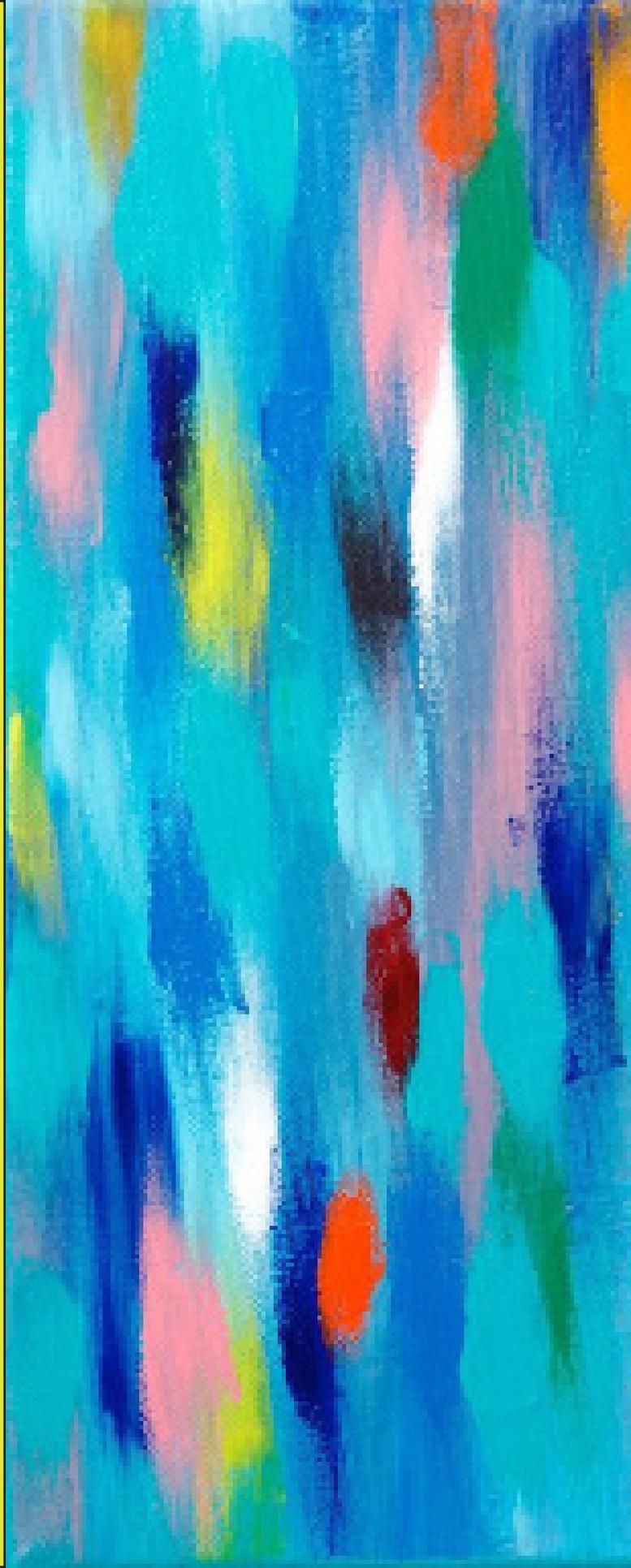


OFF THE CHART



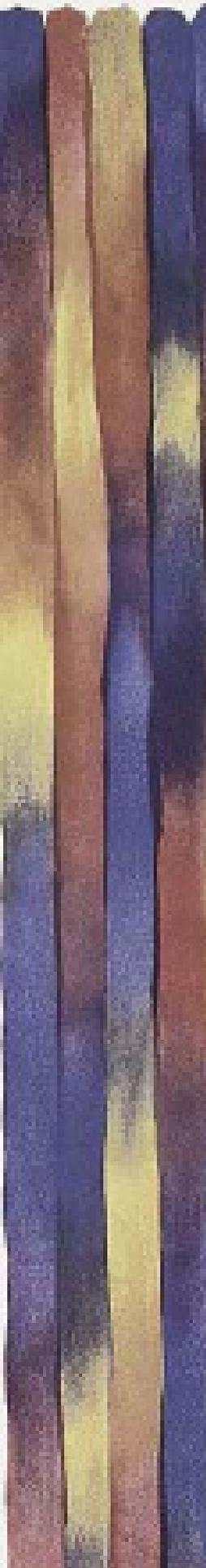


Most designers, I'm guessing, would find it hard to imagine voluntarily giving up control of color in their work. Yet that notion is being explored at several museums right now. Color Field painting, with its restricted use of brushes, is the subject of a show at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, as well as a citywide festival in Washington, D.C. Despite its name, the "Jasper Johns: Gray" exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, offers other new thoughts about color as well. Meanwhile, "Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today" at the Museum of Modern Art is all about artists who reveled in color as "found object." Curated by Ann Temkin and running through May 12, "Color Chart" is about color out of the can, out of the box and off the shelf.

