

COLOUR, DESIRE AND DESTRUCTION IN BÉATRICE BONHOMME'S *LA
MAISON ABANDONNÉE*

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Abstract

To write colour is to draw into the space of the text an element of the visual idiom which resists words: while a painting's line and framing invite the viewer of even non-figurative art to perceive semantically, colour expressivity defies language. Yet its immediacy and embodiment appeal to the contemporary poet. In Béatrice Bonhomme's *livre d'artiste La Maison abandonnée* (2006), a collaboration with pastel artist Christine Charles, we follow the speaker's meanderings through a house soon to be destroyed, but ephemerally painted over by a fresco or graffiti artist who remains anonymous. The house is pregnant with a forgotten history, that of lost childhoods whose lingering traces on the site are doomed to disappear – yet loss coexists with celebration in the wild, child-like, yet emphatically sexualized markings on the walls. Colour saturates the speaker's apprehension of the place and is presented as a catalyst to the act of writing; yet it ultimately eludes words, which prove unable to tell colour apart from light or from other senses, namely touch. But, in their discontinuous, gradually undone account of the viewing process, words can still bring out the congruity of the short-lived colours' temporality and aesthetics. Violent, chaotic and desire-driven, the frescoes seem to look

forward to their destruction, presenting it as another creative process in its own right; one that will intensify their lustful, celebratory energy and their hurried, unbridled aesthetics in a moment of consummate undoing.

Colour is a source of intense visual expressivity which poetry, in its search for a regenerated language within French, attempts to draw into the space of the text. Colour is arguably the least narrative, or even semantic, element of visuality: it demands a bodily engagement and a commitment to the immediate. Thus colour poses words a profound challenge. Writing colour also means grappling with some of the philosophical inquiries into the nature of perception and indeed language, in which colour holds a central place. For Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein alike, it is not possible to approach a colour as an essence, even if in ordinary language colour words create the illusion that red, blue and yellow exist in isolation from their occurrences in the real and that colours are properties of objects that apply to them but also transcend them. In what Wittgenstein has shown to be the idealized grammar of our everyday language use, colours become disembodied chromatic concepts and near-abstractions.¹ By contrast, colour as an experienced phenomenon, both philosophers suggest, involves an intensely temporal and intricate interplay between many factors: between a subject (their senses, perspective, motion or stasis, but also their language, colour memory and culture) and the real (a given space,

¹ See Marie McGinn, 'Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*', *Philosophy*, vol. 66, no. 258 (October 1991), pp. 435–53, especially pp. 446–48.

background or colour context, light, air quality, motion or stasis, and so on). Words can only attempt to flesh out such an entangled and transient interplay: in the knowledge that colour will ultimately elude verbal expression, we turn away from the illusion of pure colour. This apparent defeat is what opens the way to an alternative language of colour, which may account for the fragmentary forms of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on colour* or Merleau-Ponty's *Le Visible et l'invisible* (insofar as it is valid to speculate on the intended form of those unfinished works). Set against the linear discursiveness that theories of colour might have taken, their fragments signal a departure from ordinary language, a move towards more spatial textual forms, and perhaps an acknowledgement of incompleteness in the face of what colour demands of words. This is also why poetry, arguably the literary genre that relies most on spatiality and discontinuity, might be at an advantage in contributing to the philosophical question of articulating colour. I will approach this question through the prism of Béatrice Bonhomme's poetry in *La Maison abandonnée* (2006). Bonhomme has acknowledged the importance of philosophy, including phenomenology, to her perception of poetry, other media and their interactions. Quoting Michel Deguy, she affirms: "La poésie n'est pas seule" constitue une pensée essentielle. Ces penseurs me permettent de comprendre la philosophie comme lien vers d'autres arts, en particulier la poésie.'²

² Quoted in Dorothée Catoen-Cooche, 'Entretien avec Béatrice Bonhomme', in Peter Collier and Ilda Tomas (eds), *Béatrice Bonhomme: Le mot, la mort, l'amour* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 33–50, p.36. On Michel Deguy and phenomenology, see Michel Collot, 'Une phénoménologie de l'espace poétique: Deguy et Merleau Ponty', in Yves Charnet (ed.), *Le Poète que je cherche à être: Cahier Michel Deguy* (Paris: La Table

Bonhomme is a significant and internationally recognized figure in the landscape of contemporary French poetry: a collection of essays and other responses to her work constituted the hundredth volume of Peter Lang's 'Modern French Identities' series.³ Bonhomme has made an important contribution to the re-locating of poetry in an open interface with other media. Her collaboration with artists has been extensive: not only has she co-published several *livres d'artistes* among other visual-verbal forms, she also gives a substantial place to visual contributions in the poetry review she founded in 1994, *Nu(e)*.⁴ She has been increasingly drawn to the visuality of the stage, experimenting with a play and a magic lantern show.⁵ Bonhomme's poetry itself relies on light, colour and

Ronde / Belin, 1996). See also Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg (eds), *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 335–66.

³ Peter Collier and Ilda Tomas (eds), *Béatrice Bonhomme*.

