

## The glow of the moment

Nancy Constandelia's first solo exhibition, *Unseen* (2016), comprised a series of monochromatic gradient paintings in green, blue, red, and purple, variously toned. The gradients mostly followed vertical axes, appearing to flow upward and/or downward, a duality achieved through the visual effect of suffused colour-fade. The imperceptible passage of manifold transitions makes it possible to reorient Constandelia's paintings while maintaining their tempo. Rotate a painting and the gradient cooperates, functioning in other directions.

In mathematics, the gradient is defined as a 'rate of change,' which is precisely what Constandelia maps in her paintings. *Change* is what I believe she meant by 'unseen' and continues to pursue in her work. Gradients describe *and* adapt to change.

Constandelia followed *Unseen* (2016) with *Making Time* (2017), *The Deep Empty* (2017), *Ephemeros* (2018), *Slow Motion* (2020), and *half past* (2021). Time, space, flux, ambivalence, all leading, gradually, to this exhibition, *Untitled Gradient Paintings*. Attempts to name the gradient's function, to name what she has been chasing all these years, have returned Constandelia to the abstract gradient itself. 'In modernism, everything is possible except arriving.'<sup>1</sup> The flow alone prevails.

Constandelia exercises gradients in a fascinating range of orchestrations, restricting their pathways, multiplying them across layers and picture planes, inverting, foregrounding and backgrounding them, assigning them to the far edges of her paintings, tightly packing them together and, conversely, isolating them, painting them in various colours and to varying degrees of transition. Sufficed to say that she has, at this point, entered the flow of her gradients, the rhythm of their continuation.

Motion and stillness share a notoriously fraught relationship in western modernism, which Constandelia's gradients antagonise. Learn of her Chinese heritage and suddenly the gradients seem less formal. The perceived temporality supersedes pictorial representations to express, rather, how it registers physically and metaphysically. Reconsider the motion of a gradient as energy or qi and we find something more universal than linear time or motion: the flow of energy from one source to another, used, recycled, mapping only entropy.

In *Untitled* (2021) a thin gradient band runs vertically through the centre of a small linen substrate. It appears like a trachea, channeling air in and air out. There is something inherently organic about the gradient, which Constandelia honours with her deliberately loose tapings and use of linen surfaces. The subsequent overflows and staining record time and process. But does the gradient extend or exhaust? Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale: each cycle extends *toward* exhaustion. It is both wondrous and confronting to consider how many times this cycle repeats.

Lee Ufan's *From Line* (1979) comes to mind. In it, he has painted twenty-six rudimentarily brushed lines in blue, one at a time, starting at the top of the canvas with a loaded brush, which dries out as it approaches the base. From saturation to paucity, each line is like a breath. Lee has painted gradients many times over in his *From Line*, *From Point*, and *Dialogue* series. For him, like Constandelia, the objective is to 'capture and stop the fleeting poetic moment that appears by chance and then immediately gives way to the everyday world... to construct a momentary, high-tension scene and give it universality and continuity.'<sup>2</sup>

'This work of focusing on the glow of the moment saves reality and enriches the experience of seeing.'<sup>3</sup>

## James Gatt, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Tino Sehgal (quoting Gerhard Shulze). (2021). In *Modernism Everything Is Possible, Except Arriving: Interview with Thomas Oberender and Tino Sehgal*. In *The Living Exhibition* (p.99). Spector Books.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Ufan. (2018). What Can Be Seen in a Moment. In *The Art of Encounter* (p.57). Lisson Gallery, London.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*.