
CHAPTER 22

More on thin lines

Introductory

In the 1960s, great importance was being given by the artistic community to the painting-as-an-object. This tendency reached its apogee in 1968 when there was an exhibition entitled, “The Art of the Real”, at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York. The unifying idea was the total elimination of illusion from paintings.¹ Two consequence of this were

- *The use of larger and larger areas of uniform colour²*
- *The virtual disappearance of picture frames on the grounds that their absence gave a more powerful presence to the picture as object.*

Others artists, like myself, were far from abandoning the time-honoured project of playing off real picture surface against illusory-space. For these also the absence of framing provided a way of giving added emphasis to the real-surface. However, in their case, what they wanted was to be able to better control the objectness variable in their efforts to explore the real surface/illusory space dynamics.

Inspired by the surprising richness of the colour effects generated by the illustrations in my children’s book, I decided to use thin lines in my next series of paintings. I am glad I did for without them I would almost certainly have missed out on the discoveries that are described in this and the next two chapters.

Lighting conditions

Encouraged by the excitements generated by the thin line book illustrations, I

1 Which is ne of the reasons why so many artists, like Ellsworth Kelly and Michael Kidner, turned to sculpture at this time.

2 At the limit, the entire picture-surface could be painted with one colour.

introducing thin-bar components into my paintings. *Figure 1* is a computer generated image that can be used to illustrate some of the possibilities which I explored.³

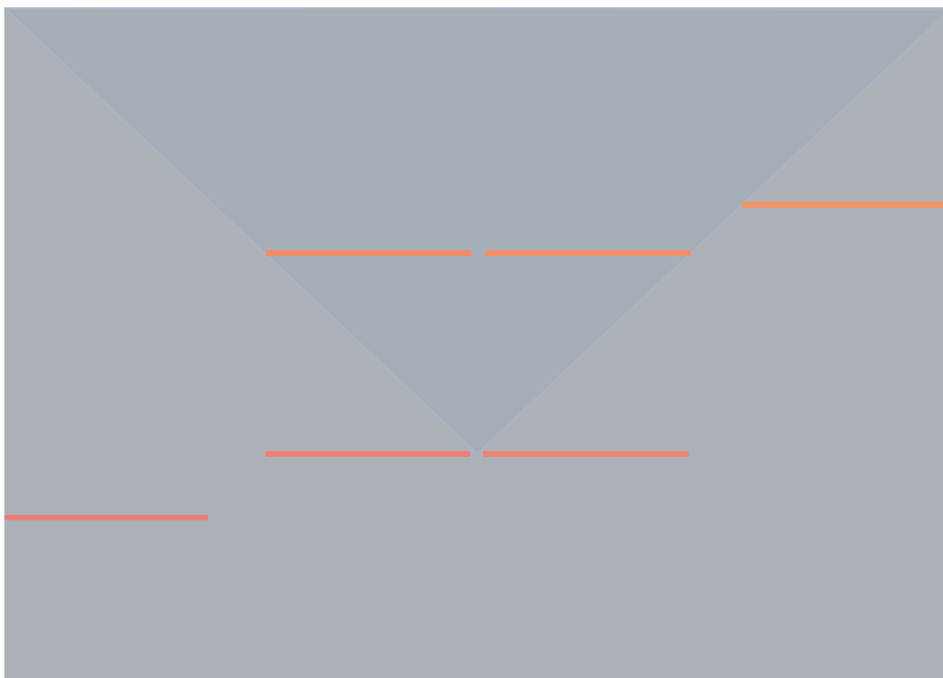


Figure 1 : Thin bar elements of the kind used in the “Orange Bar Series”.

Although creating optical effects was very far from being a primary purpose, I found that my use of edge-dominated elements kept producing particularly powerful ones. However, more important for the purposes of current narrative, was the number of lessons it generated.

