

# Transitions

## Three: True Colours



Text and images by

**Christopher Cristóbal Newberry**

## Preface

“Transitions” is a series of 5 books, each with its own theme. This first book is “Gestalt Blue Skies”, then come “Platonic Views”, “True Colours”, “Lockdown” and “Abstracting Colours”. The reader will find the preface and introduction will be very similar because they introduce the whole, but then there are a few written pages about the individual collections.

The five ‘transitions’ refer to the progression of my work, thinking and feelings from about 2009. The running theme throughout is ‘perception’ in relation to ‘truth’ about people, ideas and information. How we see and interpret information – particularly visual information. I hope to have some small influence on the debate about how we interpret information and why we interpret it in certain ways.

When I started these ‘transitions’ in 2009 I hadn’t really thought the whole thing through, I didn’t know exactly where I was going. Things sort of developed from the idea that when we only have partial information on a subject, idea or image we invent the rest. That’s basic Gestalt theory. Then I started thinking about how we tend to idealise images by thinking of them diagrammatically – in terms of geometry, symmetry, simplicity: so, for example, sky, sea and land became long rectangles. This led me consider at what point something we interpret as real or truthful is actually not. As conspiracy theories became more and more prevalent on social media I thought there was a clear link between ‘post-truth’ and my images. Things that seem real but aren’t.

2020 brought us the Covid 19 pandemic and ‘lockdown’. As my partner and I couldn’t leave our home except for groceries and exercise, that forced me to have a much closer look at my immediate surroundings: my house, my garden and my exercise route. Having nothing else to work with, I created images using those surroundings. However, instead of single, coherent images I took whole scenes, such as an unmade bed or a ceiling, and divided them into details and segments and reincorporated them into a whole, which would produce patterns and symmetries.

Most recently, I have started to simplify real images into abstract colours, which still give the impression of the original, ‘real’ image but are now a 22-colour reduction of information.

More detailed information in each book.



*When we don't have the whole of it, we complete the rest.*



*Perfect rectangles do not exist in nature, only in our mind.*



*Given lockdown, a ceiling was a natural choice to re-colour, segment and re-incorporate as squares.*

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Website: [www.christophernewberry.com](http://www.christophernewberry.com)

## INTRODUCTION (Part 3 of 5)



*Starting off with the truth: A rather mundane entrance to a car park with 3 bicycles dangling from the ceiling.*



*While conserving a degree of verisimilitude, the image is now almost abstract, missing superfluous objects that hinder.*



*Detail – Before and after: Lines have been straightened, colours have been changed and saturated, and superfluous objects such as pipes and straps have been eliminated, creating the illusion that the bicycles float. Illusions like this are to be seen both in the Spotlight and in the Photographer's Gallery upstairs where "True Colours" continues.*

I honestly thought it would be spotted immediately as a fake. Many didn't. I got lots of compliments. I had deliberately set out to deceive, so it was a lie – joke or not. However, that image is an exception to my work. My works are verisimilitudes, based on truth with the purpose of exposing 'truthiness' and lies. They are not lies.

### The camera doesn't lie??

In the past people used to say, "the camera doesn't lie". The Cottingley girls showed us that the camera certainly can lie. When creating an image, I start off with the truth: objects that in fact exist. When light hits these objects, it bounces off of them and into our eyes. Usually, reflected light warns us of the presence of an object so we don't bump into it. or trip on it. For any practical purpose, if we can see the object with our eyes and touch it, then it is real – it is factually there. If the objects are lit, a camera can pick up their reflection on film or image sensors. When viewed we can say that the resulting image is 'truthful'. Depending on the shapes, forms, colours and composition we can think of those truthful images as beautiful, ugly or, perhaps, mundane – uninteresting. Take a car park.