⁴ Bonhomme has worked in collaboration with the following artists: Geneviève Guétemme, Stello Bonhomme, Serge Popoff, Henri Maccheroni, Albert Woda, Alberte Garibbo, Jean-Marie Rivello, Danielle Androff, Claudine Rovis, Thierry Lambert, Maurice Cohen, Isabelle Raviolo, Claire Cuenot, Michel Steiner, Youl, Sonia Guerin, Bérénice Bonhomme.

⁵ Quoted in Catoen-Cooche, 'Entretien': '[j]e cherche à inventer une forme visuelle à partir des intonations et du rythme de la voix, forme visuelle qui influencerait la forme même de mon écriture' (p.40). 'Les mots, je les croyais vivants comme les tableaux et la musique. J'ai, ensuite, beaucoup travaillé avec des peintres pour la revue et mes recueils. J'ai même pratiqué un peu la gravure grâce à Serge Popoff' (p. 42). *La Fin de l'éternité*, a play (Nice: Editions de la revue *Nu(e)*, 2002), was staged in Granada in 2009.

other visual modalities: ‘le geste d’écrire reste très proche pour moi du geste du peintre’.⁶ Her father, Mario Villani, was a painter and a *pied noir* of Italian extraction. Through his former philosophy teacher in Algiers, Jean Grenier, Mario Villani was given continued access to the intellectual milieu of his generation after moving to France in 1956, although he consistently refused to allow exhibitions of his work as a painter, or to allow Grenier to publish his philosophical writings in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. The purpose of creating, for Villani, lay clearly in the process: ‘[i]l disait que l’essentiel résidait dans le geste de créer.’⁷ As we shall see, this is of particular relevance to Béatrice Bonhomme, who has acknowledged her father’s legacy in her own practice. After his death in 2006, she organized the first exhibition of his work and published two volumes dedicated to his memory,⁸ incorporating his name in her signature as a tribute: Béatrice Bonhomme-Villani.⁹ In her poetry, Mario Villani’s presence is felt through the

Kaléidoscope d’enfance, a magic lantern show, was performed at the Bibliothèque Municipale Louis Nucéra, Nice, on 10 March 2012.

⁶ Quoted in Catoen-Cooche, ‘Entretien’, p.42. This parallel is explored in the third section of *Béatrice Bonhomme*, entitled ‘La lumière étoilée: rapports entre arts et artistes’ (pp.101–69).

⁷ Béatrice Bonhomme, quoted in Catoen-Cooche, ‘Entretien’, p. 37.

⁸ *Mutilation d’arbre* (Mers sur Indre: Collodion, 2008) and *Passant de la lumière* (Jégun: L’Arrière-Pays, 2008).

⁹ ‘Il était donc normal qu’à partir de là, je lui rende ce qu’il m’avait offert et que je signe de son nom à lui aussi, d’autant que je sentais mon geste d’écrire rejoindre son geste de peindre.’ Quoted in Catoen-Cooche, ‘Entretien’, p. 39.

occasional use of Italian, the fascination with the other ‘other language’ of visuality, and an aesthetic of elusiveness and of process.

This article focuses on *La Maison abandonnée* in order to explore, through close reading and analysis, the spectrum of the roles played by colour in Bonhomme’s poetry.¹⁰

La Maison abandonnée is a *livre d’artiste* published in 2006 in collaboration with pastel artist Christine Charles, who contributed nine pieces. Across its pages, we follow the speaker’s meanderings through a house soon to be destroyed, but ephemerally painted over by a fresco or graffiti artist who remains anonymous. No photos of the frescoes are included in the book. The house is pregnant with a forgotten history, that of lost childhoods whose lingering traces on the site are doomed to disappear – yet loss coexists with celebration in the wild, child-like, yet emphatically sexualized markings on the walls. Colour saturates the speaker’s apprehension of the place and is presented as a catalyst for the act of writing; yet it ultimately eludes words, which prove unable to tell colour apart from light or from other senses, namely touch. But in their discontinuous, gradually undone account of the viewing process, words can still bring out the congruity of the ephemeral colours’ temporality and aesthetics. Violent, chaotic and desire-driven, the frescoes seem to anticipate their destruction, which is presented as another creative process in its own right.

My reading will focus mainly on the dialogue with the frescoes within the texts themselves, though the presence of another medium is important in conveying the poem’s refusal to settle in a single form, as is the presence of another, visually distinct poetic

¹⁰ Béatrice Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, with pastels by Christine Charles (Colomars: Melis, 2006).

form, since poetic prose alternates with verse. We might briefly note one element of aesthetic continuity and one of sharp contrast between the individual poems and pastels. On the one hand, each poem and each pastel comes across as part of a series with variations on recurrent themes, rather than as a self-contained totality. As we shall see, this iterative quality also characterizes the frescoes, as evoked in the poems. On the other hand, the prominence of bold, even garish colours in the text contrasts with the reproductions of the pastels in shades of grey. Only one original numbered print inserted at the very beginning of the book is in colour, but its hues are soft and subtle. This clear departure from what the text evokes suggests that words take it upon themselves to conjure up colour. Their task is epitomized in one of the closing poems, which contains the book's final colour notations:

Il a fallu longtemps laisser couler le bleu de l'encre pour réparer le gris des choses.

