

CHROMATICS

by

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Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the final copies of the thesis to the Graduate College.

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### **Dedication**

To all the loved ones who couldn't make it to this moment.

### **Artist Statement**

Chromatics is a multimedia installation that explores the complexities of Blackness and the color black through the lens of color theory to analyze and examine the ways we are taught to see race. Chromatics refers to that which is highly colored; of or relating to color and its phenomena and sensations. Growing up in a predominantly white area, I was made aware of my Blackness at a very young age. While I did not fully understand the intricacies of race, I understood that the color of my skin was a major component of what it meant to be Black. This part of my identity has been complicated by my ever-changing environment, rendering me too Black in some spaces or not Black enough in others. In my art education, I was exposed to western color theory and the work of color theorist Josef Albers through his seminal text, *The Interaction of Color*. His work posits how our perception of a color shifts based on the proximity of that color to another. I employ this optical phenomenon as a metaphor for race, offering an entry point into understanding the depth of racism's impact.

This installation comprises six 2D works on paper and one single-channel video. Appropriation, manipulation, and re-presentation are the strategies used to subvert information presented to the viewer as fact or truth in popular culture, mainstream media, and public and political policy. The video work explores the media's historical part in perpetuating racial stereotypes while the mixed media pieces deconstruct systems of categorization and seeing that have served as justification for white supremacy. Through drawing, painting and screenprint, I examine and deconstruct pigmented color, specifically the CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, and Black or Key) process. The overlapping primary colors that contribute to the color black create an intersectional space that recontextualizes black as a central point that brings all other colors together rather than a marginalized absence of color. Imagery from cartoons, public records, and

the social media platform TikTok act as recognizable anchors to these theories. These accessible forms of connection allow for the wide flow of information that goes on to influence generations and in turn, reinforce their thinking towards racial and color-coded constructs.

Chromatics offers a space for Black individuals to be seen, to rethink the visuality of Blackness, and to educate others on the various ways Blackness is constructed.

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## **Abstract**

*Chromatics* provides a more in depth understanding of the MFA thesis show of the same name that analyzes color and how it has been used throughout art and history; specifically looking at the pigment black and its relation to Blackness, as in the way the Black identity manifests. Black is broken down via color theory, exploring the print color process CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) and how additive colors create black. The construction of race is also used to provide context into how colors can become associated with certain characteristics and ethnicities. These theories are tested by looking at cartoon characters from popular culture that are interpreted to be Black or “of color”, hence the title of the show and paper. Each piece from the show, which comprises six 2D works on paper and one single-channel video, is described in detail and elaborates on the reasoning behind the artistic choices.

## Introduction

There are certain cartoon characters that I have always subconsciously identified with. Some notable ones being Daffy Duck from Looney Tunes, Jerry Mouse from Tom and Jerry, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (specifically from the 2003 series), Jake and Jermaine the Dog from Adventure Time, and Tyrone and Uniqua from the Backyardigans, to name a few. All of these characters are anthropomorphised animals. It was not until the USA television show *Psych*, starring James Roday-Rodriguez (Shawn) and Dulé Hill (Gus), that I started to think about why I identified with these characters. In season 3, episode 14, “Truer Lies,” the two main characters discuss the color, and subsequently, ethnicity, of the McDonald’s restaurant character Grimace:

**Gus:** Then there was Grimace. That brother was funny, what!

**Shawn:** No, no, no, no! Excuse us. I gave you Vin Diesel –

**Gus:** Gave me?

**Shawn:** You’re not claiming Grimace as a brother.

**Gus:** Grimace is a brother!

**Shawn:** He’s an amorphous mass, he’s like a big amoeba.

**Gus:** He’s a Black amoeba Shawn –

**Shawn:** Purple!

...

**Shawn [to the hostess]:** Thank you. What color was Grimace?

**Hostess:** What?

**Gus:** Black.

...

**Gus:** His name was Grimace Jackson, Shawn. Grimace T. Jackson.

**Shawn:** You're ridiculous.

Why would Gus, a Black man, identify with a fictional “purple anthropomorphic being of indeterminate species” (McDonald’s Wiki). Ronald McDonald, while a clown, is still a person, same with the Hamburglar, so why would Gus see himself in Grimace? Perhaps it was the character’s color. Due to colorism, many dark-skinned Black people have had their complexion compared to the color blue or purple. They are said to be “so dark they’re purple” or even called “midnight”. This prejudice, known as colorism, can be seen in the Disney Channel cartoon *The Proud Family* with the Gross Sisters. They are the only characters in the show whose skin tone is blue rather than a natural skin tone. The sisters also happen to be the roughest and most disliked characters in the show.