### Car parks and verisimilitude

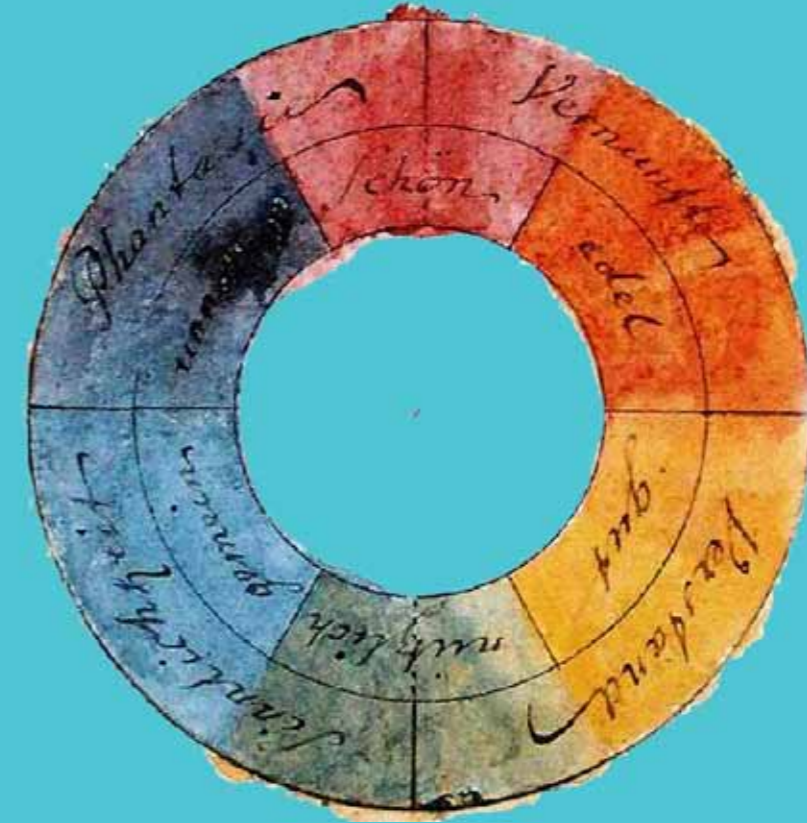
Car parks on the whole are not beautiful objects. The one pictured left in Bruges was certainly not a thing of beauty, but it did have bicycles dangling from the ceiling with neon lights as wheels, so I took an interest. I photographed the scene and the resulting image is 'truth'. It is not the object itself, but a truthful reflection of the object. However, then I transformed the image: I made all lines perfectly straight, I changed the colours, got rid of superfluous objects such as pipes and straps. Then, the image becomes more and more abstract, but conserving a degree of verisimilitude: There really are 3 bicycles in a room with pipes. That much is true, but bicycles don't usually float in the air, so the image is verisimilar – not true. The image becomes idealised with its almost perfect shapes and saturated colours – many of them complementary.

*(Continues in Book 4, Lockdown)*

# True Colours

*“Full, saturated colours have an emotional significance I want to avoid.”*  
– Lucian Freud

*Colour is a power which directly influences the soul.*  
– Wassily Kandinsky





Ancient Greek statue of an archer before and after restoring its original colours. By the time of the Renaissance people already believed that Greece was a world of elegant, shimmering white. (See “The School of Athens” by Raphael on page 8 of “Platonic Views” in this series and notice the building and statues).

For centuries we believed that the ancient Greeks lived in a world of glimmering white marble buildings and statues. Remnants of paint on statues has recently provided clear evidence that bright, powerful colours covered statues and buildings, yet people chose to believe that the Greeks lived in an elegant world of whiteness.

That has been the dominant belief in western cultures for the past 500 years or more.\* Surely bright colours could not be a part of that world.

Whiteness was important. 18th century biology taxonomist Carl Linnaeus classified the whole of the natural world according to ranks, including people. He gave certain characteristics to people according to their race: if you were white you would be gentle, acute, and thoughtful. If you were black you would be lazy, cunning and without shame. Europe believed that the whiter the statue, the more beautiful, elegant and refined it was. According to Goethe, (yes, that Goethe, who, by the way, invented the colour wheel and developed the

basis for modern colour theory) “savage nations, uneducated people and children have a great predilection for vivid colours – people of refinement avoid vivid colours in their dress and the objects that are about them.”

Goethe would not have believed that ancient Greek culture, which we

\* By the Renaissance people already believed that Greece was shimmering white. See page 8 of “Platonic Views” in this series: “The School of Athens” by Raphael shows white buildings and statues.

all regard as refined, had enjoyed precisely the bright colours liked by “savage nations”. We are all product of our time, including Linnaeus and Goethe. European culture, particularly in the late 18th and 19th centuries was visually drab. They were the times of “dark satanic mills”, the times of the industrial revolution. Coal and soot. Children chimney sweeps. This reflected on society: Women’s wear was drab: light browns, blues or greys. Wealthy women’s wear used deep, rich, tones of green, blue and brown, but was still drab. Men basically dressed in black and white, perhaps brown on festive occasions. By then Gothic cathedrals, which had been richly coloured in Medieval times, had lost their pigment and were as grey as everything else. In 1838 Michael Faraday, the British scientist, was asked to provide a solution to the cleansing of the Elgin Marbles, then recently having been removed from the Parthenon in Athens to the British Museum in London. Faraday tried many methods, but failed to come up with an answer: “The examination has made me despair of the possibility of presenting the marbles in the British Museum in that state of purity and whiteness which they originally possessed”. So for the last five centuries Europe has been a culture where whiteness is identified with the virtuous male, the rational and the western. Colour becomes therefore, the non-male, the non-rational and the non-western. Well, I come from Mexico where colour there is! The Aztecs, Toltecs, Olmecs, Mayans and many other Mexican cultures used a lot of colour as did many pre-Columbian cultures in Central and South America. Mayan culture flourished from about 200 to 900 AD. Greek culture was at its height about 300 years earlier. Despite never having had any contact whatsoever, Mayans and Greeks used similar colours and thought in similar ways. We’ve always known that Mayan buildings, statues and frescoes were richly painted, but in the case of Greece, it wasn’t until the 21st century that archaeologists discovered that Greeks also painted their statues and buildings. The Greeks certainly had no aversion to colour!



In Victorian eyes understated colour in female attire allowed them to keep a sense of decorum and propriety.



“A Private View at the Royal Academy” by William Powell Frith -1881. Women’s attire, though rich in colour was drab. Only one man is wearing a colour that is not black, white or brown. He wears a red tie and he has nothing to declare but his genius: Oscar Wilde.



