

Dreaming In Color An Illuminated Color-Field

Artist Essay by Leni Schwendinger

Framing the Promenade between the Phelps Center and Marion McCaw Hall on the Seattle Center Campus are nine large-scale metal-mesh scrim. The passageway is 300 feet long; the rectangular scrim range from 30- by-70 to 30- by-40 feet. Geometrically extending the lobby of McCaw Hall outward -- and echoed by the hardscape patterning below-- the progression of scrim simultaneously defines, and echoes, the architecture of what was once a negligible interstitial space. *Dreaming in Color*, a public-art lighting enhancement, further transforms the Promenade landscape at night-- intensifying the welcome that awaits Seattle Center visitors.

Dreaming in Color originated as a technical analysis of Seattle's LMN Architects' goal to project video images onto multiple, oversized, nearly transparent wire scrim--evolving into a full-scale artwork for McCaw Hall for the Performing Arts. Seeking the most effective way to transpose the drama of performance and stagecraft from within the auditorium onto an outdoor promenade, I studied the size and serial positioning of the screens. Concluding that video was not the best method -- for reasons ranging from light-contrast to budgetary considerations - my studio assistant and I studied the scrim's sectional drawing and wondered out loud, "What is the absolutely *simplest* solution to this complex and monumental challenge?" We sought one individual light that might achieve the result of complexity and richness that the site's scale and layers of canvas suggests.

With the elusive "one-light" question burning in our minds, we searched for a self-contained light that would both cast a panoramic beam-spread *and* change colors automatically. We arrived at a solution consisting of two or three lights per 900-to-2100 square-foot scrim.

Additionally, each light would have the capacity for one million colors. With a method now at hand, we faced the seeming near-impossibility of lighting many layers simultaneously. The answer to this dilemma, we concluded, would be to strictly limit the color palette for each composition.

Johannes Itten observed “El Greco, Rembrandt, Cezanne and other masters produced remarkable mixtures by overlaying transparent pigments. Seurat and the Neo-impressionists instead placed pure hues side-by-side, to form additive mixtures in the eye of the beholder.” Modern color-theory begins with adjacency-of-color and ground-figure to contrast – as in the model of Itten’s contemporary Impressionists. In *Dreaming in Color*, rather, our focus had to be upon the transparent layering of *color upon color* in real-time sequence.

Additionally, the *Dreaming in Color* surfaces exist in a three-dimensional, spatial environment – with viewing angles almost as numerous as the many grades of hue. Thus a viewer might stand in the center, viewing four scrim, with one scrim predominately in the foreground; or the viewer might be at the north end, across the street, with a full view of all nine scrim (the first one being predominate, but influenced by the other eight). Finally, as the viewer walks beneath the scrim along the promenade, each scrim falls out of view until a single scrim fills the viewer’s field of vision.

Distinct and individual compositions were required to build upon Itten’s “expressive potentialities of color”. *Dreaming in Color* counters the popular view that light-environments are subjective swirls of kaleidoscopic hues. In contrast, *Dreaming in Color*’s progressive sequences were composed as distinctive melodies for the eyes:

- *Of Rothko, Section and Plane* is based on the idea of raising or “extruding” flat Rothko paintings into three-dimensional volumes of color and light – as if the paintings materialized onto the ground and the colors extended upwards into the air, forming a volumetric box of light, sliced by the nine scrim.

- *Sleepwalk Into Primary Red-Blue-Green*: the surprising effect of layering undiluted red over green is to achieve yellow, and the unexpected shifts in hue accomplished by these three pure colors – combined in accordance with Itten’s concept of “simultaneous contrast” evoke a feeling of excitement and lively vibration of ever-changing intensity.
- *Within the Northern Lights* takes its inspiration from the Aurora Borealis, the colors of which were interpreted into a pattern by the interior designer, Sussman/Prezja, for McCaw Hall’s grand wall. In turn, for *Dreaming In Color*, a timed scoring of color, volume and time was based on the linear progression of the wall. With jewel tones of purples, turquoise, greens and rusty orange this sequence plays upon the “contrast of extension” – an orchestration of proportional areas of color.
- *Aquamarine, A Beguiling Song* is inspired by a short passage in Richard Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* opera. The plaintive yet radiant motif of the Rhine maidens is hauntingly interpreted through deep colors and lengthy dissolves of visual change—rhythmic, dissonant and harmonically unresolved.

The vision that drove *Dreaming in Color* from its conception to its actualization was that of offering a theatrical experience to *all* Seattle Center and McCaw Hall visitors, whether ticket holders or not. This follows my intent as a public artist --to transport a building’s meaning from inside to outside for all to experience.