The first lesson concerned the importance of *lighting conditions*. It cannot be news to many artists that these can adversely effect colour relationships in paintings. However, even I was unprepared for the degree to which my thin-bar elements were vulnerable to them

In an early group of the paintings in which I made use of them, I used blue or blue-green lines. My first discovery was that, if these were not of roughly equal-lightness relative to their backgrounds, lightness-contrast effects regularly

³ Due to the much greater size of the original paintings (20 X 20 inches) the relative sizes of the painting and the orange thin bar elements in photos of the actual works do not illustrate the relevant points so well.

overwhelmed the colour in them. I found that:

- If the context was too dark, the colour tended to be *bleached out*.
- If it was too light, the colour became dark, like a shadow.

This being the case, it was only to be expected that my project of giving the greens or blues of my thin lines a slightly luminescent and floating quality would face me with particular difficulties. To make matter worse, even when I managed to achieve what I was seeking, when the paintings were looked at in daylight, when they were illuminated by electric light, they lost virtually all their *greenness* or *blueness*. Their became so drab and shadow-like that it became distressing for me to look at the painting containing them.

I reasoned that the problem was due to the fact that the “*yellowish light*”, given by the tungsten filaments of the light bulbs, is approximately complementary to blue paint and, consequently, absorbed by it to a significant degree. This would explain both the dramatic loss of lightness and the unpremeditated, colour-destroying effect. Similar colour loss occurred with the blue-green paint, although to a lesser extent.

Making a virtue out of necessity

Faced with this unfortunate turn of events, I tried to think of ways of making a virtue out of necessity. My thoughts soon led me to ask what would have happened if the thin bar elements had been painted *orange* (as those featured in *Figure 1*). Surely, the tungsten light would cause the orange to gain, rather than lose in brilliance?

When I tried out the idea, I was excited by the result. In daylight the orange thin bar elements had the qualities I had laboured to achieve, while, by tungsten light, they became like bars of an electric fire, glowing out from the grey/blue background in a most remarkable way. I still preferred the daylight, but was also excited by what happened in the artificial light.

Ambiguities

In virtually all paintings there is the ambiguity between:

- Perceptions of pictorial elements residing in an illusory pictorial space
- Perceptions of the same elements as being situated on a flat picture-surface.

Inevitably, having to choose between two ways of perceiving the same thing, will challenge the eye/brains' interpretive systems. As with all visual perceptual ambiguities, the eye/brain will take time to come to an interpretation, a process that may either cause distress or focus attention in creative ways. This second possibility has been explored by many artists, including myself.

One of my efforts in this direction took the form of a series of thin line paintings being discussed. *Figure 1*, gives an idea of the basic elements I explored. The paintings always consisted of two, juxtaposed shapes each being made of a scarcely perceptibly different grey (in *Figure 1* one of these is a triangle). In the actual paintings, all the greys are scarcely perceptibly graduated and both have edges in common with the picture support.

On the different grey backgrounds, I placed different arrangements of orange thin line bar elements. Each of these is arranged in a different relationships with respect to :

- The other orange bars.
- The edges of the similar but different grey shapes.
- The edges of the picture support.

My reason for using this setup was that it would enable me to explore the degree to which the different orange thin line bars would be allowed to float in an illusory pictorial space.

The function of the triangle of a very slightly different grey was to suggest recession away from the picture surface. Accordingly:

- Where an orange bar touches the edge of the picture support, it is seen as attached to the picture-surface,.
- Where it touches the grey triangle, it perceived as being behind it,
- Where it does not touch anything, its position in pictorial space is left ambiguous.
- Where it stretches between a real edge and a painted one, the result is a forward/backward push-pull.

The question was, "*How could I maximise these effects?*" Logically, if I wanted to maximise the object interpretation, I would need to do away with any kind of picture frame and emphasise surface-texture information. If I wanted to promote the *illusory* aspects, I would need to take full advantage of the ideas of Professor

Bohusz-Szyszko described in *BOOK 1* of this volume. In particular, I would have to ensure that no colour is repeated and that all colours are complex mixtures containing some portion, however small, of a colour or colours from opposite sides on the colour circle.