In the miniseries, the *Wacky Adventures of Ronald McDonald*, Grimace regales the “Legend of Grimace Island” (also the name of the episode) to the McDonald’s crew. In part of the story, he says to the group, “the Grimaces were not very brave” to which Sundae (Ronald’s dog) replies sarcastically, “you don’t say”. Grimace replies, “duh, yeah!” obliviously before continuing on with his story. Grimace is said to be famous for his “slow-witted demeanor” with him commonly starting a sentence with ‘duh’. This portrayal falls in line with the coon stereotype. A coon is a derogatory term for a Black individual who is an inarticulate, easily frightened, buffoon (Ferris State University). The presentation of this story and the way the Grimaces were depicted provides a context for how we the audience should interpret Grimace; that is, as Black.

Finally, consider the name Gus gave Grimace, “Grimace T. Jackson”. Jackson is an extremely common surname within the Black American community theorized to be due to the

number of slaves former United States president, Andrew Jackson held. The most notable Black people with this last name are the Jackson family: Joe, Katherine, Rebbie, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, La Toya, Marlon, Michael, Randy, and Janet. Notice Jermaine Jackson shares a first name with a character I mentioned earlier, Jermaine the dog from Adventure Time who is noticeably different from his white, blond haired, blue eyed, adopted human brother and protagonist, Finn.

Shawn and Gus' conversation prompted me to examine the cartoon characters I grew up with and pinpoint exactly what aspects of these characters aligned with how I saw myself and my identity. When representation is not present, we must go looking for it, hence these pseudo-Black characters like Grimace. In the main gallery of the University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA), hangs my master work, *Chromatics*. Six mixed-media works on paper are displayed on either side of a television monitor, three pieces per side. The pieces are propped up on dark, wooden picture ledges all with brass plaques. Each plaque reads "Fig.," shorthand for 'figure', a number from one to six, and a title. The TV displays a single channel video with sound, there is no plaque or ledge for this element. With little information and discussion on the topic, *Chromatics* sets out to provide a new way of seeing how race is constructed in cartoons.

An important note on the usage of the word black before this paper proceeds. When discussing the pigment or color, I will use 'black' with a lowercase 'b'. When discussing the people and race, I will use 'Black' with a capital 'B'. I find this distinction particularly important, however a few of my references do not capitalize the 'b' in Black which is their prerogative as there are a multitude of ways to express Blackness.

### Artistic Practice

While I consider myself to be an interdisciplinary artist, my main medium is printmaking. Printmaking has history with the mass dissemination of information due to inventions like the printing press as well as its presence in many protests and revolutions. The color mixing technique of CMYK seen in commercial printing like off-set printing and Pop Art-era Ben Day Dots, is integral to my idea that color theory can be applied to how we see and assign race in the United States and throughout the diaspora. Besides print, many other mediums were used such as drawing, painting, video, and animation. 2D studies deal with physical color where red, blue, and yellow are primary colors while animation and video work deal with light color where red, green, and blue are primary. The other mediums, acrylic ink and paint, pastels, and graphite, allow for my hand to be visible and therefore my presence felt. This suggests that what is being seen and presented as fact is man-made just as race is constructed. The act of mixing paint and ink, building resists through layering material, and mark making then erasing was all research into construction and how quickly things can be decided, changed, and accepted.

I was heavily inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois' *Data Portraits* that he created with students from Atlanta University and exhibited at the Paris World Expo. These pieces shared information on the Black population in the state of Georgia, illustrating different metrics and data gathered by the state through the census and other approaches. W.E.B Du Bois' *Data Portraits*, created with his students from Atlanta University to visualize Black America, heavily influenced this project. Du Bois describes data visualization as, "the vending of information in a visual format to help communicate data while also generating new patterns and knowledge through the act of visualization itself" (B. et al., 2018). The idea of a data portrait is an interesting concept but all that surrounded them sounded like what I wanted to achieve through these cartoons. The data

represents more than numbers, it is communities, people, generations even, hence portraits. Black people in America and in some circumstances, across the diaspora, were seen as statistics, specimens, property. Double consciousness, “the experience of always seeing one’s self through the eyes of another – a psychic alienation and social isolation produced by the “peculiar” condition of being black in America” (B. et al., 2018).

