functioning, and its effects, in a desire to rationalize this profoundly complex phenomenon of visual perception. From the refraction of light into colours by Isaac Newton<sup>1</sup> to the law of simultaneous contrast of colours by Michel-Eugène Chevreul<sup>2</sup>, each discovery on the subject helps little by little to elucidate it. However, as colour historian Michel Pastoureau points out, “[. . .] colour is indefinable, resists analysis, and synthesis even more so.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond optical physics and neurology, a more sensitive approach to colour allows us to reveal unsuspected nuances and hues.

Like Pierre Soulages (1919–2022) with his blacks, Yves Klein (1928–1962) with his blues, or Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) with his combinations of black, white, and primary colours, Guido Molinari (1933–2004) is one of the artists we spontaneously associate with colour. Initially exploring colours in a gestural practice, he gradually gravitated toward geometric abstraction, where the use of the hard edge technique allowed him to remove all traces of gestuality from the pictorial surface in order to liberate colour's effect. A series of his works of the 1960s deployed chromatic vibration, where neighbouring colours meticulously chosen for their complementary and associative qualities animate the canvas. For Molinari, the three elements at the

base of the creation of a work—colour, structure, and space—are activated thanks to the dynamic contribution of the spectator, whose sensitive and emotional experience results from a subjective synthesis.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, colour “[. . .] is the most relative means of artistic expression,” as Josef Albers (1888–1976) before him had pointed out.

Inspired by Molinari's chromatic explorations and his analytical approach to painting, Jean-Maxime Dufresne and Virginie Laganière have made their residency at the Guido Molinari Foundation an investigative project on the polysemy of colour. These Quebec artist-researchers, who, in addition to their respective practices, have been working for about 20 years as a duo, are interested in the territories that surround us—natural, constructed, technological, psychic. With their exhibition *Chromatopia*, they explore the territories of colour, its anthropological, social, historical, and political dimensions, as well as the imaginaries it arouses. Throughout their residency, Jean-Maxime and Virginie shared the Foundation's space and Molinari's paintings therein and consequently coexisted with his colours that were mixed in the adjacent studio.

It was by applying a gradient of coloured lighting to Molinari's tableaux that the artists in residency effectively passed the colour through the developer. The sequence of coloured lights on the pictorial surface made the colours of the canvases dance before our eyes, in a skillfully measured optical ballet where the serial bands approach and recede, lighten and darken to the changing rhythm of LEDs. The quasi-psychedelic sensory experience revealed Molinari's sharp chromatic expertise, which, in addition to the impeccable juxtaposition of his serials, was able to camouflage within his works a chromatic DNA that only the shimmering lighting gradient could reveal.

Faithful to their artistic practice following a methodology between documentation work, scientific research, and fictional stories, Jean-Maxime and Virginie met with a sociologist, neurologists, entomologists, art theorists and an expert in optical physics to construct a chromatic narrative at the intersection of these disciplines. The Foundation presents this story in three parts: a photographic chromatic index; a video work composed of interviews with specialists; and a rereading of Molinari's work from the perspective of colour. Like Ariadne's thread, the colour chart of their photographic archives deployed in the exhibition space combines places, objects and details of a material culture that the artists documented and collected over the last 15 years. If the recurrence reveals the codes and standards associated with certain colours, this index above all illustrates the importance of context and culture in colour's perception. Indeed, as the sociologist and author of *Mythanalyse de la couleur*<sup>5</sup> Hervé Fischer underlines in his interview, colour is both a standardized social language and a marker of myth, and therefore subject to a diversity of interpretations. The white of virginity and purity in the West is not the same as its association with mourning and death in Asia, for example. The video work created during the residency acts as a buttress for Molinari's archives, voices, and historical works that informed the entire project.

In an effort to disrupt the anthropocentric perspective on the issue, Jean-Maxime and Virginie initiated a collaboration with the Montreal Insectarium to observe and better understand the biological function of colour in insects, particularly butterflies. Whether used as a warning against toxicity, a camouflage subterfuge, or an alert signal, colour is a powerful visual communication tool—and not only for insects. Fischer even goes so far as to state that colour is an ideological construction that has become a commodity in the service of capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The reduction of the chromatic alphabet with industrialization has therefore led to a simplification of perception and, consequently, reduced nuances in favour of greater saturation.

With the *Chromatopia* exhibition-residency, however, colours do not fade at the Foundation. On the contrary, Jean-Maxime and Virginie invite us to an immersive experience that celebrates colour in all its kaleidoscopic splendour and creates a dialogue between eras, territories, and disciplines. From butterflies' iridescent wings to the ochre bands of Molinari's paintings, new narratives emerge between the lines, between the colours.

— Camille Bédard

- 1 On this subject, see "A new theory of light and colours," originally published in 1672, under the heading: *A Letter of Mr. Isaac Newton, Mathematics Professor in the University of Cambridge, containing his new theory about light and colours*.
- 2 Chevreul, Michel-Eugène. *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l'assortiment des objets colorés, considérés d'après cette loi dans ses rapports avec la peinture, les tapisseries...* Paris: Pitois-Levrault, 1839.
- 3 Gruet, Brice. "Michel Pastoureaux et l'imaginaire des couleurs," *La Géographie* 1567 (4), 2017, p. 15.
- 4 Text delivered by Guido Molinari at a conference convened on 14 March 1974 at the Université du Québec à Montréal.
- 5 Fischer, Hervé. *Mythanalyse de la couleur*. Paris: Gallimard, 2023.
- 6 Comments made to Jean-Maxime Dufresne and Virginie Laganière as part of an interview with Hervé Fischer, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024.