Features of Mark Soo’s recent exhibition at Artspeak paint 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 alumínium-framed free-standing photograph shows a sunset—a big, heavy and 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 orange-yellow light, the photographic transparency itself is stripped of colour. This colourlessness is an effect of the monochromatic nature of the lights. Soo was clearly experimenting with the phenomenal and spatial confusions 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 stages 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 of other Oppenheimer Park is used to define an image of a sunset at English Bay, which crystallizes as the cliché of a natural high promised 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 casts aside the grains of social and civic boundaries. If the two parks in question are in some way related (one is seen as Vancouver’s playground, 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. Ironical, the monochromatic light shatters the monochromatic cliché of the sunset at English Bay.

This ability to link formal exactitude to social commentary contributes to a transforming nexus 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 refractions 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) ‘lights’ 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, ‘Monochrome Sunset’ (English Bay—Oppenheimer Park), literally, as it extends the pragmatic tone of Soo’s questioning of the world.

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One 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 monochrome-sunset may be a picture full of mystery and promise. For all the discussion of cracking the lights, 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.

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 affect the sunset image, but transformed the palor of every person who came through the gallery door, turning people grey. As skin colours tended towards a similar desaturated hue, rendering its viewers colour blind, I could not help but consider the question of colour sociably. 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 insuicuous colour comes from the not-existent. Thinking serves 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 nearest; philosophy is the prison, in which its colours are caught.

The prose is cryptic because colour remains quite incomprehensible. Adorno recognizes that to start with something as illusive as colour is to reflect meta-concrete pieces of existence with first possibility. In a sense, 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, do colours inside of a prism.