The video was partly inspired by Tik Tok videos which merge easily accessible and disseminated information with fun sound bites or “sounds” and trends that make some difficult topics easier. However, the main inspiration was from comedian Jaboukie Young-White’s thirty minute stand-up show where he had a section called “A Frat Bro Explains Feminism”. His character “Chad” gives a TEDTalk-like lecture with an accompanying poorly made slide show. Both these references used visual aids and humor to discuss problematic issues the creators noticed from their lives.

A technique I frequently use in my practice is what Du Bois calls progressive disclosure, “a technique that gradually reveals to the viewer the ideal amount of information” (B. et al., 2018). Due to the nature of my subject matter, I did not want to potentially scare away any members of the audience before giving them the chance to share my experience as a Black individual. It seems that any discussion of race will be met with some comment about “why must it always be about race” (usually from non-Black individuals). By revealing information slowly and over six bodies of work as well as a video, the audience would not necessarily catch on until they had already become invested in the work.

A large aspect of this project was to display my research in a didactic and approachable way. At the beginning of this process, I worked on both the paper elements and the video at the same time but found they were not connecting. I had a clear vision of the mixed media pieces

and only an initial idea of what the video would entail so, I prioritized the mixed media works. This allowed me to use the video as a response to what was being highlighted in the 2D elements rather than as a separate artwork that I was trying to pair with the six works on paper. Not only does the video act as a response but it is an expansion on the ideas presented in the ‘figures’ of the overall installation. *Chromatics* functions as a response, a way of understanding and sharing the ways Blackness is portrayed and exists.

## Frames

### Color Theory

Color theory is one of the basic foundations taught alongside perspective, line, etc. There are two ways that color exists: physical (pigment) and light. Light always plays a part in how we perceive color, but it looks and reacts differently when it is matter rather than when it is purely light. The prime physical colors (blue, red, and yellow) refer to colors that cannot be created from other colors and when mixed together create a kind of black (in actuality a grayish brown is achieved.) A variation of these colors is cyan, magenta, and yellow (CMY), which is primarily used in commercial printing where color mixing is integral; it was later adopted as a fine art technique in printmaking circles. The prime light colors would be red, green, and blue or RGB. These mixed together, in theory, would create white light. This distinction is important.

In thinking about this knowledge around color, I will briefly define the main terms associated with color theory. Hue means the color or intensity of a pigment. Primary colors consist of red, blue, and yellow. Secondary colors comprise orange, purple, and green. Tertiary colors are a mix of a primary and a secondary color, for example: red-orange, yellow-green, blue-violet or blue-purple, et cetera. Tint refers to the addition of white to a color to lighten its hue while shade darkens a hue. Traditionally, shade means adding black; however, darkening the hue can be achieved by adding a dark color other than black or a color's complement. Complementary colors are those that sit across from each other on the color wheel. Complements will always consist of either a primary and secondary color (blue/orange, red/green, or yellow/purple) or two tertiary colors (red-orange and blue-green). Analogous colors are those that sit adjacent on the color wheel (yellow, yellow-orange, and orange). Monochromatic colors mean a color in multiple hues (all blues or all reds). Often overlapping with analogous are warm

and cool tones. These groupings of color depend on the color temperature with cooler tones being your blues, purples, and greens and the warmer colors being your reds, oranges, and yellows. Violet/purple and yellow are versatile as they can fall either side of the cool/warm spectrum depending on their hue.

Albers, the color theorist and author of *The Interaction of Color* (2013), observed that colors and how we perceive them change when placed with other colors. These differences can be small such as a slightly different hue due to tint or shade, or they can be a completely different temperature, placing cool-toned colors with warm tones. “In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is – physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art” (p. 1). Albers specifies in his book that cut paper should be used to make models for comparing colors as it is more accurate and students would not waste time trying to make the correct colors. I purposefully disregard this and use pigment to address the manipulation and construction found in art and society. “As ‘gentlemen prefer blondes,’ so everyone has preference for certain colors and prejudices against others. This applies to color combinations as well... We change, correct, or reverse our opinions about colors, and this change of opinion may shift back and forth” (p. 17). Albers himself mentions our biases and prejudices towards colors and likens it to physical attributes humans have. This comparison opens the door for the application that has to race. He continues, “[t]he only way in which the 2 groups can be compared easily and accurately is to superimpose 1 group on the other” (p. 36). While he is talking about two pigmented colors being compared for art, two groups being compared by superimposing one onto the other is reminiscent of the very way White Supremacy works, by basing everything around whiteness and deeming anything different from it as ‘other’.