Just as the book focuses on loss, that of the destroyed frescoes' colours and of the past clinging to the house, so words assert their colour value, 'le bleu de l'encre', which is absent from the book printed in black. Nevertheless, this present–yet–absent colour is a redemptive one: 'pour réparer le gris des choses' suggests that the real is colour-neutral and marked by loss, and therefore needs the chromaticity that words can provide.

Returning now to the poem's opening and unfolding, we will consider how words acquit themselves of this task in a poetics of desire and embodiment.

In the first three lines, a colour stimulus acts as a catalyst for the writing process, enabling the body of the text to find its shape on the page:

Un passage comme si de rien n'était

Et voilà que je me remets à pénétrer les mots de la vie

Un soleil sur la nappe rouge

The colour red seems to prompt this passage into writing, as hinted by the fact that the poem's framing noun groups, '[u]n passage' and 'la nappe rouge', almost mirror each other's sound sequence in /p/, /a/ and /ʒ/. This almost fortuitous transition into words is presented as part of an iterative process ('je me remets à pénétrer'), which is also reflected in the brevity of the individual poems across the book: they number between two and nine lines each, and leave at least half of the page blank. Between each text, writing and reading are suspended by the white vacant space, projecting no illusion of self-enclosed completion. But when they resume at the following page, it is often by means of a colour notation: 'La terre rouge', 'Il y a toujours ce noir profond', 'Un vieux rideau vert', 'Tu restes / Dans l'odeur bronzée des lignages'.¹¹ Colour sets a chromatic pitch at the opening of the fragment which makes 'pénétrer les mots' possible, so that while the text is from the outset part of an uncertain, open-ended process, colour acts as a

¹¹ Respectively p.10, p.16, p. 28, and p. 36.

driving and rhythmic force within it, ensuring that ‘la respiration des mots se [fait] encore’.¹²

If colour enables the passage into words and drives the text onward, it is not because its purpose is descriptive: colours are rarely tied to specific objects in the frescoes. Nor does Bonhomme’s colour lexicon encompass subtler hues, but gives clear preference to primary and (to a much lesser extent) secondary colours that are named but not further refined by descriptive adjectives such as ‘bright’ or ‘dark’, because pinpointing colours accurately is not the point. Rather, the text reads as a search for a language of colour that would de-conceptualize and re-embody colours. The first direct evocation of the frescoes foregrounds their chromatic intensity, but also their refusal to isolate colour from the temporality of the viewing process, which combines indeterminacy and a violent immediacy:

Sur les murs de la maison qui va être détruite, les taches de couleur, les
oiseaux, les marques du désir ont laissé une colle rose. Les couleurs
éclaboussent le matin, dans les formes enfantines d’un trait mal défini. Le

¹² Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 11. The role of colour as a rhythmic, almost incantatory force is particularly noticeable in another collection, *Les Gestes de la neige* (Coaraze: L’Amourier, 1998). Its intricate poems are characterized by a desire-driven rhythm punctuated by recurrent motifs, not least the colours black (in the initial poem, ‘Le Croisé d’enfance’, whose opening ‘Il pleut noir où voguent les nuages’ is repeated) and blue (throughout the collection, but particularly in ‘Le Chemin de la mer’, with the repetition of the line ‘et le reflet des bleus’).

sabre entre les cuisses, la fresque viole la lumière dans une fin d'après-midi qui doit mourir.

The colours' context and connotations are highly fluid. The shift from morning to late afternoon is not elucidated, nor is the metaphorical juxtaposition of children's drawings and rape – though the latter themes resonate with Picasso's minotaur etchings and their Mediterranean imagination, combining a simple outline with unbridled, Dionysian energy.¹³

Light and colour (which are optically interdependent) are evoked in their mutual impact, with colours gushing in the morning light ('éclabousse') and the fresco cutting ('sabre') through the afternoon light. The viewing process belongs to an unplaceable, but immediate here-and-now. Rather than freeze the fresco in a timeless description, the poem conveys a relation to it, that of its apprehension in time. This converges with Wittgenstein's proposition that 'a natural history of colours would have to report on their occurrence in nature, not on their essence. Its propositions would have to be *temporal* ones.'¹⁴ Colour writing is the rendering of a phenomenology of colour in words, rather than an epistemology: it is not about pinning down what colour is, but rather about conjuring up colour as it is experienced in an ephemeral here-and-now.

¹³ See for instance his etchings *Minotaure marchant avec un poignard* and *Minotaure attaquant une amazone* (1933). One strand of Bonhomme's imagination taps into Mediterranean Modernism (see also p. 20, 'des fleurs à la Matisse').

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour* (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1978), III-135, p. 34.

The impossibility of isolating colour from the spatiality of the viewing process comes to the fore in the next evocation of the frescoes, a few pages later:¹⁵

Une fontaine est posée entre les murs, sa pluie avive les couleurs projetées dans la lumière. Dans la maison abandonnée, une chambre bleue a reçu un trait de pinceau piaillant et des oiseaux sont nés qui hurlent leur rougeur innocente entre les becs des lustres oubliés.

