



A response to an exhibition

Red Lines  
Alan Phelan

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## ‘MATERIAL GLITCH: RGB AND THE CODIFIED IMAGE’

For the past few years, Alan Phelan has been exploring the Joly Screen process – an early photographic technique, invented in 1894 by Trinity College professor, John Joly. This technically demanding, additive colour photography process involves adding colour to a black and white glass plate via a filter overlay, composed of thin red, green and blue (RGB) inked lines (1). While developing this ongoing body of work, Phelan has embraced and personalised the distinctive Joly aesthetic, while also harnessing the RGB format as a motif for expanded exhibition-making. Previous iterations of the work during 2019 – in Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, The Glucksman and The LAB – have ushered site-responsive installations, incorporating RGB coloured curtains and viewing devices, manifesting physical renditions of the process on a macro scale.

According to the artist, the title of his current exhibition, ‘Red Lines’ at The Dock, may refer obliquely to the “red lines of decision-making in history and politics”. An eponymous curtain, fabricated in long strips of red photographic paper, dominates the atrium space, while the windows of Gallery One have been obscured by opaque RGB blinds. This creates a dimly lit environment – a pseudo darkroom – in which to view the photographic works, individually illuminated by LED panels, and meticulously installed along the opposing wall. This arrangement also suggests an impulse to shroud some covert activity from the exterior realm.





Across this body of work to date, Phelan has experimented with a range of imagery, drawn from visual culture. His latest series explores the art-historical genre of flower painting – a deceptively simple format used by artists throughout the ages to conceal complex social narratives. Phelan’s photographs document contemporary floral arrangements developed in collaboration with members of the Dunboyne Flower and Garden Club. Each title pays homage to an artist and year, without directly mentioning a specific artwork, thus loosening iconological ties with the original, while relinquishing the impulse to slavishly recreate it.

Adding seemingly steganographic by-lines to each title, Phelan cites a suite of contemporaneous events, perceived as pivotal to the course of modern history. Artworks do not exist in isolation but are embedded in the societal conditions that shape them – a position German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (a former pupil of Martin Heidegger) described as ‘occasionality’. For Gadamer, occasionality refers to the ‘situatedness’ of a work of art, which we view according to our own cultural horizon. In this way, ‘understanding’ is culturally conditioned, and interpretation of the past becomes a ‘fusion of horizons’ [*Horizontverschmelzung*] (2). Galvinised by occasional contemporary references – such as the inclusion of the Extinction Rebellion logo in one instance – Phelan’s photographs highlight the cyclical nature of human history, pointing to the revival of pre-existing ecological and political anxieties in the current era.



Spanning almost five centuries – a timeframe that predates the invention of photography itself – Phelan’s codified references articulate “counter-fictional histories” across a range of fields, from botany and the natural sciences, to colonialism and geopolitics, while also alluding to timely cultural developments in comedy, publishing and even perfumery. For example, the earliest citation of 1490, denotes a time when the wealthy merchant classes superseded the monarchy and the church as dominant patrons of the arts. By the sixteenth century, in the context of a flourishing capitalist economy, the Netherlands became the biggest importers of rare and exotic flowers from around the world. Imperial triumphalism permeated the golden age of seventeenth-century Dutch flower painting, expressing the collector’s wealth and taste for the exotic, whilst also containing *vanitas* (or hidden messages) linked to sexuality, the transience of beauty and the inevitability of death. While the genre promoted a newfound appreciation of flowers as aesthetic objects, it was largely founded on artifice. The botanical impossibility for exotic specimens to bloom at the same time, rendered these painterly scenarios artificial constructs, fundamentally based on illusion.



Phelan's photographs embody many of the formal conventions of painting, in terms of their scale, singularity and objecthood. They immediately resonate with the intimate proportions of medieval miniature painting, arising in the early-sixteenth century out of the 'illuminated manuscript' tradition. They also assert paintings as three dimensional objects, best appreciated at the moment of physical encounter, rather than through secondary reproduction. The history of analogue photography is similarly tethered to concepts of objecthood, not least in terms of the extensive photographic equipment – cumbersome and outmoded by today's standards – traditionally required to capture, develop and print photographs. In the past, photographic images only existed in physical form, as film negatives or printed matter. This weighty material history sits in contrast with the immaterial and fleeting nature of images in the digital age. Unlike most photographic prints, which usually exist as reproducible elements of a larger edition, Phelan's photographs are one-off, autonomous artworks – a characteristic also shared by painting.

Employing an outmoded analogue technique allows Phelan to disassemble the photographic process into its component parts – light, time, light-sensitive surfaces, alchemy, colour and object. However, one could also argue that this examination of flower painting provides a robust metaphor for a much broader history of looking at images. The artist’s use of LED panels – illuminating prints from behind – directly channels omnipresent screens of the modern age. Similarly, the act of peering into these lightboxes recalls early innovations in motion picture, including Edison’s single-lens kinoscope, and other coin-in-the-slot, peep show devices. Using RGB lines as composite elements, further connections are made with analogue TV, transmitted using encoded signals and fast-moving scanlines.

In this way, Phelan’s photographs anticipate movement; however, rather than the construction of on-screen imagery, they seem to resonate more specifically with its disruption or deconstruction. Joyful imperfections – such as chemical leaks or registration irregularities, found along the edges of photographs – evidence the technique’s limitations, while perhaps alluding to degrees of malfunction enacted upon contemporary screens.

One thinks of static interference, weakened signals and electronic noise, as well as digital glitches, in which multicoloured or flickering vertical lines variously denote corrupted software, damaged hardware or drops in band width. When devices malfunction, their material precarity is first made visible via touchscreens. With this complex body of new work, Phelan is revisiting the technical rigour of his postgraduate training in photography. Coupled with his wide-reaching artistic research into lesser-known histories, as well as his ongoing work as an archivist, it feels quite poignant for Phelan to be developing a “visual history” for this short-lived analogue technique, where none previously existed. Though undoubtedly an anachronistic medium, its revival in this instance frames history as an unfolding set of schemata – neither straightforward, nor conducive to a nostalgic lens.

(1) The RGB

plate breaks the colour spectrum and burns it to film on exposure. When the black and white plate is processed and displayed with this same RGB plate carefully aligned, a full colour image is rendered.

(2) Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative’ in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997). Originally published in 1960.



Image of gallery by Paul McCarthy

Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Leitrim. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was previously assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and coordinator of the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF). Joanne won 'VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2012/13' for her extended essay 'Commemoration – A Forward Looking Act'. She has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland. Joanne Laws website [www.joanelaws.wordpress.com](http://www.joanelaws.wordpress.com)

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For further information or to apply please contact Laura Mahon, email: [lmahon@leitrimcoco.ie](mailto:lmahon@leitrimcoco.ie)

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Gallery Opening Times:  
10:00am - 6:00 pm Monday to Friday  
10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.