## Constructions of Race

In Toni Morrison's 1992 book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, she looks at how the portrayal, or absence of, explicitly Black characters led to these pseudo-Black characters that she calls "Africanist". She explains, "I am using the term 'Africanism'... as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (p. 6). According to Morrison, these Africanist characters go on to shape literature and the American public's perception of Blackness. While her findings already touch on color and its part in Africanism, I applied a lot of her concepts to a more modern form of storytelling, cartoons.

The majority of the cartoon characters I am focusing on are pseudo-Black, that is not explicitly Black but coded as such. This could be achieved through their name, appearance, voice actor, and relation to other characters. "Color coding and other physical traits become metonyms that displace rather than signify the Africanist character" (p. 68). In some instances, every character in the show is non-human or not a recognizable "human" color like the Backyardigans. In other instances, the colorful characters are amongst naturally colored beings like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or the cartoon Doug. "In any case, the subjective nature of ascribing value and meaning to color cannot be questioned this late in the twentieth century. The point for this discussion is the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances. And this leads into the social and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed in American literature" (p. 49).

Morrison asks an important question: "how is 'literary whiteness' and 'literary blackness' made, and what is the consequence of that construction" (p. xii)? I have found that because

whiteness has been made the “norm” or default in American society, that unless explicitly stated otherwise, white persons assume a character is like them, white. Color is unmistakable when compared to its absence; it in fact stands out. This visual outing has made it easier for inferences to be made against them. Exploring what makes “literary blackness” is the impetus of *Chromatics*.

## Chromatics

### see Fig. 1: Mumia

*see Fig. 1: Mumia* is the first piece in the series. The 22" x 30" paper is mounted on museum board and displayed on a dark-stained, wooden picture ledge. On the front of the ledge, a brass plaque reads "Fig. 1 Mumia". The other five pieces are displayed the same way with their respective titles on their brass placards. On the paper, the background imagery consists of the abstracted hands and arms of various Black and pseudo-Black cartoon characters. The hands and arms are all in the same position on each character, with their hands on their hips. This pose seemingly denotes sassy, no-nonsense characters and is frequently used to represent Black characters. When applied to characters that don't have race, it can be inferred that these characters are meant to be read as Black. In the foreground, nine cartoon characters can barely be made out with help from a brown pastel. The brown pigment is in reference to the practice of taking mummified Egyptians and their pets to be turned into the paint 'mummy brown', also known as 'mumia' (Torres, 2013). The nine cartoon characters are all characters I perceived as Black when I was younger due to color association. From the top left to the bottom right: the brown M&M, Scooby Doo, Little Bear, Bessie, Bear, Koda, Roo, Jerry Mouse, and Grizz.

### see Fig. 2: Rich Black

*see Fig. 2: Rich Black* comprises an ambient color wheel made up of cyan, magenta, and yellow pastel. A warped grid is screenprinted in white on top of the wheel. "Prime" along with three arrows sit in the center of the wheel; each arrow points to one of the elements of the CMY wheel. In the negative space of the print lie wisps, or rather swipes, of the same colors. The name "Rich Black" refers to Adobe's recipe for what they call their richest black, a color with more depth than just straight black. In Photoshop (probably any Adobe application that uses color) one

would pull up the color panel (what's this called?) and type in "Y: 40, M: 40, C: 60, K: 100". The richest black is a dimensional one, made up of multiple other colors. The same can be said for Black characters or Black communities. Often, we are judged as a monolith rather than individuals or with varying circumstances. This piece really pushes the idea that the color black is an intersectional color.

**see Fig. 3: Shirley**

*see Fig. 3: Shirley* depicts a 13-layer screenprint of a Kodak shirley card and a graphite drawing of a chocolate bar in the image field. The card has a greyscale down the right side of the image and features both RGB (red, green and blue) and CMY. These cards were used by Kodak to create a baseline for a customer's photos to be developed, to make sure all the photo's colors, highlights, and shadows were correct. Before, the cards only featured a white woman as the subject of the cards (Lewis, 2019). Eventually, a "Shirley" card was created for every ethnicity, despite still having this original white woman's name. Kodak received complaints about the development of the photos, mainly that it was difficult to distinguish the darker colors from each other. What prompted Kodak to change their process was chocolate and wood companies' complaints (Lewis, 2019). Milk and dark chocolate couldn't be deciphered nor could light woods versus dark woods. The title "Shirley" is a nod to "Lucy", a hominid discovered back in the 70s in Ethiopia. She was a part of a group that precedes homo sapiens, meaning she is our ancestor (Arizona State University). People as we know them today being descendants of Africans is part of what I mean when I use 'prime' and 'primary' throughout the work.