Spatiality affects colours in three different ways here. The fountain's water clarifies the air and thus sharpens them; the blue room offers a contrasting background to the red painted birds; and their shape determines their ambivalent expressivity: redness is associated with blushing innocence, but also, more typically, with piercing violence through the verb 'hurlent' and the keen outlines of the beaks, metaphorically paralleled with the tapering, pointed shapes of the discarded chandeliers, and also mimicked in the syntactic break of the anacoluthon: 'des oiseaux sont nés qui hurlent'. Bearing in mind the previously encountered *sabre* metaphor and the pervasive sense of loss, it is hard not to think of the association between colour and sharpness as carrying a *punctum* effect similar to that identified by Barthes in some photographs.¹⁶ The ambivalent colliding of

¹⁵ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 18.

¹⁶ See Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980). On other transpositions of, or parallels with, the Barthesian *punctum* in Bonhomme, see Clémence O'Connor, 'Étoilement du poème: légèreté et *punctum* d'une écriture', in *Béatrice Bonhomme*, pp.127–41. On photography and loss in Bonhomme, see also Geneviève Guétemme, 'Entre le dire et le voir: le nu, la photographie', in *Béatrice Bonhomme*, pp.103–25.

childishness and rape in the previously presented passage is here maintained in the association between innocence and violence. Combined with the colour-contrast between cold blue and warm red, this association also directly echoes the famous description by Jouve, Bonhomme's literary mentor, of the blue room at the opening of *Paulina 1880*, which is the room where Paulina, obsessed with the religious imperative of moral purity, kills her lover. In that description, 'le rouge et bleu échangent des provocations terribles' – a sentence mirrored almost word for word in the second poem of *La Maison abandonnée*: 'Le vert et le rouge échangent des provocations d'amour', and echoed again further on in the book: 'un lieu plus secret où le bleu se bat avec le rouge'.¹⁷ The ominously still and lonely room depicted by Jouve has little to do with the loud and teeming shapes of this wildly synaesthetic blue room ('un trait de pinceau pialliant', 'hurlent leur rougeur'), but this near-quotation highlights the role of the verbal in shaping colour perception. As Michel Butor affirms, 'notre vision n'est jamais pure vision. [...] [N]otre regard est entouré'.¹⁸

Thus it becomes clear that spatiality is deeply involved in our apprehension of colour, whether we consider physical space and conditions, the space of the frescoes and their shapes, or indeed the legacy of literary space which acts as another prism through which we see colour. And in turn, colour gives the particularly spatial words of the poem a *rhythmos*, a pattern and a pace. The role of colour in the text's opening and at the start

¹⁷ Pierre Jean Jouve, *Paulina 1880* (Paris: Folio, 2007), p. 14. Echoed in *La Maison abandonnée*, p.10 and p. 42.

¹⁸ Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1969), p. 8.

of some of the fragments has already been explored. Now with the next, breathlessly paced passage, the rhythmic parallel between text and frescoes becomes more tangible:¹⁹

La fraîcheur d'un jardin et les dédales de la maison abandonnée comme
des enfants auraient joué de quelques flaques de lumière et posé sur le mur
leurs doigts imprégnés de couleur, mais pas encore assez défaites. Une
pièce bleue, peinte à la va-vite, par touches jetées sur la tapisserie, garde le
silence des enfants, laissé pour compte, oublié. Et brusquement se
découvre le couple de la fresque, dessiné avec son désir en bataille.

Like the room 'peinte à la va-vite', this text moves quickly onward. Deprived of a main verb, the first sentence is given no resting point. The bewildering repetition of colours and motifs in the abandoned house likens it to a maze ('les dédales', another possible connection with the Minotaur myth); yet here the new theme of the couple is suddenly encountered. The anteposed phrase 'Et brusquement se découvre', preceding the actual object of discovery, conveys the unravelling of the fresco with the viewer's motion through space. This abrupt coming into sight injects fresh energy into the poem. As in all mazes, the eye does not precede the step, which adds to the sense of bodily engagement in the viewing process. The final metaphor of 'désir en bataille' reactivates the tension between child-like disorder (the phrase typically determines tousled hair) and the strife of 'battle' – another hint at bodily struggle, and more generally at the haptic dimension of the gaze, encountered here also in the image of children's hand painting, 'leurs doigts

¹⁹ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 23.

imprégnés de couleurs’. Colour is rendered as wavering between two senses, sight and touch, suggesting that the gaze is not a strictly optical phenomenon, but involves a desire to touch and penetrate the painting’s surface, as the pioneering Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Claude Gandelman have characterized that mode of visual scanning.²⁰ Significantly, the first evocation of the frescoes’ colour and light, analysed above, already presented several haptic notations: ‘une colle rose’, ‘éclaboussent le matin’, ‘viole la lumière’.²¹

The continued emphasis on the haptic quality of the gaze, and on the brisk pace at which it unravels, also makes viewing an extension of the creative gesture, which is here characterized as a gesture of undoing. As hinted at by the hand-painting comparison, the breathless desire shared by the frescoes and poems is for the undone: ‘pas encore assez défaite’, colour seeks a way out of line, out of shape and representation, a place that could serve as a repository for the very silence of repressed memory – including that, perhaps, of a playful creative gesture, heedless of adult standards, mindful only of the

²⁰ Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901) (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985); Claude Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).