*“Procession in Honour of the Nymphs” (above) is a painting on a wood panel from Pitsa Cave, done in about 500 BC. Very few of these Greek paintings survive today, but this gives a clear indication of the colours that were used.*

So, returning to the theme of ‘Platonic Views’, Plato, who by definition was a man of his time, would probably have taken the colours of his times for granted. He had no idea that a couple of thousand years later we would believe his times were ‘white’ and that the bright colours he knew would appear ‘gaudy’ or ‘vulgar’ to us. As far as I know, the natural world in which the ancient Greeks developed was not a particularly colourful one, therefore their use of colour must have developed independently of the colours immediately found in nature.

The Mayans didn’t have that problem – just think of the colourful parrots, toucans and macaws that inhabit the area! The Greeks must have experimented a lot with colour to come up with what did not commonly exist in nature. They thought about colour in a different way to the way we do today. According to Plato the primary colours were four: white, black, red and the ‘brilliant and shining’, which to us is not a colour at all. They had no one word for ‘blue’ though they used it in many shades. In the play by Euripedes, “Helen”, she feels guilty about her beauty having been the cause of so many devastating events in the course of the Trojan War. She pleads that the colours on her statue be removed in order to get rid of that beauty. The Greeks’ use of colour is not mere speculation. There are recent archaeological reconstructions which corroborate that ancient Greek statues were actually polychromatic. The effect that the Greeks sought when applying the most brilliant and saturated colours was to portray splendour, energy, movement and life.

The series in True Colours is a continuation of Platonic Views, in the sense that the images are versimilar, however in addition to the impossibly geometric shapes, I gave the images impossibly vibrant colours, in the sense that those colours were not present in the original photograph – a reflection of reality.

In these times of post-truth, pandemic and climate change, perhaps what we need is a bit of colour without feeling we are unsophisticated!

*Bonampak Mural (below) is a Mayan painting from about the year 600 AD. Compare the colouring and poses of the subjects. There was no contact between these two cultures, yet they developed similar pigments, customs and attitudes.*



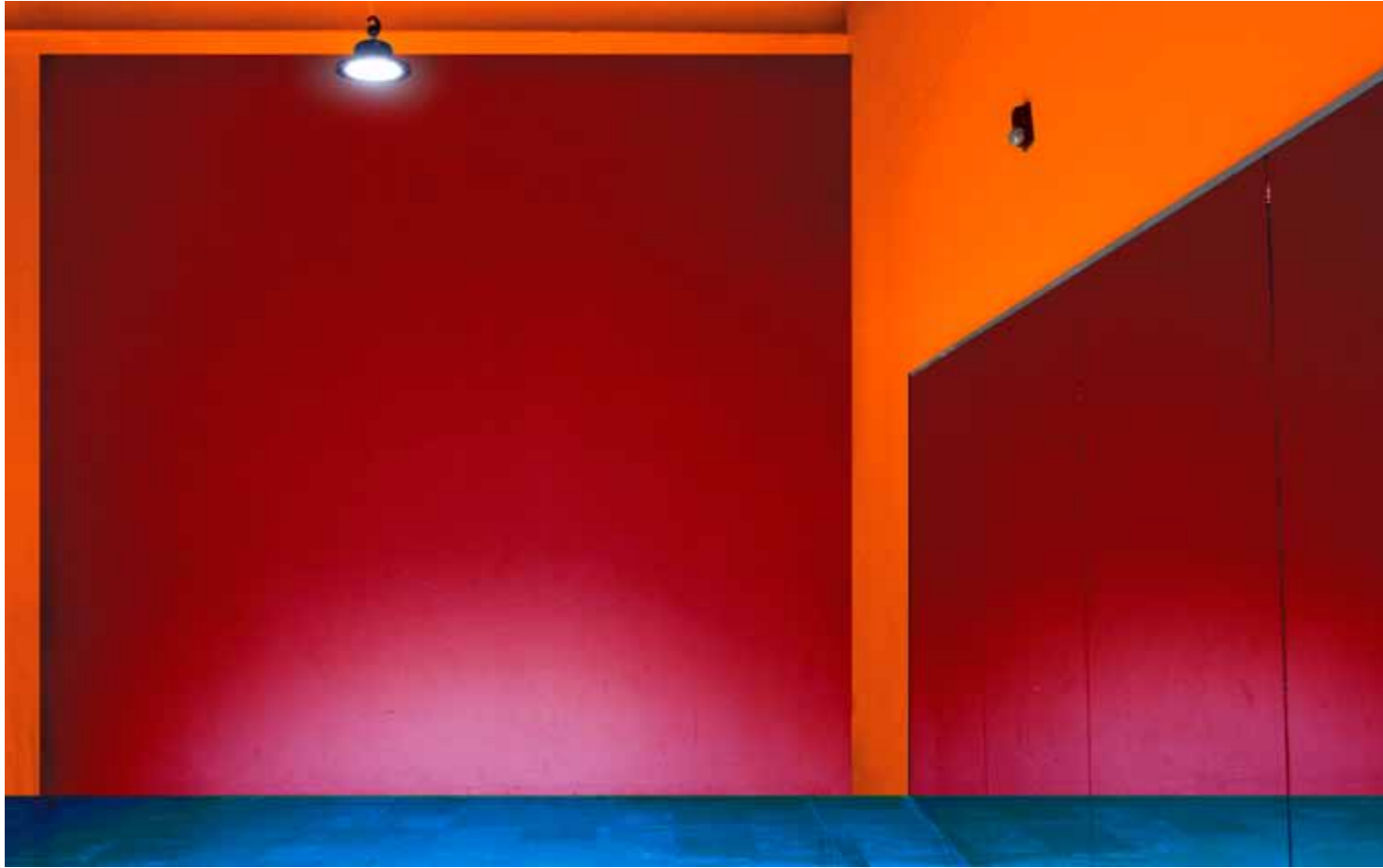
Composition 447  
 “Bike Lights”  
 Bruges, Belgium  
 2019