**see Fig. 4: Kodak**

*see Fig. 4: Kodak* is the solution for the aforementioned problem in differentiating darker products and skin tones. This patented technology shows the separations needed to see Black

skin versus white skin. Skin R in the diagram processes white skin tones while Skin B processes darker skin tones. The blue and amber pastel nod to the outdated belief that only blue and amber light could be used to light dark skin in film and television. This belief was disproved by the lighting director for Issa Rae's HBO show *Insecure* where they found that all lighting could work for darker-skinned people, it was just a matter of the reflectability of their skin (Harding, 2017).

The schematic is of US Patent number 5428402, Kodak's model for color photography to capture better images of people with darker skin (Lewis, 2019). The letters "RGB" seen at the top refer to red, green, and blue, all prime light used to make other colors. When all three are mixed together, they produce white light since light is a subtractive color method whereas pigmented color creates black as an additive color method. The intersection of RGB being white instead of black is important in this context because whiteness and white narratives are centered in photography. This idea is pushed further by the "automatic white balance control circuit". White balance is a common tool in both film and digital photography to make sure that the colors coming through aren't too warm or cool toned. It is considered a neutral color in this context, what everything should be based off of.

**see Fig. 5: One Drop**

*see Fig. 5: One Drop* has a color scale made from acrylic paint depicting the changes in red, yellow, and blue when tint or shade is applied. Kodak's patent is printed on top of the color scale. One drop refers to the slow addition of white and black pigment to the primary colors as well as the one drop rule which was used to categorize whether a person was considered Black or not. The color scale visualizes the darkening and lightening of the "pure" pigment. Issues of colorism, an off-shoot of racism, are undercurrents in this piece. The mixing of the races, often colloquially referred to as 'the swirl' produced varying levels of Blackness like "quadroon" and

“octoroon” (someone who is a quarter and eighth Black respectively) as well as other offensive terms like mulatto, redbone, and many others.

These lighter and darker variations of the pigment are still the same hue yet they are treated differently in relation to art and society. Pastel colors, colors with more tint, are associated with softness, airiness, delicateness while the darker shades are seen as more serious and heavy. Light-skinned Black persons are seen as more conventionally attractive for their proximity to whiteness while darker skinned Black persons are seen as less desirable. Consider the societal difference in treatment between white women and Black women. White women are seen as fragile, delicate, and feminine while Black women and other women of color are deemed strong, difficult, masculine. The arrows are used to trace the changes back to the original ‘prime’ color as a reference to genealogy and family trees.

**see Fig. 6: Color Wheel**

*see Fig. 6: Color Wheel* is a six-layer screenprint with colored pencil and graphite elements. The colors are all labeled: Red, Redbone, Orange, Mulatto, High Yella, Yellow-Green, African American, Octoroon, Blue, Negro, Violet, and Midnight. Outside of the wheel are arrows and an axis that indicates the cool tone range of colors and the warm tones. A lot of the cartoon characters I discuss throughout this installation are what Morrison describes as Africanist characters and what I’ve been calling pseudo-Black. They aren’t explicitly Black yet I see Blackness in them. These characters’ actual skin colors range from violets, greens, yellows, etc. so by adding skin tone names to the color wheel, it solidifies the other colors (yellow-green, red, blue, violet, and orange) as skin tones as well.