I love color charts. They recall for me the color matching samples of stamp collectors, from my childhood. I can't resist grabbing those paint strips found in hardware stores, in particularly irresistible hues.

The artists in the MoMA show seem similarly attracted. They let chance or commerce pick their colors by using the colors as they come from the factory. In part, their use of color belongs to the century-long effort of art to escape from craft and become more intellectually respectable. The jokes about color found in the show are similar to jokes played with subject matter and materials by Duchamp or Johns or Warhol.

The chart—like the target or map, the photograph, the number or letter—is a document. In the show are several paintings that seemed to resemble color charts themselves. Jim Dine pays homage to the Red Devil enamel chart, seen in many main-street hardware stores. Damien Hirst covers a wall with bite-sized color samples of house paint. A Donald Judd piece randomly deploys colors from the European RAL paint system. Both Gerhard Richter and Ellsworth Kelly produce what look like color charts but use chance to deploy color in a grid.



The commercial color chart made it possible for an artist to “phone in” one’s performance, as Lazlo Moholy-Nagy did in 1922. He ordered up five paintings from a maker of porcelain sign panels using a color chart and graph paper. He compared the process to playing chess by phone or mail.

Surrendering control over color in this way was anathema to the Bauhausers, like Joseph Albers, working in the tradition of Paul Klee to seek the harmonies among colors. But other artists followed Moholy-Nagy: Sol Lewitt was happy to restrict himself (or actually those who executed his instructions for drawings) to three Koh-i-noor pencil colors or to the eight crayon colors in the basic Crayola pack.

Another piece in the show made me think of crayons and the limits of color out of the box. Byron Kim plays on Crayola’s pre-Civil Rights era “flesh” crayon in *Synecdoche*, some 250 variations of tans and mochas suggesting human skin colors.

I was struck by how many of the artists in the show used paints from my area of interest: automobiles. Cars began with famous limits to color: Henry Ford’s Model T came in any color you wanted as long as it was black. The Model T came in black because black was the only color that dried fast enough for Ford’s factory. So, one of the most important color charts—and one included in the catalog—was that of DuPont’s Duco enamels. Introduced in the mid-1920s, the brightly colored auto paints for the first time dried fast enough for the assembly line. Duco made the Model T chromatically obsolete. (Ford reluctantly added a dark green.)

Artists themselves have used auto paints. Billy Al Bengsten in California and Richard Hamilton in the UK applied them to canvas. Hamilton used auto paint in 1958 in *Hers Is a Lush Situation*, whose subject includes a 1950s Buick. (Alice Twemlow tells the painting’s back-story.) John Chamberlain is best known for his sculptures made from crushed

parts of cars, often with the paint still clinging to the metal. He is represented at MoMA by paintings from the 1960s made by spraying auto paint onto masonite. The titles come from pop music groups of the day, like Orions and Dion, suggesting the limited palette of popular taste shared by auto buyer and record buyer.

In 1971, the Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti juxtaposed two very similar reds used by two competing Italian motorcycle makers, Guzzi and Gierli (the latter now defunct), in Rosso Palermo. The two brands had fervent fans, whose rivalry was reflected humorously in the slight, yet passionately felt variation in color.

The idea of the palette as readymade, like Duchamp's urinal, something therefore “undesigned,” underlies the show. But the more you look, the more designed that palette looks. Of course, Martha Stewart and Ralph Lauren design palettes for house paints. And artistic movements have their own palettes, just as Picasso had his roses and blues.

With color comes a sense of play, which the show grasps well. Frank Stella's 1962 *Gran Cairo*, with its rainbow palette, is riffed off of by Jim Lambie's *Zobop!*, a work executed for the MoMA show, splayed across the floor in colored vinyl tape.

The day after I saw the show, I visited a design class where students used similar material. They could dream up any color they wanted on the computer, then print it onto adhesive vinyl.

Whereas for the last century or so, as MoMA seems to suggest, the commercial color chart, created by technology, was all about limits, today's industrial technology promises to color without limits. Could it be that the challenge to the designer and artist alike is to limit the palette? Coloring within the self-imposed lines—how bold.