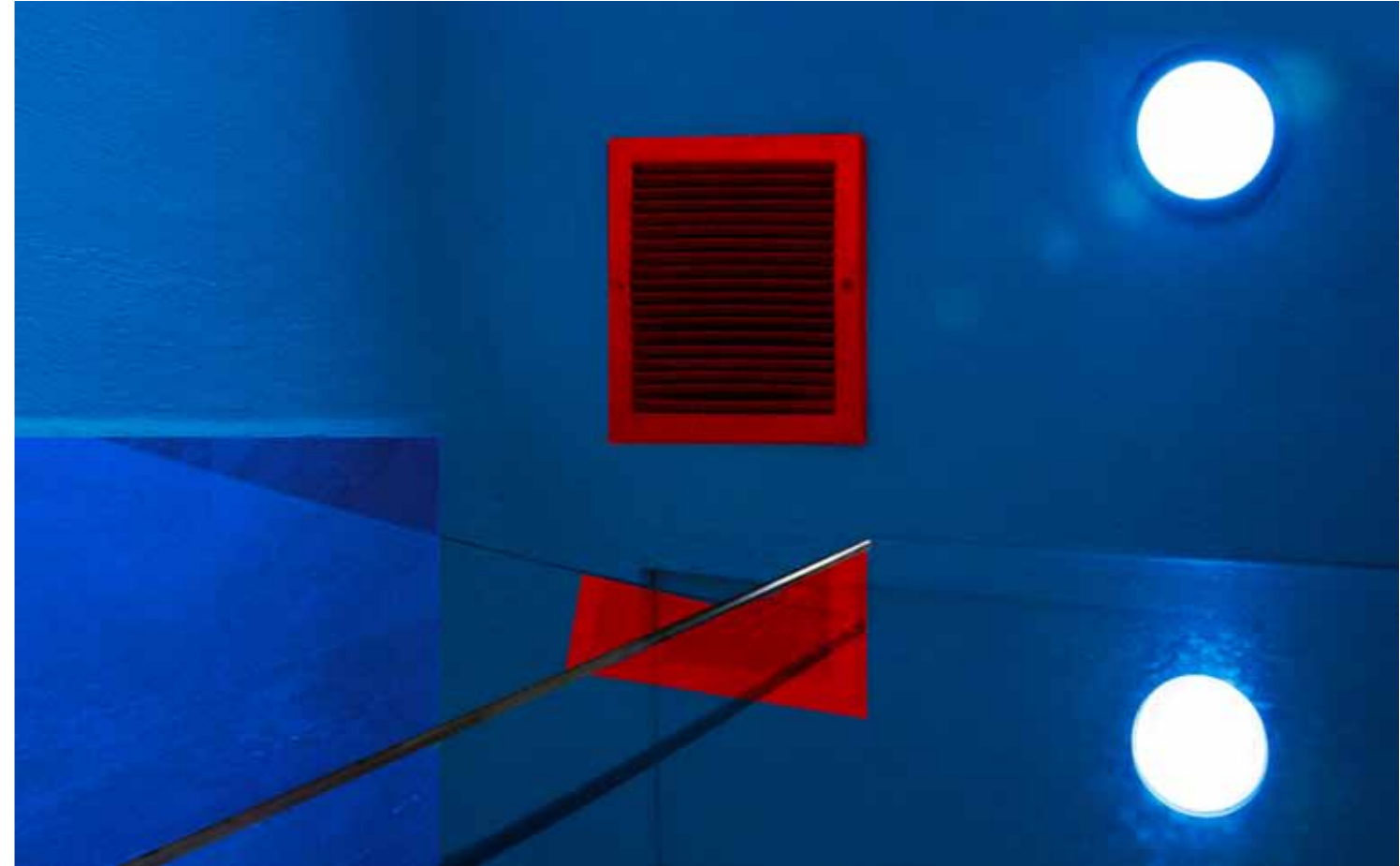
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Composition 448  
"Escape"  
Bruges, Belgium  
2019



