

CHICAGO



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Luftwerk, *The Sky at the Time was Berlin Blue*, 2022, fifty-two shades of blue acrylic paint, LEDs, 12 × 30'. Photo: John Faier.

Luftwerk

CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

“Color is the most relative medium in art,” according to Josef Albers. Its relativity, along with the subjective nature of visual perception, forms the basis of the immersive light installations that comprise “Exact Dutch Yellow,” the most recent exhibition of Chicago-based collaborative Luftwerk (Petra Bachmaier and Sean Gallero), who transformed the fourth-floor galleries of this cultural institution into an oasis of complex optical phenomena.

Luftwerk’s multimedia practice encompasses light-based public projects and large-scale architectural interventions, often within iconic modernist buildings. Here, viewers were lured into darkened galleries by the radiant glow of eight mainly wall-based objects, including two neon word sculptures, a mural, and various concave and flat panel-like works airbrushed with botanical dyes and “activated” by programmed sequences of LEDs. Spaciously installed to offer a series of intimate individual encounters, these works revealed how light changes our perception of color—as illustrated in *Interaction of Light*, 2020, a set of prints pairing two color wheels that show how the same spectrum of colors appears differently on reverse grounds. The title of the work spins on Albers’s influential book *The Interaction of Color* (1963).

The related three-dimensional *Portrait No. 1 Yellow to Blue*, 2020, and *Portrait No. 2 Mauve to Gamboge*, 2021, set Albers’s theories in motion to examine the ways in which color impacts the body and senses. Installed on opposite sides of an interior wall, these conical forms (constructed of painted fiberglass and aluminum and rimmed with LEDs) appeared, when viewed head-on, as floating orbs of pulsating chroma whose concentric rings seamlessly flow from fiery oranges and saffron yellows to hot mauves and deep blues, all to mesmerizing effect.

While Luftwerk never deny the metaphysical and sometimes spiritual properties of their chosen medium, the duo use light to demonstrate how color defines the physical world and our understanding of it. To that end, the exhibition took its inspiration from *Werner’s Nomenclature of Colours* (1814), a taxonomic guide by geologist Abraham Gottlob Werner that established fifty-four colors found in nature, including a reddish flaxen he identified as Dutch orange, the hue of the common marigold. Before Pantone, Werner’s book set the standard for the study of color in the arts and natural sciences. The manual was also used by Charles Darwin during his infamous voyage on the *HMS Beagle*. Writing within the pages of Werner’s text, Darwin noted his observation of a striated caracara (a Mexican eagle), the legs of which he described as “exact Dutch yellow.”

Such history, provided within the works’ didactics, was helpful for understanding the provenance of the exhibition’s title—scripted in an orange-and-yellow neon sculpture at the show’s entrance—but not essential to one’s experience of the art itself or its atmospheric plays upon the gallery’s interior architecture. In the floor-based *Landscape of Perception*, 2022, a horizontal field covered in raw powdered pigments of ultramarine, ocher, and green is transfigured into a kind of lunar, otherworldly terrain through a gentle wave of projected light that undergoes subtle changes in intensity, so that each color appears to blend fluidly into the next. An accompanying score of synthesized Minimalist tones enhances the installation’s spatial and affective dimensions.

Luftwerk’s sundry colorscales owe as much to legacies of abstract painting as to the histories of natural science, as suggested by the triptych *Meadow*, 2022: three canvases airbrushed in earthen tones of yellow and green that, when illuminated, suggest the passage from dawn to dusk; the piece evoked the work of Mark Rothko and the Color Field school. The more static *The Sky at the Time was Berlin Blue*, 2022, enveloped the viewer in a numinous expanse of the titular hue while taking up an entire gallery wall. Descending from ultramarine blue-black to near white, this meditative monochrome painting—comprising fifty-two horizontal bands rendered in various shades of cerulean—was created with the aid of a cyanometer, a tool invented in 1789 to measure the blueness of the sky. At once contemplative and alluring, such works give form to the immaterial while remapping the natural world as experiential environments of pure color and light. When viewed against the backdrop of today’s climate crisis, which has severely altered Earth’s ecology, “Exact Dutch Yellow” presented an exactly distilled view of nature, asking us to really see.

— Susan Snodgrass