²¹ More generally, Michael Bishop stresses the haptic quality of Bonhomme’s apprehension of the real and what he names ‘cette érotique de l’être’, when he writes: ‘Sentir, c’est vivre l’immédiateté des contacts et des frôlements des caresses et des brutalités, de la matière’. See Michael Bishop, ‘Béatrice Bonhomme: l’irréductible, entre dystopie et outopos’, in *Béatrice Bonhomme*, pp. 335-346, p. 336 and 341 respectively.

process. The act of painting and its un-self-consciousness are foregrounded in the next prose fragment of the volume:²²

Le couple dessiné à la va-vite, comme grossièrement, ressemble aux graffiti d'enfant. Il a gardé l'innocence des choses simples au milieu des taches d'oiseaux et de fleurs qui croisent sur la tapisserie un silence bleu déposé là par hasard.

In the second sentence of this poem, breathless in the absence of a single comma, we witness an increasing indeterminacy over what is represented: the couple is only roughly outlined, 'grossièrement', while the birds and flowers here become 'des taches d'oiseaux et de fleurs': the focus is on the gestural quality of painting. An area of 'silence bleu' is fortuitously and ephemerally found, hushing our tendency to identify what we see in semantic terms, and refusing to reveal more than colour itself. Followed by an expanse of unprinted space on the page, the synaesthetic phrase 'un silence bleu' allows us to dwell in the blue, though it only offers a light point of anchorage, being itself in motion as the verb 'croisent' suggests.²³ The phrase 'déposé là par hasard', too, presents this blue

²² Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 26.

²³ Colour in Bonhomme characterizes other senses and in doing so, exceeds the realm of the visual. In *Jeune homme marié nu* alone, examples of synaesthesia include other evocations of silence: 'quel est ce malaise d'ombre au silence rouge des carreaux' (*Jeune homme marié nu* (Colomars: Melis, 2004), p.157), olfactory notations: 'certaines odeurs blondes' (p.73); 'l'odeur bleu mer' (p.156), and lines where colour and touch fluidly characterize each other: 'la moiteur bleue / de ton amour' (p.199), 'tu es dans le bleu coupant de ce ciel' (p. 232).

primarily as the trace of a gesture. This echoes the fountain ‘posée entre les murs’ in a previous passage, suggesting that the space comes together lightly and loosely in the viewer/speaker’s gaze. The terms ‘posé’ and ‘déposé’ are in themselves a leitmotif in Bonhomme’s poetic work, where words and fragments, too, seem to alight on the page, in a volatile poetic idiom which moves forward by way of echoes, variations, fluid metaphorical associations, and iterative rhythms. The impression is one of un-self-consciousness, of words as a humble offering made in passing, or of chance traces heedlessly left behind. Words seek no centre to gravitate around, but instead probe visual–verbal boundaries, emphasizing the process of their explorations and the bodily presence involved not only in painting and viewing, but also in writing, as was already suggested at the book’s opening in the line ‘Et je me remets à *pénétrer* les mots de la vie’ (my emphasis).

The gradual undoing of mimesis and the intensifying of bodily engagement continue as the text, itself increasingly fragmentary, takes us closer to the frescoes’ destruction. The corporeality of the colours is highlighted with increasing emphasis. They seem to embody desire itself in the following fragment:²⁴

Sur le mur s’étale vif et clinquant le désir, désir de vivre et de jouir, désir
de procréer des fleurs et des oiseaux.

The adjectives ‘vif’ and ‘clinquant’, which normally apply to colour, implicitly assimilate chromatic values to desire – both the sexual desire figured in the frescoes’ nudes and an

²⁴ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 30.

equally lustful desire to create ('procréer') in the face of loss and thus allow the walls of a house doomed to destruction to bloom with colour. Indeed, the frescoes themselves seem to look forward to their own undoing:²⁵

Des graffiti entrelacent des noms et des corps très matériels, mal définis, et
l'on distingue juste le sexe de l'homme qui devient une fleur de couleur
violente avec des oiseaux dans ses nids.

An indeterminacy bordering on disintegration is expressed by the phrases 'mal définis' and 'l'on distingue tout juste', only heightening the materiality of both visual and verbal shapes. Rough outlines allow colour to shift shapes, as if breaking free of stable semantics: 'le sexe de l'homme qui devient une fleur de couleur violente avec des oiseaux dans ses nids.' In this anamorphic viewing process, a zone of visual confusion ('l'on distingue juste') comes into focus successively as a sexual organ, a flower and birds that are spawned by the metaphorical drift. Intricacy ('entrelacent') and anamorphosis ('devient') are both conveyed by verbs, reinforcing the fresco's dynamism.

