

Comments on Meurant's paintings and Guiraud's analysis

by Alberto Argenton¹

In regard to the two questions [1 - *what the painter Meurant is doing*; 2 - *how Guiraud is evaluating it (and linking it to Gestalt psychology)*], since I am neither an aesthetician nor an art critic, I think I am able to answer to you only to some extent, and more specifically, only about how Guiraud is "linking" Meurant's paintings "to Gestalt psychology", that is only from a perceptual/psychological point of view, and with some reservation as well: in fact, I have never seen Meurant's paintings 'live'. However, perceptual effects of Meurant's paintings, of which Guiraud gives a detailed description, are well enough observable on the computer monitor or on colour prints too.

Anyway, personally I find Meurant's paintings very interesting and enjoyable. It has been a very pleasant discovery.

In regard to how Guiraud is "linking" Meurant's paintings "to Gestalt psychology", I am very perplexed. In a few words I will try to expound why.

According to Guiraud, Meurant's paintings show, from a perceptual point of view, "a very peculiar property. When looking at different parts of the surface, at a given moment a group of these rectangles will appear to unite, forming a single rectangle, which the next moment disintegrates, while the process repeats itself with another group and then another, each one different".

I agree with this account, but I don't with Guiraud's subsequent claim: "the optical effect can be explained : it complies with the laws of Gestalt theory". This claim, in my opinion, reveals Guiraud's naïve knowledge of Gestalt theory or a not correct, exhaustive, explanation of his claim.

Except that Gestalt theory discovered and formalized not only laws but principles too, the fact of the matter is that *every optical effect* can be explained through laws and principles of Gestalt theory and that *every painting* – every visual pattern, artistic or not – "complies with the laws" and the principles "of Gestalt theory"; or, to be exact, every image complies with *some* laws and with *main* Gestalt theory principles of visual perception.

Meurant's paintings, particularly, are very good – I would say very *exemplar* – examples of presence and functioning of *dynamics* principle of perception. As Rudolf Arnheim (1974, p. 412) writes: "It turns out that every visual object is an eminently dynamic affair. This fact, fundamental to all perception, is easily overlooked when we adhere to the common practice of describing sensory phenomena by purely metric properties. What is an equilateral triangle? A combination of three straight lines of equal length, meeting one another at angles of sixty degrees. What are reds and oranges meeting on a canvas? Wavelengths of 700 and 610 millimicron. And a movement? It is defined by its speed and direction. Although useful for practical and scientific purposes, such metric descriptions overlook the primary quality of all perception, the aggressive outward pointing of the triangle, the dissonant clash of the hues, the onrush of the movement. These dynamic properties, inherent in everything our eyes perceive, are so fundamental that we can say: *Visual perception consists in the experiencing of visual forces*".

In Meurant's paintings "the experiencing of visual forces" (i.e., experiencing of the interaction and the tension among perceptual forces²) is not only *much in evidence*, but it also is *the main visual effect* – "optical effect" – that these kind of paintings produce: a highly dynamic one.

¹ Written May 14, 2012 in reply to a letter of Gerhard Stemberger, Austria, asking for comments on Meurant's paintings and their evaluation by the Belgian arts theorist Jean Guiraud.

² As established by physicists for physical forces, perceptual or psychological forces have a base of attack, a direction, and an intensity, and they are generated by the shapes and configurations of visual objects.

The reason why Meurant's paintings show their "peculiar property" and produce their peculiar "optical effect" consists, as usual, in the structural features of shape³, in the structure of the whole, that is, in the structure of the field or of the Gestalt. The structure of the whole in a visual object consists of parts, units – or "genuine parts"⁴ – that are also, at the same time, perceptual forces.

In Meurant's paintings, on the one hand, the "hierarchic gradient"⁵ of the units is very low, since each unit (genuine part) is on the same plane of all the others (in other words, each unit is juxtaposed to the others, like a chessboard), and each unit has only one of three similar (right-angled shape) configurations: a basic square, a larger rectangle that is composed of two basic squares, and a larger square consisting of four basic squares. On the other hand, each unit differs in colour from those that are juxtaposed to it, thereby creating a not very homogeneous whole.