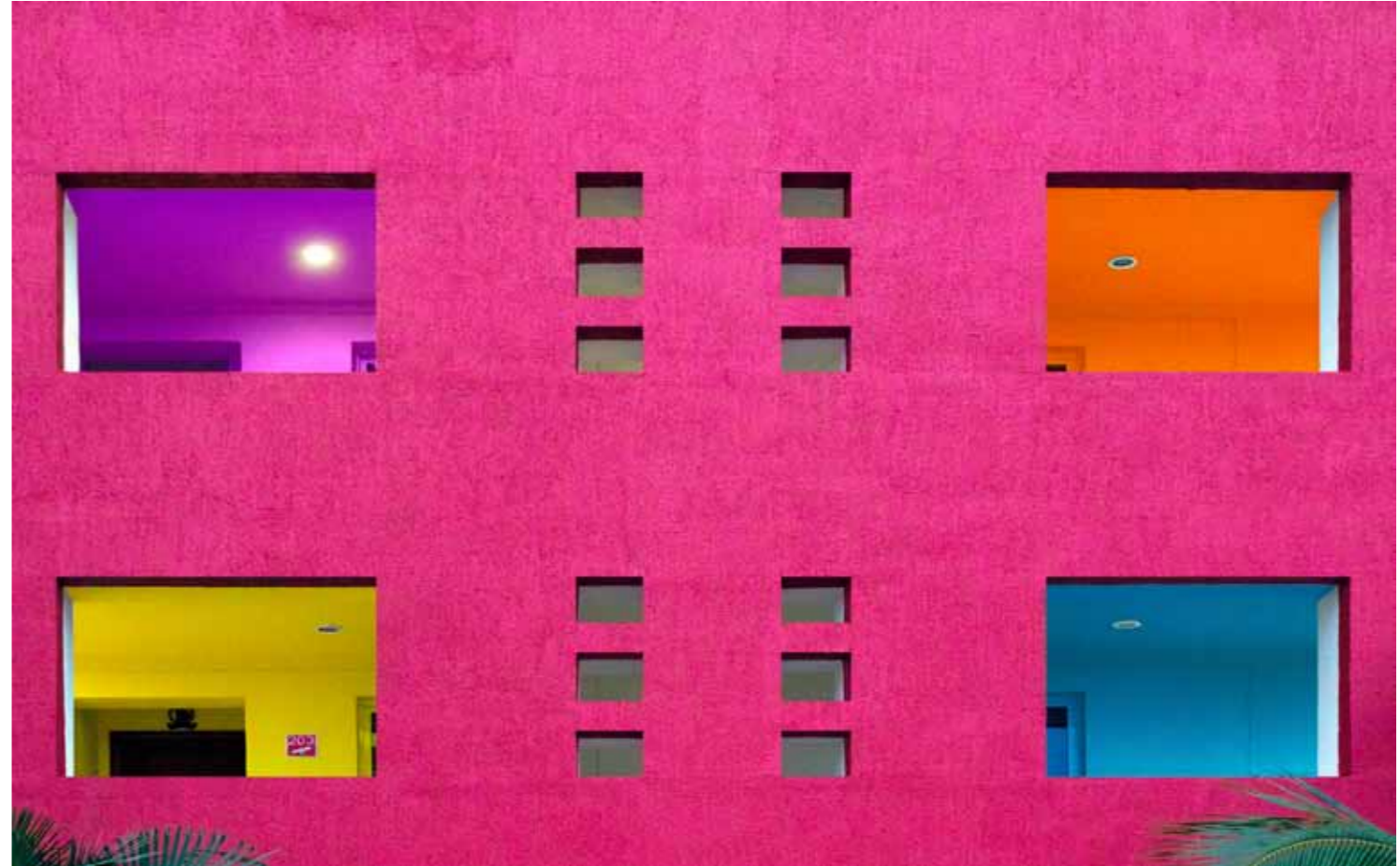
Composition 405  
"Lobby"  
Guadalajara, Mexico  
2018



