

Alan Charlton
Trapezium Paintings

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Light, Colour, Form

by Lynn Kost

Alan Charlton (*1948) is one of the preeminent British artists of the post-war period. Since graduating from the Royal Academy of Art in 1972, he has painted exclusively monochrome paintings in variations of the colour grey. The formal principles of his work appear self-evident: canvases painted in grey, executed without painterly gesture or visible brushstroke, the formats divisible in height, width and depth by a factor of 4.5. Even the gaps in multi-part works or the blank spaces in the so-called *Channel Paintings* correspond to this basic measurement. Each painting is planned precisely by Charlton, who executes every step of its production himself. He orders the wood slats for the stretcher frames, cut to size, joins them together, attaches the canvas, paints it grey, makes a suitable transport box and packs up the work. His by now legendary self-description is succinct: «I am an artist who makes grey paintings.»

This dedication to manual production and the physical object distinguishes Charlton's way of working decidedly from conceptual art. He insists that nothing is further from his mind than sitting down and intellectually justifying his forms and colours and issuing certificates. His aforementioned principles for minimising the artistic signature are merely the foundations for what he calls «making». At the end of this working process are paintings that bring out the qualities of form and colour in space, that continuously change as the light shifts, developing a life of their own that takes root in the perception of the viewer. Without Charlton having to systematically search for them, new shapes, formats and shades of grey constantly come to him during the repetitive process of manual labour. He is inspired by the nuances that inevitably arise through repetition. From there, new ideas crystallise in a slow process. Once Charlton has decided to pursue one of these ideas, he first records it in meticulous drawings. They function as models or samples, whose effects he then again takes time to observe. If the shapes and proportions continue to convince him at this stage, the drawings then serve as a basis for determining the exact materials required to make the paintings and ordering them from the artist's supply store. Finally, he documents the colour mixes of each painting as he makes them. He always archives a test strip together with the details of the composition, the number of layers, the date of creation and the weather conditions. No shade of grey is repeated.

For a long time, Charlton worked primarily with variations of the classical painting format of the rectangle. From this primary shape alone, he developed an extraordinary variety of work. He deconstructed the basic shape right down to his *Line Paintings* or expanded it into immense

wall-scale multi-panel paintings. He designs most of his works with exhibitions in mind, with reference to the architectural conditions of the exhibition venue. The spatial situation is important for determining the dimensions of the paintings. In the case of multi-part works, it is also the starting point for the structure and rhythm of the elements and thus the walls as a whole. The lighting situation, in turn, is crucial for the choice of grey tones. It is a complex interplay of site-specific criteria that flow into the artist's working process. In 2010, for example, he conceived an arrangement of 16 rectangular paintings for a wall of the Tschudi Gallery in Zuoz, right next to a large window that was approached obliquely, towards the right from the entrance. Together, the panels appeared like an upside-down pyramid shape that intuitively drew the audience across the room towards the window and back again. When Charlton installed the work at the gallery and saw it for the first time in its intended context, the abstractly implied triangular shape particularly caught his eye. This led to an intense preoccupation with the geometric form of the triangle, which he had never explored before, and which eventually led to the *Triangle Paintings* series. In the current exhibition at the recently opened second location of the Tschudi Gallery at Rämistrasse 5 in Zurich, the artist now introduces a third geometric form: the Trapezium. Like all his other paintings, the *Trapezium Paintings* are also based on a unit of measurement of 4.5. Of course, they are also painted in monochrome grey.

Grey is often associated with a neutral or even boring image. The colour is considered dull or inexpressive. Alan Charlton's paintings defy this reputation. They show that grey is a colour of infinite facets, a colour that can be endlessly varied without ever merging into a different colour range. Moreover, no other colour can play the spectrum from warm to cold so profoundly. Charlton exploits these possibilities masterfully and proves their variety through understatement. Paradoxically, it is with restraint that his work dominates entire spaces, shifting their temperature and atmosphere, making the walls cast a luminous glow. Charlton's paintings animate white walls into a moving event. Their sculptural presence sets the viewer in motion and demands constant changes of perspective – which is essential, not just for the perception of art. His paintings show how our perception is conditioned by structural elements. By withdrawing and not «telling stories» about themselves and their creation, the works become catalysts for an introspective reflection, as well as an examination of space and ultimately a sharpening of one's own perception. This active observation also becomes an act of self-reassurance. Charlton is aware of how to achieve this in the best tradition of Minimal Art. In their systematic arrangements and patterns of repetition, these paintings suppress anything supposedly creative and spontaneous that might linger in the ego of the painter. Instead, they focus entirely on the perception of the viewers, who at the centre of things become the directors of their own experience. This modesty on behalf of the artist is significant and can also be interpreted as generosity. Alan Charlton is one of the few painters who succeed in making paintings that do not refer to the painter himself or even primarily to the history of painting. There is no trace or gesture that indicates the personality of the artist, no heavy-handed references to the discourse of painting. The paintings are present precisely because they are so discrete, or as Charlton himself notes, «... abstract, direct, urban, basic, modest, pure, simple, silent, honest, absolute ...». They want only one thing: to take their viewers seriously and to offer them the possibility of absolute perception, in the here and now.