The choice of 'graffiti' over 'fresque' in this fragment places the emphasis on the hasty painting gesture, its 'couleur violente' and the inscription of nouns or perhaps names. The process of alternating between the two terms and their contrasting visual genres, and indeed registers, enables the viewer/speaker to avoid categorizing the paintings in terms of the dominant hierarchy between presumed lower and higher art-forms. As readers, we find ourselves unable to rely on the socio-cultural baggage that

²⁵ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 35.

dictates that ‘graffiti’ and ‘frescoes’ cannot apply to the same painting. We are thus forced to reflect on the frames of reference that inform our gaze. Similar textual strategies are at work in the following fragment:²⁶

Une fleur criarde étale sa vulgarité sur la tapisserie peinte à la hâte. Le soleil la frappe et la fait hurler au bord d’une fenêtre qui baille.

The connotations of ‘criarde’ and ‘vulgarité’ add to the recurring motif of sexual violence, which is mobilized, here again, to evoke the dramatic colliding and mutual sharpening of colour and light. Yet negative connotations are in a sense neutralized. The paintings are neither trivialized, nor glorified by the poem, which simply celebrates the boldness of their lust for colour, and their desire-driven rashness. As we can see, not only does colour gradually lose its mimetic value as we advance in the text, but the visual frames of reference through which we perceive them are also deconstructed, as if to allow the raw corporeality of paint to speak for itself.²⁷

²⁶ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 39.

²⁷ While certain colours seem to carry recurrent associative value in Bonhomme (the adjective ‘blond’, for instance, is often coupled with sensuality), it is important to note the fluidity of colour value in her poetic idiom. The verbal rendering of a colour’s expressive charge is particularly apt at fleshing out (or indeed, deconstructing) its cultural and literary elements, in addition to the subjective impact and immediate, fluid significance it might have for the viewer / speaker. As such, colour value encompasses both the verbal / socio-cultural / generic layerings that inform colour perception, and

In the two fragments on the abandoned house that precede the evocation of its destruction, the colours' physical medium – the house itself – begins to come undone:²⁸

Toutes les fenêtres, les portes battantes mais dans le dédale des pièces
demeure un lieu plus secret où le bleu se bat avec le rouge. Il reste une
odeur d'enfance.

Like the initial noun phrase, which is set adrift in the absence of a verb and punctuation, the structure of the house becomes highly fluid. It was already an ambivalent space with fountains and courtyards blurring the boundary between inside and outside. Now it becomes a maze of open, in-between shapes, windows and swing doors, with at its heart an unplaceable 'lieu plus secret'. Here colour is divested of any representational function; it is non-figurative. 'Le bleu se bat avec le rouge', as it might in a painting by Marc Rothko.²⁹ The verbs 'demeure' and 'reste' assert the presence of sensorial traces: the colours and 'une odeur d'enfance' testify to long-gone childhoods still hovering in the

colour's sheer resistance to the verbal, its mutely expressive value as a language foreign to words.

²⁸ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 42.

²⁹ 'Rothko-esque' is the title of a poetic tribute to Bonhomme composed by Peter Collier, published in *Béatrice Bonhomme*, Collier and Tomas (eds), p. 83. On poetry and non-figuration, see Clémence O'Connor, 'Translating Non-Figuration: Heather Dohollau's Poems on Pure Visuality', *French Studies*, 64 (2010) (special issue entitled *New Ekphrastic Poetics*, ed. Susan Harrow), pp. 276–89.

house, that are soon to vanish for ever except for their paradoxical preservation in this text haunted by loss. This paradox is rendered by the juxtaposition of abstract and concrete notions in the phrase ‘odeur d’enfance’, strangely evocative of dormant memories waiting in vain to be awakened. In the penultimate fragment on the paintings, permeable, oozing surfaces prefigure destruction.³⁰

Des larmes d’eau suintent dans la cour avec des fleurs qui saignent sur les
murs recouverts de signes rouges.

Water-diluted paint bleeds into the walls, though the French metaphor ‘saigner’ is not a dead metaphor and refers much more literally than the equivalent English verb to blood loss, with as strong an emphasis on the corporeal nature of colour as on the dissolving shapes. Tears and wounds signal imminent loss, but even here, loss is congruent with the creative process: the flowers’ liquefying shapes reveal walls ‘recouverts de signes rouges’. Now unattached to clear referents, this red enables us to imagine the mysterious significance of a pure sign.

The last direct evocation of the frescoes in the volume is dedicated to the coming of the bulldozer and its work of destruction:³¹

Le bulldozer, lorsqu’il viendra, fera éclater les murs, appuyant trop vite sur
des tubes de gouache comme un enfant pressé et tout aura cet air à la fois
désolé et festif d’un gâchis de couleur.

³⁰ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 44.

³¹ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 46.