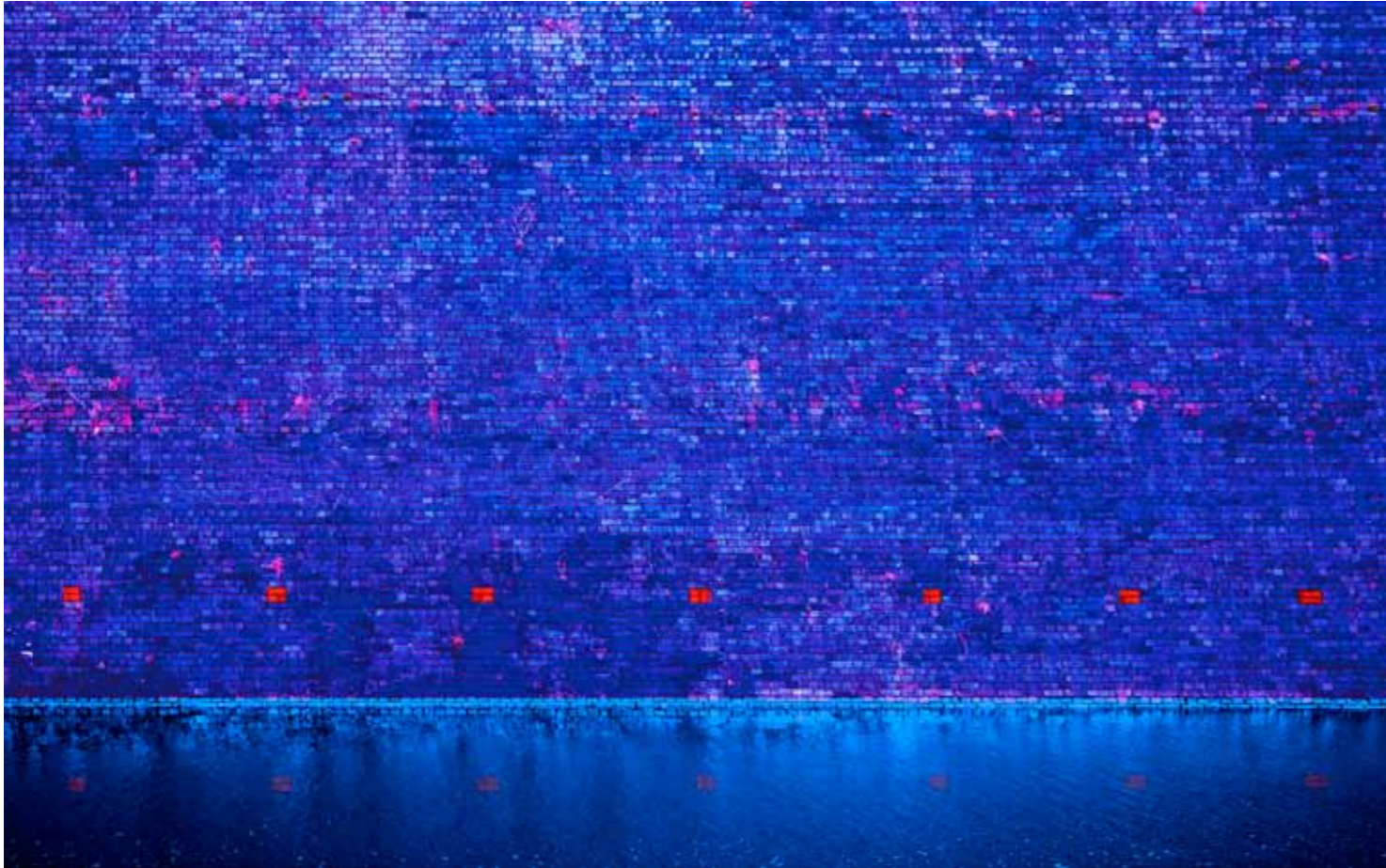
Composition 407  
"Air Vent"  
London, England  
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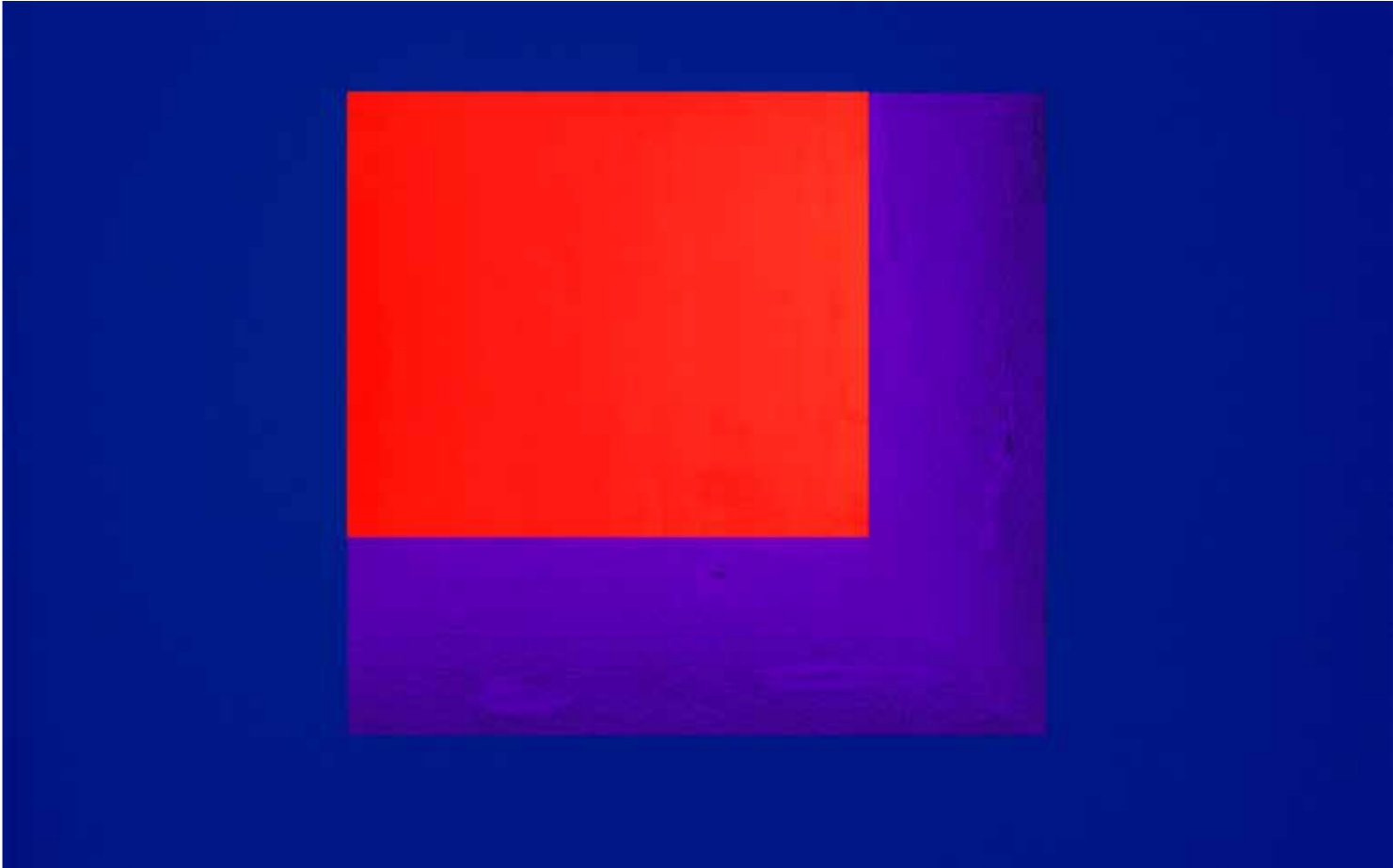
Composition 382  
"Bus Parking"  
Winchester, England  
2019



