"54": 54 Strokes of Luck
by Clémence Fernando

The text is a free translation of the article « 54 coups de hasard: 54, de Clémence Fernando », first published in *Actuel*, #24, 2022. The description of Fernando's device was first published in *Les Nouvelles de l'Estampe*, « Au-delà de l'estampe : cinq artistes contemporains et leur utilisation de la gravure », #264, 202 (https//journals.openedition.org/estampe/1634).

A generative puzzle

Clémence Fernando engraves small mezzotints –10 cm square in shape – that are the building blocks for composing larger prints of square or rectangular shape. The composition of each print depends on three choices: (a) the number of mezzotints involved; (b) the position of each mezzotint in the global image; (c) the coloring of each one. Thus, each resulting print takes place in the series of all the possible images – actual or virtual– that instantiate the other choices of mezzotints, positions and colorings. The multiplicity of the series grows very quickly and soon goes well beyond imagination.

For instance, the print "54" takes place in a series involving 54 mezzotints arranged to compose a print of size 76 by 106 cm. The position of each mezzotint changes with each printing. Each mezzotint is printed three times in three different colors (blue, yellow, red); the swapping of the colors gives six different colored versions for each one. Thus, the number of possible prints is given by the following formula:

$$54! \times 6^5 \simeq 1{,}45 \times 10^{114}$$

where:
- factorial 54 – noted 54! – is the number of permutations of the mezzotints composing the resulting image;
- 6 the number of possible colorings for each elementary mezzotint.

In other words, the number of possible different prints in the series is roughly 1 followed by 114 zeros. You may compare this number with the estimated size of the universe: 8.8×10^{23} kilometers; in other words, roughly, 8 followed by 23 zeros.

The device set up by Fernando can be compared to a puzzle: each mezzotint is a piece to be integrated into a global image. But, unlike the usual puzzle, the global image is not given in advance; it is reinvented at each printing. Thus, it can be described as a generative puzzle: at each printing, a new unprecedented image is produced displaying another array of choices in terms of composition and colors. Fernando pushed the logic of her device further in the digital video "54" which generates images from 108 elementary mezzotints by random permutation[1].

The device also reminds one of a formal grammar generating a pictorial language. Each elementary mezzotint belongs to the vocabulary and represents a picture-word; the syntax – made up of dispositional rules – assembles the words into picture-statements. The number of picture-statements is almost infinite as the number of words grows and the syntax is complex.

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[1] The video can be seen on Fernando's website : https://clemencefernando.com/gravure-108/.68.

Unlike grammars that generate natural or computer languages, no semantics is associated with the combination of the pictures. As far as "54" is concerned, it is up to the onlookers to associate a meaning with each generated image, either in a top-down (based on the global picture) or in a bottom-up way (by combining the elementary images represented in the mezzotints).

Analogist mandalas

The images represented on the mezzotints are of very diverse types: symbols (numbers, letters, etc.), geometric figures (pyramids, hemispheres, etc.), figurative vignettes (celestial bodies, humans in a variety of activities, space shuttle, etc.). They refer to all dimensions of the cosmic or human life (human *vs* non-human; celestial *vs* earth, object *vs* process or event; quantum *vs* vibratory, etc.) and belong to all pictorial genres (figurative, abstract, symbolic, decorative, etc.). Such a maelstrom is characteristic of an analogist representation of the world-cosmos according to the anthropologist Philippe Descola: the cosmos, including the surrounding environment, is viewed as a seamless flux of multifarious phenomena, no ordering principle seems to prevail except the one that one manages to decipher and impose on the appearances. As Descola puts it in *Les formes du visible*, "what is sought above all is the warmth of the profusion and the enchantment of multiplicity, the mosaic of shapes and colors, the multiplication and shimmering of the facets; in short, everything but minimalism". The role the analogist artist gives to her image is to welcome such a diversity and to forge threads connecting all those impermanent aspects of her vision.

This is how Fernando's undertaking may be characterized: she registers aspects of the world-cosmos in her limitless vocabulary of mezzotints, composes them, print them into large prints that capture suspended snapshots of what's going on. From that point of view, Fernando's prints can be called analogist mandalas.

Splendor of mezzotints

The device is sophisticated and somehow demanding, and yet the prints are enticing. They carry some sort of appeal in them. The appeal is that of mezzotint. Mezzotint brings about a special light effect: it captures the light as if irradiating from within the print. This is what the word *splendor* etymologically designates: the glow emanating from the very source of light. The use of color and Fernando's particular way of handling the trichromacy magnify the effect: each picture is both precise and imbued with a colored aura. When composed together, shades and hues resonate as if a veil of colors was floating at the surface of the prints.

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