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Ben Millar's *The Colour Notation Project*

A conversation between Rebecca Harkins-Cross and Roger Nelson

Rebecca Harkins-Cross: Mathematical grids traced directly onto the walls, square shards of colour like a game of Tetris blown apart and scattered across the room. The rainbow geometries of Ben Millar's *The Colour Notation Project* are jarring punctuations against the gallery's pristine surfaces. You could almost miss the guitar amidst all that white. A creamy Fender Stratocaster. A teenage dream, plugged into an amp more suited to a stadium than SEVENTH. The guitar sits perfectly erect, like the sword in the stone, waiting for the chosen one to play the chords that set it free. This is Guitar Hero in the gallery. Can you read the writing on the walls, Roger?

Roger Nelson: Erect? Guitar Hero? It sounds like you're seeing a toughness and machismo that completely passed me by. I was too seduced by the gentleness of the nearly-but-not-quite pastel hues, the hand-drawn pencil lines and endearingly wobbly blocks of colour, and the kind, almost relational-aesthetics (does anyone even talk about that anymore?) gesture of offering a free poster/instruction sheet that's displayed as prominently as the axe. Axe—that's what real men call a guitar.

RHC: Surely there is a toughness inherent in an electric guitar, in an amp the size of a boulder? The din these objects conjure is an aberration in the gallery's shhhhh-be-quiet surrounds. That's why it's a shock when you finally get up the nerve to play, the sound not quite equating with the instrument before you. It's softer, cleaner, fragmentary like the patterns that encircle it. The oversized amp is in fact an ornament, the notes resonating from its smaller sibling that perches atop. Even the most seasoned 'axe man' will at first struggle to decipher the code, to find the

correct combinations that translate colour to sound.

RN: Trying to play it made me feel quite small. The awkwardness of becoming the centre of attention. The sore-fingered realisation that I haven't picked up a guitar in years. The foolish feeling of being unable to decipher even the simplest of Ben's notations. I think that's important. This is a system of signs that purports to be so clear and uncomplicated – that looks almost childish in its basic, blocky repetition – but that is in fact quite difficult to master. It's an interesting deception. And maybe that's why when I'm standing in the middle of the room, with the colours all around me, it's dead silent. I should be surrounded by sound but instead the quietness makes Ben's project seem utopian, hopelessly hopeful but mute, self-defeating ...

RHC: I only learnt guitar to impress a boy I had a crush on in Grade Six. We used to talk about Nirvana at recess, and compare notes on the latest Triple J hits. He had a band, and I thought if I learnt to play 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' it'd be a sure thing. In my first lesson, my teacher said he was jealous of my hands – I have abnormally long arachnid fingers – but he didn't understand that their length means they lack brawn. It made me feel a lot like you do when faced with Ben's notations. These daddy longlegs mitts are supposed to make the guitar easier, but by the time my fingers bend around to touch the frets they're spent and useless. The one song I ever mastered was 'Blackbird' by the Beatles. I am also the only person in the world who hates the Beatles.

RN: The Beatles lack all the contradictions and bafflements that I like in Ben's work. I reckon his 'notations' don't just make you and I feel bad at guitar: they'd make anyone feel a bit clumsy and plodding. It's beguiling how that feeling of ungainly ineptitude contrasts with the prettiness of the work, its elegance. Simple, mathematical drawings made directly on the wall, they recall Sol LeWitt. But geometric and bright, they look a bit like Mondrian; the larger canvas appears almost a rewrite of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Until you get in closer, that is; until you see that the lines are made with pencil and that the colours don't quite fill the squares. All these naked signs of Ben's hand approximate a vulnerability; they're quiet like an Agnes Martin but also quaint like a song your better-at-guitar boyfriend wrote to

help you toughen up those digits of yours.

RHC: He wasn't my boyfriend. We never even pashed. I blame Paul McCartney. It's strange that this work affects us on such an emotional register. It is essentially a semiotic system, an equation that professes to convert colour into sound. But when you're standing in that room surrounded by its fragmentary patterns it becomes experiential. It appears like an attempt to map synaesthesia, to notate that bewildering experience of sensorial confusion. As if we can see sounds. Billy Joel was synaesthetic. Syd Barrett too. Even Pharrell Williams (who, coincidentally, I would also like to pash). But for the rest of us, Ben's work seems to evoke some sense of wistfulness. We've failed before we even pick up the guitar. We already know we'll never find the right notes. We are not the chosen ones.

RN: How wonderful that this work invokes such visceral, vehement responses in you. Images of guitars being wrenched from stone, and thoughts of passion and pashing. But perhaps this sense of failure you're feeling – the failure to play the notes Ben prescribes, the failure to hear music in the colours – is something of a letdown for you? Some kind of disappointment? I hope not. I feel the failure too – the awkwardness and the hush – but for me it's a triumph. It's a beautiful tension, a joke at its own expense, an insistence that colour remains colour and that sound is always sound. 'The artwork is to be performed by more than one person,' Ben hopefully insists in the instructional sheet that accompanies the show. A generous and optimistic gesture ... But even lovelier is the realisation that it apparently cannot be performed at all.