Here the quest for undone colour, previously made explicit in the phrase ‘pas encore assez défaire’, comes to a point of paradoxical fulfilment. As suggested by the metaphor of squeezing tubes of gouache, destruction is another creative process that intensifies the frescoes’ celebratory energy and their hurried, unbridled aesthetics in a moment of consummate undoing. The metaphor ‘appuyant trop vite sur des tubes de gouache’ for the bulldozer thrusting into the painted walls, is significantly haptic: as in Georges Didi-Huberman, touch is both ‘l’*eschaton* de la vision, sa limite, – mais aussi, et pour cela même, fantasmatiquement, son *télos*: toucher serait comme la visée (obsession ou phobie) de la vision.’³² We cannot see well, or stop seeing altogether, what we stand very close to, yet the very physicality of the artwork nonetheless makes us experience seeing as potentially prolonged by touch, or informed by touch in the Aristotelian sense of the term. The destruction of the house, set in the future, is a paradoxical ‘passage’ into the undone that completes the viewing process, just as it puts an end to it, with a penetration into nothing. The image of child-like impulsiveness and the resulting waste testify further to the significance of the process in the anonymous and highly precarious offering – *à perte*, at a loss – of these short-lived colours.

So, in *La Maison abandonnée*, it seems that words seek a language that might articulate colour as perceived in space, in time and in memory, mobilizing both the linearity of the verbal to convey time, and the textual viscosity of poetry to render space, rhythm and a form of heightened materiality. Loss is not only central to the frescoes’ story, their emergence, fate, and process-oriented aesthetics; it is also consubstantial with colour – an intensely transient phenomenon. Thus, just as words articulate and emphasize

³² Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Peinture incarnée* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 56.

loss, they also precariously redeem it, continuing to speak the colours' elusive, corporeal language long after their destruction, 'pour réparer le gris des choses'. Colour is often violent, provocative, and pugnacious, and it is also sometimes secret and silent.

Contemplating colour, we are invited to practise a suspension of the cerebral, of anything that could lead to a judgement of genre or taste. Colours, above all, are relations between the subject, a place and the present moment; colours are their interface and interplay, made momentarily visible to the speaker. Here we draw close to Merleau-Ponty's definition of colour in *Le Visible et l'invisible*:³³

[U]ne couleur nue, et en général un visible, n'est pas un morceau d'être absolument dur, insécable, [...] mais plutôt une sorte de détroit entre des horizons extérieurs et des horizons intérieurs toujours béants, [...] une certaine différenciation, une modulation éphémère de ce monde, moins couleur ou chose donc, que différencie entre des choses et des couleurs, cristallisation momentanée de l'être coloré ou de la visibilité.

Colours are therefore not only the perceptions evoked in the poems, but also what such poems seek to render: a momentary crystallization of the intensely relational and temporal. What colour is, the poem aspires to be.

Colour writing, then, channels both presence and transience. Here we can see the possibilities opened up by this colour-centred approach to Bonhomme's writing as a whole, as several of her other works articulate this tension. Her colour writing lends a

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 173.

transgressive, fleeting visibility to what is lost or out of reach – such as the inside of the body,³⁴ the past, or indeed her dead father, as we shall see in a brief epilogue. In ‘Ce sourire caché’, colour plays an incantatory role in recalling childhood in the mind’s eye and in the poem:³⁵

que tu sois la pureté de ma voix

petite fille aux joues rouges

sur ta luge

de poupée

que tu sois la lumière

dans ta main de miniature

un pantin colorié charme

l'étoile d'une enfance

les larmes coulent sur tes joues

des joues de pomme rainette

³⁴ For example ‘des méandres vert-bleu d’un cerveau qui s’ignore’ and ‘un cerveau bleu-vert très pur’ in *Jeune homme marié nu*, p.124 and p.168 respectively; ‘les bronchioles [...] se prolongent par des sacs aériens qui sont tissus d’or’, *Passant de la lumière*, p. 21.

³⁵ *Passant de la lumière*, p. 91.

tu as bu trop vite, goulue
 le jus des pommes de la treille

 et tout l'amour de mon enfance

The colour red, named in the second line and later denoted by the 'pomme rainette', is invoked to conjure up the magical charm of childhood into the text: 'que tu sois la pureté de ma voix'. The poem briefly balances a coloured talisman at its centre, like the puppet in the child's hand, endowing it with the roundedness of cheeks and apples: wholesome, hold-able shapes. Yet the nourishing colour dissolves into transparent tears and hastily drunk juice, ebbing back into invisibility. This fluid handling of redness enables it, not only to convey the mourning of a child learning about loss, but also to invoke in the poem both 'tout l'amour de mon enfance' and its transitoriness.

Colour articulates a similarly precarious tension between loss and presence, visibility and invisibility, in both of the collections that Bonhomme has dedicated to mourning her father. As opposed to the achromatic grey of absence, colour is bound up with life and material presence. Both collections evoke the disorienting effect of loss through the reversibility of birth and death, youth and old age, motion and stasis, self and other. In *Mutilation d'arbre*, the grieving speaker, in her search for material traces of her father's presence, yet unable to acknowledge 'cette preuve de ta mort', fails to find her father's grave, or to pronounce his name when phoning the stonemason.³⁶ Yet colour's

³⁶ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, pp. 25–26.

grounding effect is asserted in the face of grief, its bewildering ‘dérive’ and ‘labilité’.³⁷

The speaker dwells on a transparent jar containing blue pigment in her father’s studio, emphasizing the materiality and vitality of its colour.³⁸

Toi l’accueillant, tu savais accueillir le bleu dans ce petit bocal transparent où tu conservais le pigment de la matière. Et toi si concret, si dru, comment être devenu abstrait au cœur des choses?