Composition 412  
"Condo"  
Puerto Vallarta, México  
2019



Composition 490  
"Wall on Rochdale Canal"  
Todmorden, West Yorkshire  
2021



Composition 351  
"Red Rectangle"  
Guadalajara, Mexico  
2018



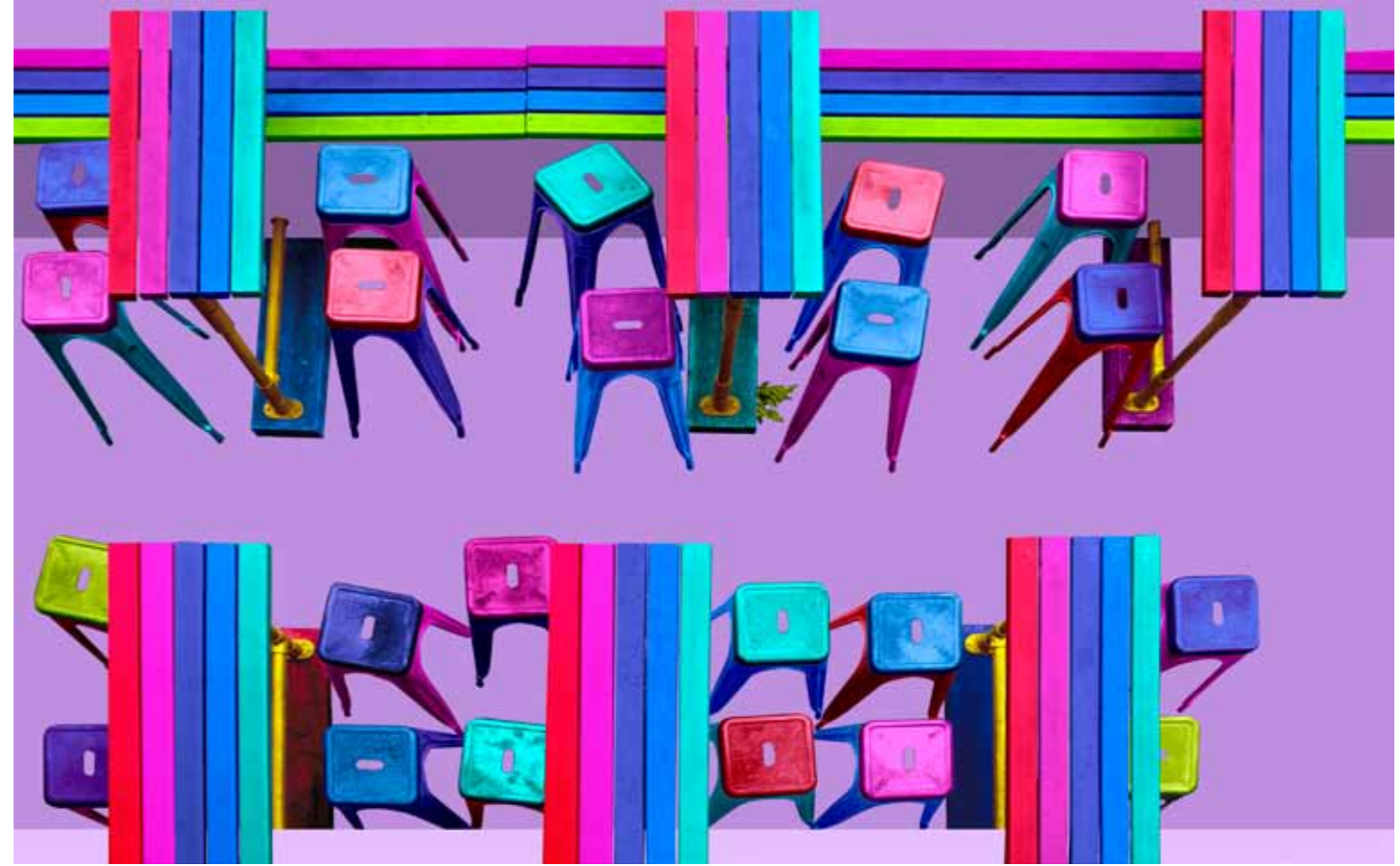
Composition 488  
"Park Benches"  
Twyford, Hampshire  
2021



