

A Viewer and a Voyeur

Eulalia Bosch

I Send You This Cadmium Red:

A Correspondence Between John Berger

and John Christie Barcelona: Actar, 2000. pp. 300

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reviewed by Trevor Curnow

Eulalia Bosch is well-known for her work in organising innovative exhibitions. Here, however, in addition to the role of organiser, she also plays those of eavesdropper and midwife. *I send you this Cadmium Red* is an exhibition as well as a book, and it is based, as the subtitle indicates, on a correspondence between John Berger, artist and writer, and John Christie, artist and film-maker. Eulalia was, in her own words, 'an occasional witness' to this correspondence, which began when John C sent John B a painted square of Cadmium Red. For the next two years or so all manner of items changed hands including colours, letters, poems and booklets. Cadmium Red gave way to Rust-Iron, blue, black, gold, green... The subject of their correspondence was, in the words of Berger, 'darkness, light, pages, colours, stones, bodies, layers.' But above all, it was about colour. Each colour led to a series of reflections. Some were purely personal, based on subjective associations: but these were never more than a beginning. They led on to wide-ranging considerations of the meanings and natures of the different colours, drawing on personal experience and the history of art. Matisse and Mondrian, Kandinsky and Klee all find their way into the discussions. The authors' own ideas are also regularly interspersed with those of others such as Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys and John Gage. In this way, the discussion unfolds into a prolonged meditation, not systematic but multi-faceted, on the notion and significance of colour itself.

In her role as eavesdropper, Eulalia writes, 'Their insights drew me into an apparently gratuitous but rigorously essential way of looking.' This prompted her to act as midwife, in suggesting to the two authors that they convert their correspondence into a book, which in due course she also organised into an exhibition. Since the correspondence took place with no thought of being made public, the reader's experience of the book is that of both a viewer and a voyeur. The two kinds of experience are inextricably combined: personal letters are reproduced as illustrations. It is difficult to get drawn into the depths of the discussion without also feeling drawn into the lives of the writers. In revealing the layers of meaning in the colours, they are also offering us revelations about themselves.

While the book is structured chronologically, as with an exhibition it is sometimes tempting to go around it the wrong way. It can be dipped into as well as tackled systematically. Given that the authors were writing only for each other, they have not felt the need to make any concessions to their unanticipated audience, and some sections require considerably more effort than others. But that is (at least part of) part of the point. It is only by slowing down, only by getting out of our habitually superficial way of looking at things, that we begin to appreciate what lies beneath the surface (or, in the case of colour, on the surface!).

The book presents a ready-made dialogue, which can be enjoyed as such. But it also provides the starting point for any number of further dialogues and journeys of discovery.

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