## Technicolored

*Technicolored* is a five minute and forty second single-channel video that uses found footage and audio as well as animations and sounds I created to tackle the issue of media representations and constructions of race. The title *Technicolored* pays homage to both the technicolor coloring process used in old cartoons and movies, as well as author Zora Neale Hurston's famous quote, "I feel most colored against a stark white backdrop" (Hurston, 2015). The video explores cartoon character colors, their physical attributes, their voice actors and background music as well as provides prompts to the audience to get them to think critically about these choices in the media. The prompts are: "pick the Black character", "spot the difference", and "hero or villain". Auditory prompts from Tik Tok include "what's something that doesn't sit right with you" and "what's something that isn't Black but feels Black to you". I include eye color tests as well as depictions of modified Albers models and Adobe Photoshop color mixing tools. There are some more serious moments like with my poem that reads:

*Careful what colors you put together.*

*For fear they will bleed.*

*Running into and away - mixed.*

*Perhaps monochromatic is the way?*

*But what would it look like to be every color?*

*Every color all at once?*

*Primary, secondary, tertiary, colored.*

*"I don't see color," they say.*

*Whitewashing with their 'buff' bluffs,*

*White lies if you will.*

*They say it's an absence, a lack.*

*The backdrop which all color is based,*

*“balanced”,*

*Judged.*

*Adding black throws shade while tint washes out.*

*What would it look like to be every color?*

*Would it overtake?*

*Red, yellow, blue*

*Really magenta, yellow, cyan.*

*Prime.*

*Primary not primitive.*

*What makes Black?*

*The absence of light - RGB*

*Or to be pigmented - CMY*

*Red, Brown, Blue, Black, Purple, Yella.*

*Black, black, Blackitty.*

*CMYK = black is key.*

*Black as me?*

*Black is me.*

Like my inspirations for this video, *Technicolored* uses visual aids and humor to discuss problematic issues. Overall, the video provides other ways of seeing or accessing the information presented or hinted at in the figures.

## **Conclusion**

People of color, specifically Black folks, are constantly having to compromise with how they are seen and depicted because the ways of seeing and portrayals have all historically centered on white bodies and lighter skin tones. They were an afterthought for Kodak as demonstrated by the Shirley card and their US Patent 5428402, or reduced to commercialized pigment like mumia. Color is often used as a device in place of race to discuss what white folks deem as too tough a subject for children. Really, they mean white children, as people of color are used to having race play a part in their everyday lives. However, race is not merely the color of our skin but the experiences and cultures that form individuals, communities, and societies. So a purple character like McDonald's Grimace or Adventure Time's Jake can be perceived as Black. As White Supremacy has centered whiteness in all aspects of life, including media, Black and brown individuals frequently go looking for representation in whatever forms they can find it.

# Plates



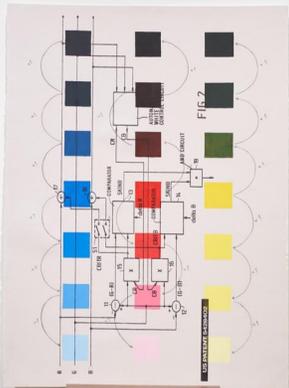
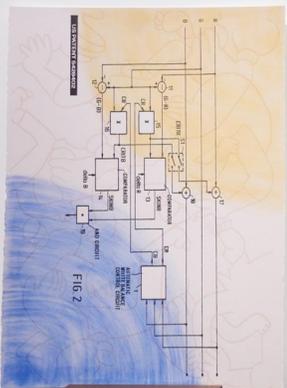