It seems to be a sort of paradox: a pattern that is homogeneous and not homogeneous at the same time. But this is only a conceptual paradox, not a perceptual one. Indeed, this apparent contrast is the structural core that explains the "endless transformations" of "groups of rectangles" of which Guiraud writes about and that is the stylistic feature of Meurant's works of art. The "endless" transformations of groups of rectangles are moreover explicable by gestaltist grouping principle⁶ based on similarity and difference (subdivision, separation)⁷. In Meurant's paintings we put some rectangles together on the basis of Wertheimer's proximity and similarity laws: as mentioned above, proximity, since all rectangles are close each other (juxtaposed, without overlapping), and similarity, since each unit has a similar shape (right-angled and with only three sizes). In addition to these two rules, another one, that plays a crucial phenomenal

³ "In speaking of 'shape' we refer to two quite different properties of visual objects: (1) the actual boundaries produced by the artist: the lines, masses, volumes, and (2) the structural skeleton created in perception by these material shapes, but rarely coinciding with them" (R. Arnheim, 1974, p. 93).

⁴ "It is necessary therefore to distinguish between 'genuine parts' – that is, sections representing a segregated subwhole within the total context – and mere portions or pieces – that is, sections segregated only in relation to a limited local context or to no inherent breaks in the figure at all. When in this book I speak of parts, I always mean genuine parts. The statement 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts' refers to them. The statement is, however, misleading because it suggests that in a particular context the parts remain what they are, but are joined by a mysterious additional quality, which makes the difference. Instead, the appearance of any part depends, to a greater or lesser extent, on the structure of the whole, and the whole, in turn, is influenced by the nature of its parts" (R. Arnheim, 1974, p. 78).

⁵ In a visual pattern, "the mere number of elements may vary from a single figure – say, a black square holding the center of an otherwise empty surface – to a screen of innumerable particles covering the entire field. The distribution of weights may be dominated by one strong accent to which everything else is subservient, or by a duet of figures, such as Adam and Eve, the angel of the Annunciation and the Virgin, or the combination of red ball and feathery black mass that appears in a series of paintings by Adolph Gottlieb. In works consisting of only one or two units on a plain ground, the 'hierarchic gradient' can be said to be very steep. More often, an assembly of many units leads in steps from the strongest to the weakest [...] The hierarchic gradient approaches zero when a pattern is composed of many units of equal weight. The repetitive patterns of wallpaper or the windows of high-rise buildings obtain balance by homogeneity. In some works by Pieter Brueghel, the rectangular space of the picture is filled with small episodic groups, fairly equal in weight, which represent children's games or Flemish proverbs. This approach is better suited to interpreting the overall character of a mood or mode of existence than to describing life as controlled by central powers. Extreme examples of homogeneity can be found in Louise Nevelson's sculptural reliefs, which are shelves of coordinated compartments, or in Jackson Pollock's late paintings, evenly filled with a homogeneous texture. Such works present a world in which one finds oneself in the same place wherever one goes" (R. Arnheim, 1974, p. 29).

⁶ Wertheimer was the first who found and described, in his pioneering study of 1923, several of the properties that tie visual items together.

⁷ "Similarity and subdivision are opposite poles [...] Similarity acts as a structural principle only in conjunction with separation, namely, as a force of attraction among segregated things [...] Any aspect of percepts – shape, brightness, color, spatial location, movement, etc. – can cause grouping by similarity. A general principle to be kept in mind is that although all things are different in some respects and similar in others, comparisons make sense only when they proceed from a common base" (R. Arnheim, 1974, p. 79).

role, is functioning, that is grouping/separation rule through colour. Colouring, calibrating hues, arrangements of colours are the activities whereby Meurant discloses his creativity and his artistic skill, and [he] produces his very appealing and interesting works. There is no doubt that Meurant knows very well, intuitively or not, the rules/effects of colour matching (i.e., the syntax of combinations), so that his paintings induce those visual effects of which Guiraud has written about.

Finally, I see a risk of confusion in some Guiraud's claims, specifically, where he writes about the "endless" possibility of rectangles grouping, as follows: "If we look at the painting long enough, the permutations are endless"; "New boundaries and groupings appear unexpectedly and endlessly"; "The groups of rectangles [...] renew a 'set of possibilities' through their endless transformations"; and so on. In the case in point, it must be clear that it can be endless the grouping process, not the possibilities of grouping. In fact, it seems true that, looking at Meurant's paintings, observer's eye is unable to stop on one of the numerous potential/possible groups that each painting allows to form, but it is assuredly true that the number of possible groups is finite, and this because we have to do with a Gestalt; i.e., a field whose units are organized in a self-contained and limited whole.

And that is what, in summary, I think about the matter. I hope this is useful.

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References

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