Composition 497  
"Dusk"  
Constanta, Romania  
2021



Composition 482  
"Sunset"  
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico  
2021



Composition 520,  
"Absent from Bar"  
Manchester  
2021



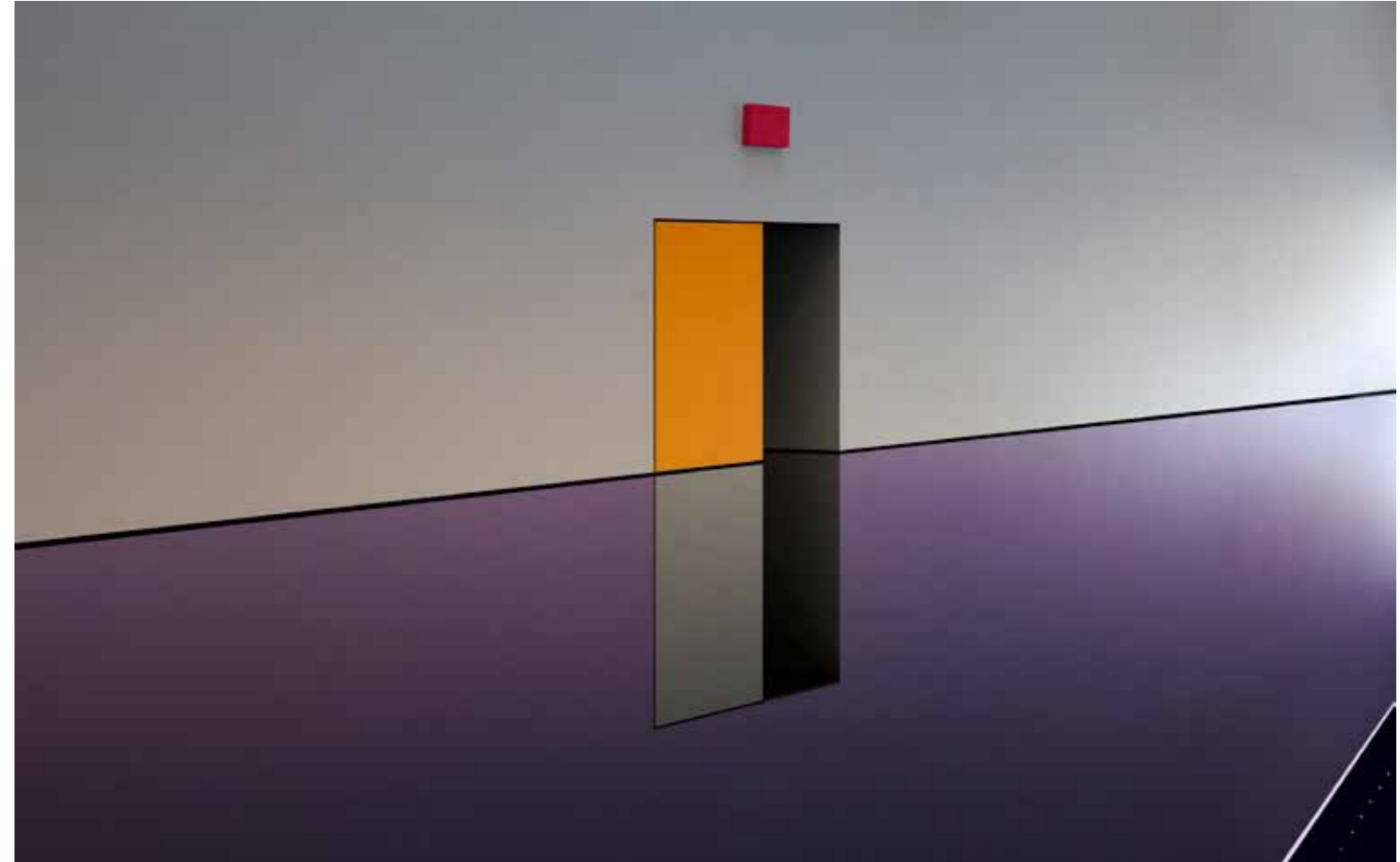
Composition 473  
"Walk"  
Lyme Regis, Dorset  
2020



Composition 474  
"Traffic Arrows"  
Lyme Regis, Dorset  
2020



Composition 342  
"Seen, Done, Am"  
London  
2018



Composition 341  
"Violet"  
London  
2018



Composition 487  
"Poppy Field"  
Nr. Twyford, Hampshire  
2021



Composition 500  
"Violet"  
Southampton  
2021



Composition 525  
"Photo Shoot"  
Constanta, Romania  
2021

