

DAAD Faculty Research Visit Grant Project Proposal

With the support of a DAAD Faculty Research Visit Grant in fall 2010, I will investigate the importance of color in the manufacturing of consumer desire and political ideology in Cold War Berlin. Since the color of the era was largely influenced by Bauhaus design, I will research color at the Bauhaus Archives in Berlin, Dessau, and Weimar. These studies will inform a conceptual framework for my current artwork, a group of prints and paintings called *The Sherwin Series*.

This series consists of prints and paintings that remix foreclosed homes with 2007 Color Forecast from an American paint company named Sherwin Williams. Sherwin Williams chose the colors during the height of the American housing bubble before the foreclosure epidemic began. I developed the series of paintings in 2010 with the end of the epidemic not in sight.

At the heart of this body of work are concerns about consumer excess, unsustainable patterns, and resulting class divides. Many of these patterns were set after World War II and exported to Europe through the Marshall Plan. I want to study design in divided Berlin because it was ground zero for related ideological debates. After completing this research in Berlin, I can return to the artwork, develop the paintings further, and circulate my findings through publications and exhibitions in the United States, Germany and abroad.

Extending the Sherwin Series

Color forecasts have always been inextricably linked to commerce and politics. These connections are especially clear in the postwar West German discourse around Heiterkeit; literally “cheerful,” also “light” and “bright” as in color. In West Germany in the 1950s, the postwar victory over despair used the trope of Heiterkeit constantly as a way to design interiors and manufactured objects that lightened the country’s mood. Heiterkeit as a soft power strategy in the Cold War reached a fevered pitch during the 1959 Kitchen Debate between Nixon and Khrushchev at the American Home exhibition in Moscow. In front of brightly colored, American-made kitchen appliances, Nixon endlessly listed his country’s consumer objects to be admired while Khrushchev emphasized the Soviets’ focus on essential rather than bourgeois luxury items.

As Greg Castillo explained in his recent talk at a recent Columbia University conference, a sunshine yellow kitchen came to embody the clash of civilizations between Western consumer excess and Soviet consumer austerity. ¹ In Castillo’s book *Cold War on the Home Front*, divided

¹ Greg Castillo, “Reconstructing German Cities and Citizens,” Architecture of the State, 1940-70, Columbia University, April 15, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtkOFw6vKN0&feature=channel>, (accessed April 20, 2010).

Berlin, especially before the wall, was the premiere theatre for this clash.² Throughout the 1950s, West Berliners travelled to East Berlin to buy cheap goods, and East Berliners travelled to West Berlin to find products and entertainment censured by the Party.³

Although bright colors were normally associated with Western affluence and contrasted with the grays of Soviet bloc housing, sometimes these stereotypes were subverted as each side battled with the other. For example at the 1962 Fifth German Art Exhibition in Dresden, East German party boss Walter Ulbricht complained about the vast number of grey objects and insisted on industrially manufactured goods in rich and lively colors instead.⁴

My research will document the history of these complicated shifts in strategy on either side of the ideological frontier and consider the contemporary implications. After decades in which American homes have grown to be 80% larger than their European counterparts,⁵ my project questions the underlying implication that lots of bright colors and clean lines will solve all problems and give people a better life. New good design, with innovative uses of color, needs to be smarter, more versatile, and most of all, sustainable. Only through research into past design can we develop innovative strategies.

Questions about the sustainability of American prosperity is present in *The Sherwin Series*' subtitle, *Rejecting Romanticism*. Taken from Cornell West's comments in the film *Examined Life*, the subtitle foregrounds the psychological impact of a bubble bursting. West suggest that rather than lamenting paradise lost, we "ride the dissonance."⁶ Designed harmonious color palettes filling fragmented structures mirror this updated approach to beauty. Americans have much to learn from how Bauhaus designers offered efficient, sustainable design as a response to tough economic times. Haus am Horn in Weimar and Bauhaus' *Wohnkultur* with its compressed floor plans and folding furniture remains as exemplary models.

Method / Strategy

August 2010 I will move to Berlin for four months to research color at the Bauhaus Archive Berlin and meet with my mentor Antje Majewski. When not teaching at the Weissensee Kunsthochschule Berlin, Antje is a prolific painter, and her 2009 exhibition *Tanz RGBCMYK* specifically relates to my interest in color. *Tanz RGBCMYK* consisted of three paintings of intertwined dancers, dressed in red, green, blue, cyan, yellow, magenta and black, paired with three paintings of recreated color wheels designed by Goethe, Runge, Itten and Küppers. Like in

² Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) xiv.

³ Ibid, xvi.

⁴ Ibid, 198.

⁵ Fredrich Bergström and Robert Gidehag, *EU versus USA* (Stockholm: Tembro, 2004), 24.

⁶ Astra Taylor, Director, *Examined Life*, 2008.

my artwork, Antje is most interested in the psychological impact of color and approaches the topic through the lens of perceptual studies. What interests me most about working with Antje is how she uses her throughout knowledge of art history and theory to push the practice of painting forward.

After giving my paper *Flexibility after Destined Death*, on innovative painting and digital practices at the ISEA 2010 Ruhr conference at the end of August, I will travel to ZKM in Karlsruhe to visit their archives about painting-digital hybrids and innovative approaches to color. On September 4, I'll take the train to Weimar to work in the archives and visit the Haus am Horn. On September 8, I'll travel to Dessau to meet with Monika Markgraf, an architect and academic consultant for building research and architectural conservation at the Bauhaus Dessau. Her research into the Bauhaus Dessau's use of color—not only through hue shifts, but also through materials—will inspire me to look for unusual final forms for *The Sherwin Series*.

Availability of Data

Although libraries in the United States have many volumes on the Bauhaus, seeing these collections and actual buildings will make a profound impact on my studio practice and writing. Although I can read Monika Markgraf's elegant description of the Bauhaus Dessau's use of color that “differentiates between load-bearing and non-bearing surfaces, thereby endowing the architectonic tension with lucid expression,”⁷ no description can fully capture walking through those halls in person, allowing the color to navigate my way.

After visiting Dessau, I will spend the rest of my time in Berlin to continue my research at the Bauhaus Archive Berlin and commercial paint stores. I also want to visit a variety of domestic interiors from the Cold War era before they disappear with gentrification. I need to be there in person, to fully appreciate the colors, the lighting, the materials, the trim, the wall sockets, among other interior details before they are removed by renovation. My research will be thoroughly documented on my blog, making it easy to access when I return to Florida State University to teach a class called Digital Color and created new artworks related to the research.

Not only will the research have a profound impact on my artwork and teaching, but I will share the results with the public and scholars in my field through publications and exhibitions in the U.S., Germany, and abroad. With the U.S. economy causing Americans to reevaluate their relationship to design and consumerism, now is an ideal time to study the psychological impact of color. Like the designs of the Bauhaus before me, both my research in Germany and the paintings after will document the complicated relationship between design and identity during tough economic times.

⁷ Siebenbrodt, 198.