Toi le plus concret au centre de la matière des couleurs, le peintre de l’atelier. Tu ne quittes pas cet atelier où sont rangées tes couleurs de vie.

Colour has the power to assert a form of presence and preservation: ‘Tu ne quittes pas cet atelier’. In her turn, the speaker affirms her role as a guardian of colour.³⁹

Je garde la pureté des pigments, le bleu en poudre dans un petit bocal. [...] Je garde la simplicité des lignes du bleu dans un petit bocal de pigment. Les lignes qui effacent et dépassent la mort, les lignes qui brisent le froid dans la couleur concrète de quelques grains de poudre soigneusement matérielle, si concrète, artisanale, comme la matière même de ta vie de peintre.

³⁷ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 26 and p. 27.

³⁸ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, pp. 24–25.

³⁹ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, pp.15–17.

The ability of colour to proclaim presence resides in its raw materiality: the grain of the organic pigment and the uneven lines which it creates in the jar have the power to cut through death, to reinvest with presence and life a world marked by the body's decay into matter. Colour is in no way valued as a means of transcending matter through its use in a given artwork or aesthetic vision, in the service of what might exalt artistic genius. The blue lines are not painted, but sheer paint: the artist in his daily existence as a craftsman is here celebrated. In its simple – fundamental – physicality, the pigment challenges both the overwhelming materiality of the corpse, which is compared to wax and stone, and the abstraction of absence.⁴⁰

In *Passant de la lumière*, the disorienting effect of loss is conveyed in the final page, where the speaker struggles to identify a colour by which to remember her father. She likens him to a passerine, 'un passereau', echoing the verb 'passer':⁴¹

Pour moi, le passereau est bleu, mais je ne sais pas trop sa couleur. Il est bleu
comme l'oiseau d'enfance et souffre-douleur d'amour.

Pour moi, le passereau est rouge, mais je ne sais pas trop sa couleur. Ensanglanté
des stigmates de pluie, il traverse les larmes.

⁴⁰ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p.10 and p.11.

⁴¹ Bonhomme, *La Maison abandonnée*, p. 22. In French, use of the word 'passereau' is not confined to ornithology.

Pour moi, le passereau est gris, car je sais trop bien sa couleur. Il passe en glissade légère les ailes étendues, discret, il passe dans la vie précaire.

Et dans les plantes aromatiques, la myrrhe d'un étrange berceau, il passe et renaît, passereau, oiseau de cendre et de lumière.

Colour uncertainty between blue and red (the blue of veins and the red of arteries?) veers to the grey of loss. Yet grey is also the colour of a passerine seen in flight, 'discret' – a quality which brings us back to Mario Villani's humility as an artist reluctant to exhibit his works, intent on the creative process for its own sake. Finally, grey is the colour of the ashes from which the phoenix is born again in the last verse. The last text written by Bonhomme, who was, for three years, on the brink of poetic aphasia caused by her loss, *Passant de la lumière* ends with a tentative image of renewal.⁴² This image looks forward to her later poem 'Le Pacte des mots', where she expresses in chromatic terms her altered perception of words: 'Les mots pourtant, tout doucement, sont revenus, ils avaient perdu leurs ailes et leurs couleurs, mais je les ai préférés gris et ternes.'⁴³ The dull colour acquired by words offers them a chance of rebirth, 'les mots [...] ont repris dernièrement un peu de leur couleur', but only because they find themselves restored to a redeeming sensorial plane which Bonhomme describes as nakedness: 'Cette nudité, c'est le concret de la langue, les mots vivants comme des couleurs'.⁴⁴ In the verses quoted above, this

⁴² See Catoen-Cooche, 'Entretien', p. 38.

⁴³ 'Le Pacte des mots', *Béatrice Bonhomme*, pp.11–18 (p.16).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Catoen-Cooche, 'Entretien', p. 38 and p. 43 respectively.

concrete materiality of words is brought forward by the repetition of unprepossessing rhythms recalling spoken French: ‘Pour moi, [...] mais je ne sais pas trop’. Lightly, unself-consciously casual, these rhythms set into motion the chromatic fluidity that both mourns and celebrates the speaker’s lost father.

What seems to underlie Bonhomme’s quest for colour, then, is a utopian inscription of presence – utopian in the tension it aims to sustain between conjuring up colour’s immediate physicality and appeal to the senses on the one hand, and its elusiveness on the other. This utopia is therefore as humble as it is ambitious. Bonhomme’s approach to colour writing is not concerned with vying with painting to flaunt the power of words to capture the real. Rather, the poet strives to apprehend colour as caught in the fabric of the viewer’s experience: thus, she repositions words on the borders of visibility, and confronts them with a form of materiality that reconnects them to their own sensorial nature.