Fig. 1 Mummy



Fig. 2 Rich Black



Fig. 3 Shirley

US PATENT 5428402

FIG. 2

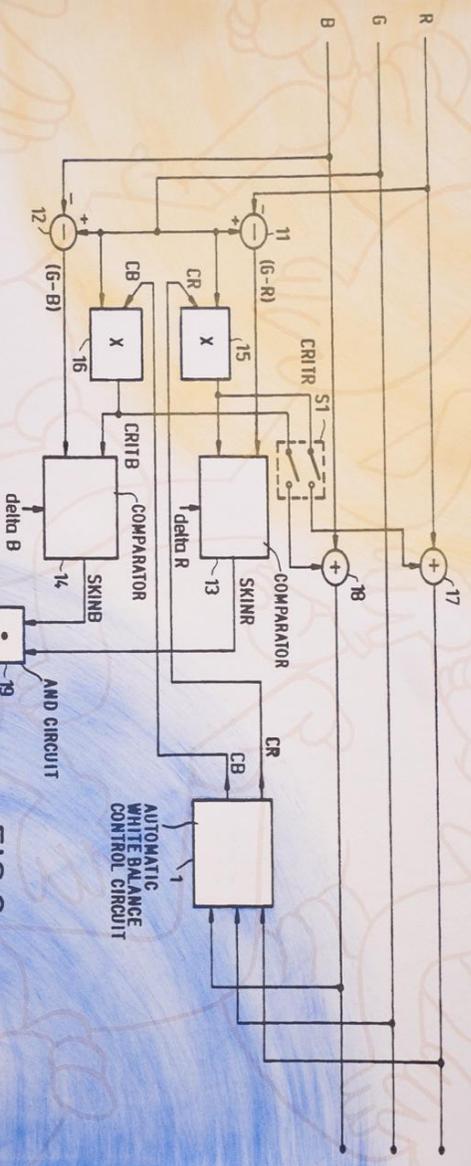


Fig. 4 Kodak

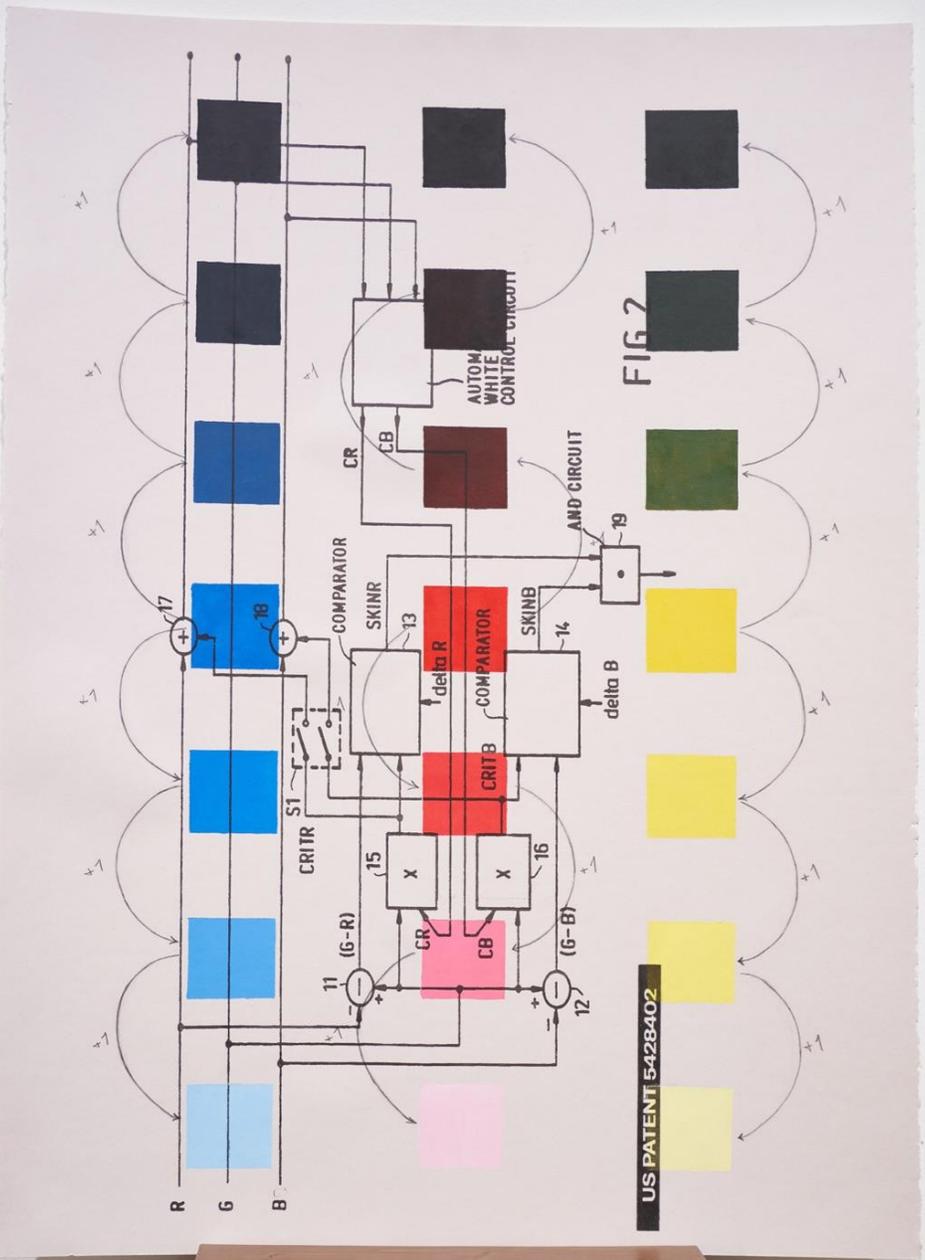


Fig. 5 One Drop



Fig. 6 Color Wheel

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