These are the reasons why in all the paintings of the “*Orange Bar Series*”, I needed to ensure that:

- All the grey regions would be modulated such that no part of the picture-surface is the same as any other part of it
- Each of the orange bars is made up of a *complex-colour mixture* such that it is slightly different in both hue and lightness from the other bars.

Figure 2 gives some idea of the range of oranges used for the thin bar elements in *Figure 1*. Note that the orange rectangle on the far left is of identical colour to the orange on the far right of the continuum.⁴ What the illustration does not make clear is that the pink used in the actual paintings was very evidently desaturated. The brightness of its appearance in them was largely due to *simultaneous colour contrast*.



Figure 2 : The range of thin bar element colours found in Figure 1

Even in the inevitably unsatisfactory context of the computer-generated image featured in *Figure 1*, a contrast can be felt between the ways the thin bar elements relate to one another, to the edge between the triangle and its surrounds and to the high level of contrast at the external borders. What cannot be illustrated is the influence of size on appearances,⁵ the texture of the picture surface and the realness of the edges. As a result it is impossible to illustrate the outcomes of looking at these paintings from different viewing distances. If it were, the most important variables would be that:

4 Because the illustration is computer generated, it was not possible to modulate the greys as in the original.

5 The actual paintings are 50.8 cm X 50.8 cm

From close

- The texture of the picture-surface becomes much more evident, with the result that the orange thin bar elements cannot float in illusory space.
- The borders of the painting are outside the visual field and cease to influence appearances.

From further away⁶

- The borders of the painting are within the visual field and very much influence appearances.
- As the viewing distance is increased the thin bar elements become progressively thinner until, eventually there will be a viewing position from which the lines can no longer be resolved by the eye, thereby becoming invisible.

Due to these factors, it is clear that viewing distance is critical. In terms of the viewing experience that I was trying to create, it is necessary for viewers to find a spot from which and the orange bars can be seen, where texture is not too evident, but where the borders of the picture-support are visible. This fixes the viewing position fairly precisely. At this distance:

- (a) The edges of the picture support,
- (b) The size of the picture surface,
- (c) The minimized texture cues,
- (d) The depth-suggesting grey triangle,
- (e) The non-recurring, complementary-containing oranges,
- (f) The extremely subtle surface modulations,
- (g) The many layers of glazing that went into the creation of the greys,

together ensure the maximum impact in terms of creating an illusory space within which the thin bar elements can float and glow and within which the push-pull tensions between attachment and liberation are made evident.

In contrast:

- If there had been no complex colour,
- If the greys had been uniform,
- If the oranges in each thin bar element had been of an identical colour.

6 How much further depends on the factors listed below.

The vitality of the pictorial dynamics would have been lost and the painting not worth the effort of making it.

Implication

This chapter has concentrated on the spatial dynamics that I explored in a series of paintings featuring thin orange lines and two different types of edge, namely the real edges of the picture-support and the painted edges of regions of modulated grey. The approach both allowed an exploration of ambiguities between the different interpretations and, in the process, confronted me with pictorial tensions of a kind I had not experienced before. I found myself both intrigued and moved by the results.

The purpose of devoting a chapter to what I learnt from my early thin line paintings is that they focussed attention on various issues of general interest. Thus the “Orange Bar Series”:

- *Showed ways of produced enhanced optical effects.*
- *Provided examples of the destructive or creative role of lighting.*
- *Provided a way demonstrating how Professor Bohusz-Szyszko’s way of thinking about colour can be combined with the way of Michael Kidner.⁷*

Finally it is important to point out that all the dynamics discussed occur to some extent in the vast majority of paintings and, even if only at a subliminal level, have an effect on how we respond to them. The reason for isolating them in a carefully controlled abstract context is that it makes their presence more evident and, for me at least, more exciting..

7 This point will be illustrated further in Chapter 24