

Belinda Wiltshire: *Existengia*

by Marnie Edmiston

The first thing that strikes me when I look at the large expanses in Belinda Wiltshire's *Existengia* isn't solely visual—nor is it intellectual. The first impression is a buzzing, quasi-electric pulsation which travels, I fancy, from the very tip of my eyeballs right through the retina and fleshy connecting wires into what I imagine to be the back of my brain. This fundamentally aesthetic pulse is both painful and pleasurable; although it hurts to look at the strangely oscillating colours, I keep tracing over the paintings' surfaces for these moments of intensity. I find them in the scratches of light that sit in relief, at the point of contact between glowing teal and red; in the darkness that once might have been blue, is now yellow, is now red, is now purple.

Existengia is full of these moments of visual illusion, created in the interaction between the painted surface and the viewer's perceptual system. For what one might see at first glance as blue in *Travelling Friend* or lilac in *Skinny Dip* is, on closer inspection, actually a meticulous layering of competing colours. These ambiguous moments are created by Wiltshire's use of a modified form of CMYK layering in her painting process, in which the initial ground colour reflects light through translucent films of cyan, yellow and magenta. Developed originally for commercial printing, the CMYK colour model is subtractive: each layer of colour added absorbs certain wavelengths of light and prevents them from being reflected. Much like the gaze honing in on the neon bar sign in *Late Night*, the tremendous excess energy of the sun is repurposed for artistic means when it hits the canvas, reflects back through the painting's several glazes and hits the retina with undiminished speed. This unstable, perspective-dependent channelling of light is what gives the paintings in *Existengia* their vibrating quality, and what allows them to draw attention to the complex of psychic, bodily and physical processes involved in "seeing". It unites, in its "transparent" mediation, the perceptual result with its distant, alien source.

Colours—as the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey writes—mustn't be misunderstood as the source of visual energy and affect, but rather that which funnels "force" into the organism to produce the "total

organic resonance” of aesthetic experience.¹ Indeed, in a scientific sense, colours do not strictly exist—they are only an *effect* of energy produced downstream from the brain’s conversion of received wavelengths, themselves originally sensed by cone cells in the retina. The full visible spectrum of wavelengths received from natural light reaches us here on earth after bouncing around—as it were—inside the sun for up to 170,000 years, subsequently travelling approximately 150 million kilometres in 8.3 minutes through the vacuum of space.² These photons reflect and refract onto the retina, providing the “data” that the mind synthesises as image and colour.

But this is only one dimension of the story that *Existengia* draws attention to, because exactly *how* the physics of light is unified in a perception remains a scientific mystery; the linking of image and perception with memory, emotion and meaning a philosophical problem doubly so. It is the unique momentary instance that Wiltshire marks with tiny monuments that float untethered through open space or are propelled, as if by fire or lightning, across the painted surface. Take for example *Suburban Sunset*, in which our attention is drawn not to the large astral doughnut of the painting’s background, but rather to the miniature flower in a mist of white, surrounded by overlapping strokes. Formally speaking, the “sun” sits behind the suspended flower, while scattered beams of colour jostle their way to a cohesive representation. The flower is individuated from the pell-mell by its glowing outline—and thus plays out the grand cosmic drama of perception (a drama usually concealed by its ubiquity): made painfully red in the late afternoon sun, the geranium exists at the unique conjuncture of celestial beams, a plant’s organic structure, the physical and psychical resonances of its perceiver. We concentrate on its petals, inspiring perhaps some small awe, despite our knowledge that it is coincidence—not fate—that provides experiences like these.

Each one of the canvases in *Existengia* houses a momentary convergence which we suspect has a special resonance for the artist. Along with the geranium of *Suburban Sunset*, we see a swirl of energy amidst a blackout in *Summer Storm*, a soothing grey crashing like salt water in *Skinny Dip*, a burning sunset pink shared by dried gum leaves in *Hot Lungs*, the glow of shooting stars in the moonlight of *Travelling Friend*,

¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 1934), 127.

² “The 8-minute travel time to Earth by sunlight hides a thousand-year journey that actually began in the core,” NASA, published 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20120122162340/http://sunearthday.nasa.gov/2007/locations/ttt_sunlight.php

and the jarring buzz in *Late Night*. In each painting, objects emerge out of, and are stranded in, atmospheres composed of colour and half-form. There is nonetheless a touch of loneliness to their drifting. Wiltshire's use of the CMYK colour space to construct these scenes further reminds us of the singular nature of vision—that although colour systems can quantify an almost infinite range of colours into exact codes, no two people will see one colour in quite the same way. Rather, it is the act of perceiving (feeling, thinking) colours that imbues them with force. In the same way that we invest colours with emotion, we position our own experiences in a narrative that binds us to others—in spite of the deflationary modern realisation that, strictly speaking, energy and matter are beyond meaning. This is perhaps what *Existengia* is trying to tell us with its titular portmanteau of *existential* angst with *nostalgia*: that there is pain (*algia*) in the affirmation (*ex/sistere*) of one's existence when placed in proximity to the size and general indifference of the universe. Yet what coherence does this frame possess without reference to the small, transient, homely moments of *nostos*?