



PRISMATIC THOUGHTS FOR MARK SOO'S MONOCHROME

Features of Mark Soo's recent exhibition at Artspeak point to the figure of a prism. First, before we even enter the exhibition, there is the radiating graphic on the exhibition invitation card—a single colour broken down into sixteen tones forming the rays of a geometric sun. Inside the gallery, an aluminum-framed, free-standing photograph of a sunset dramatizes the transformative properties of light. Soo's questioning of the world depends on identifying crystalline forms: deceptively simple pictures and isolated phenomena are cast as devices that focus and refract intersecting social and aesthetic phenomena. *Monochrome Sunset (English Bay—Oppenheimer Park)* is one such form.

The aforementioned free-standing photograph shows a sublime sunset—a big, heavy orb breaking through autumn clouds at English Bay on its way to the South China Sea. Illuminated by two LPS (low pressure sodium) lamps that emit an orangey-yellow light, the photographic transparency itself is stripped of colour. This colourlessness is an effect of the monospectral nature of the lights.¹ Soo was clearly experimenting with the phenomenal and spatial confluences that these measured colour effects might yield.

Consider that the LPS lights were not conceived to emulate the sunset. Indeed, their only use in Vancouver is as so-called 'junkie lights' and they have been installed at Oppenheimer Park in the Downtown Eastside to discourage illicit activities, pointing to a tendency to devise technical or cosmetic solutions for social problems. Soo's project adopts the controlled light effects, but disrupts the mapping of the city which they reinforce. Rather than acting as a refusal, a reduction, or a blank (in the tradition of modern monochromes from Malevich to Ryman), or a purified, groundless phenomenal field (in the tradition of James Tyrell), Soo's 'monochrome' takes on a localized social dimension. When lights used at Oppenheimer Park are applied to a scene of English Bay, one space begins to inform another. The light that is meant to diffuse the chemical high on offer at

Oppenheimer Park is used to deflate an image of a sunset at English Bay, which crystallizes as the cliché of a 'natural high' promoted through Vancouver tourist brochures.

Soo thinks across the city. His conflation of two park spaces unleashes questions about the multiple ways in which 'wonder' drives the imaginary of Vancouver—through its tourist economy, its drug trade, and the aesthetic economy of its art galleries, to name three key sites. This way of thinking cuts against the grain of social and civic boundaries. If the two parks in question are rarely related (one is seen as Vancouver's playground and the other deemed its purgatory), Soo disrupts this tendency. The physical barrier that the free-standing photograph presents in the gallery may be understood as a cipher of the social barriers in question. Ironically, the monochromatic light shatters the monolithic cliché of the sunset at English Bay.

This ability to link formal exactitude to social commentary contributes to a transforming notion of the art object where aesthetic gestures are not seen as pure or isolated. The work has a double consciousness, both as a picture, which allows a critical distance, and as an immersive light installation. It thus places the viewer at a crossroads or inside a prism that refracts multiple, often contradictory positions. Given this dialectic, to stop at the above stated conflation of English Bay and Oppenheimer Park as locales of (natural and chemical) 'highs' that have lost their luster, would be to treat the work as a kind of synthesis, a lesson to be learned, an end of a journey. Instead, I'd like to stay true to the speculative tone of Soo's exhibition and take its title, *Is It Any Wonder (1600 Kelvin)*, as an injunction to let thought travel, to traverse existing boundaries and eschew straight terminal paths. The scene and the atmosphere of the lights is such that wonder—a mind-blowing, all encompassing sensation—is alternately scrutinized and embraced. For all its formal exactitude, Soo's work does not tend towards total rationalization.

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His conceptual rigour does not filter out affect, emotion, and unspoken phenomenological responses.

A viewer might thus entertain a sincere version of the sunset; the image remains arresting and it is difficult to read into it a total and unequivocal negation of the sublime. Cast in relation to the loaded avant-garde monochrome, the monotone sunset may be a picture full of mystery and promise. For all the discussion of crashing highs, a dream of a better tomorrow is not automatically dismissed. And, just as the lights of Oppenheimer Park transform the view of English Bay, the idealized sunset view can transform how Oppenheimer Park figures in the public imagination.²

Soo's monochrome sustains many such speculative lines of inquiry, but I would like to attend to one more in particular, which may be difficult to translate accurately on this black and white page, because it dramatizes the question of colour. Most visitors to the exhibition will remember that the lights did not only effect the sunset image, but transformed the pallor of every person who came through the gallery door, turning people gray. As skin colours tended towards a similar desaturated hue, rendering its viewers colour blind, I could not help but consider the question of colour socially. I am still wondering about this uncanny viewing condition....

The unexpected effects of the out-of-this-world light of Soo's installation puts me in mind of the last passage of the introduction to Theodore Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, a thesis that aims to sustain philosophy as a pursuit of the unthought in thought. As it is for Soo, colour is an organizing principle for Adorno's argument:

The inextinguishable color comes from the not-existent. Thinking serves it as a piece of existence, as that which, as always negatively, reaches out to the not-existent. Solely the most extreme distance would be the nearness;

Mark Soo, *Monochrome Sunset (English Bay—Oppenheimer Park)*, 2006.

Photo: Scott Massey

philosophy is the prism, in which its colors are caught.

The prose is cryptic because colour remains quite incomprehensible. Adorno recognizes that to start with something as illusive as colour is to inflect more concrete "pieces of existence" with fresh possibility. In a sense, Mark Soo's *Monochrome Sunset (English Bay—Oppenheimer Park)* sets in motion what Adorno desperately wishes for in philosophy—a prismatic thought. This is to say that Soo's work sustains speculation on the yet to be formed social, psychological, or aesthetic implications of three interconnected sites: English Bay, Oppenheimer Park, and Artspeak. Here, the very categories of the social, psychological, or aesthetic converge, as do colours inside of a prism.

¹ The low colour temperature (1600 Kelvin) of the LPS lights is approximately the same colour temperature as the sunset when Soo photographed it.

² Oppenheimer Park has not always been representative of urban decay. It was once home to the legendary Asahi Baseball team from 1914 to 1942—the first all Japanese-Canadian team, which overcame ethnic prejudice and became champions of the Vancouver senior league. It was also a key site for voicing political dissent—in the 1930s the park was reportedly the only place to hold political gatherings in the city. This rich history need not be filtered out by the eerie 'junkie lights' of Oppenheimer Park, but acts as an impetus to question the possibilities not only of this space, but of English Bay or the space of the gallery that has brought them together.

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