Observations on Duchamp's Color

Recent Investigations on the relative permanence of chromatic memory retention by Prof. Karl Gegenfurtner of Giessen University in Germany may throw light on Duchamp's very conservative use of color in his mature work.

In summary account, The visual memory better and longer stores images in 'natural color' than either in black & white or bright, primary tints. The work in Germany was placed in an evolutionary context:"If stimuli are too strange, the system simply doesn't engage as well, or deems them unimportant" (see: Franz, V.H., Fahle, M., Bülthoff, H.H. & Gegenfurtner, K.R. "The effect of visual illusions on grasping." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception & Performance*, vol. 27, nr. 5 (October 2001), pp. 1124-1144).

Primary in Duchamp's concern must have been a realization that his complex and inference rich constructions might not linger long enough in memory to permit recall at prolonged leisure and reflection. Anticipating much later research, he deliberately avoided the use of any means which could possibly hinder the visual memory's work. Thus a characteristic natural effect was sought in his color schemes.

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Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp,*Given:1 The Waterfall / 2. The Illuminating Gas*, 1946-1966

In the final work, *Given: The Water Fall, 2. The illuminating Gas*, (Fig. 1) Duchamp went out of his way to obtain colorations of light, landscape and flesh, that caused some critics to questions such an apparent reversion of a revolutionary artist to mere ‘naturalism’ as practiced by the 19th century realists. The explanation may lie in another direction entirely. The writer believes Duchamp intuitively was aware of the phenomenon described by the German researcher and employed it cunningly in a major and little understood work.

(Timothy Phillips)

Fig. 1
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