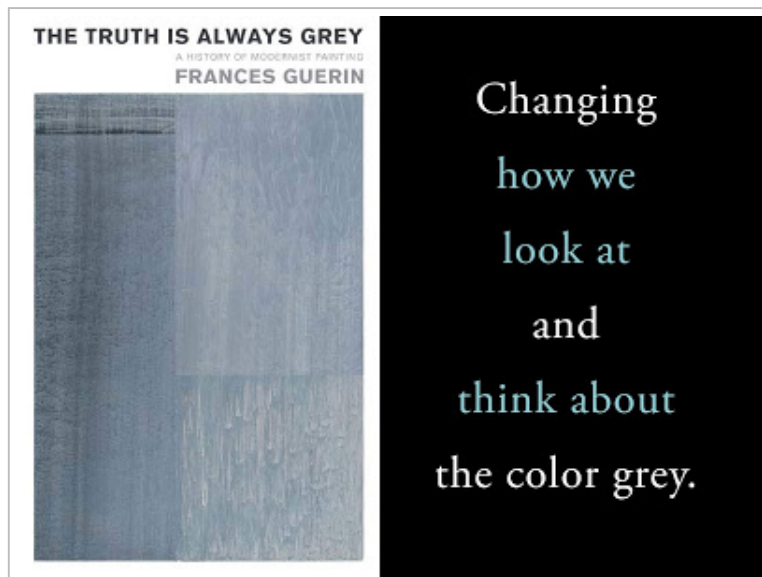


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WEDNESDAY, MAY 16, 2018

## A look behind the challenging, provocative, fascinating history of the color grey.



BY FRANCES GUERIN

I recall the day *The Truth Is Always Grey* was conceived. I was visiting the Alberto Giacometti retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Fall 2007—a huge exhibition in which Giacometti’s portraits, sculptures, and busts were placed in dialogue to shed new light on the oeuvre. As I walked from room to room, two things struck me. First, the uniformity of the figures—irrespective of the identity of the person in the portrait image, they were all the same figure—and second, every painted image was dominated by a grey palette. The array of greys was vast, and they were never monochrome, always shaded with pinks and purples, browns and greens. I had never seen a comprehensive retrospective of an artist’s work in which the entire oeuvre was painted grey. Moreover, Giacometti’s was an oeuvre in which the single color meant so many different things. Of course, *Jasper Johns: Gray* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the same year was the breakthrough moment for the art world’s growing interest in grey. But, for me, the persistent

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repetition of grey, and its breadth and variety in Giacometti's work, was the encounter that opened the door to my fascination with grey painting. I had seen smaller exhibitions of Gerhard Richter's work over the years—*Eight Grey* at the Deutsche Guggenheim in 2002 for example—which I had found revelatory. This installation ended up taking a central place in my reading of Richter's grey paintings in the book. In addition, when I started thinking about the many single works by Richter, Cy Twombly, Philip Guston, and the late Rothkos, the list of works in twentieth-century painting in a grey palette became endless. Grey was everywhere.

Ironically, although the Giacometti exhibition had been my inspiration, his works fell to the sidelines of my research as I continued the pursuit of grey. This had more to do with my ongoing interest in a certain kind of abstraction than it did with Giacometti's portraits. Specifically, grey was repeatedly used to articulate the iconoclasm that dominated the postwar period, a time when abstract painting arguably reached its most intense moment. In postwar American art, everything we knew and assumed about painting was being challenged. When all distinction between figure and ground was removed from the canvas, and artists such as Rothko and Frank Stella, and later Johns, Twombly, and Rauschenberg were engaged in a process of reducing painting to its most fundamental aspects, they so often did this in grey. The connections between this "revolution" in painting and the exploration of grey that contributed to its execution became the centerpiece of *The Truth Is Always Grey*. Put differently, it was striking to see how many of the concerns of American abstract painting were shared by artists using grey through the centuries. Painting was engaged in exploring ideas of transience and ephemerality, the ambiguity of reality, the shifting identity of the medium, and the value of representation. In addition, these postwar American artists were often looking to other art forms as a way to define what painting was and was not. I discovered that their use of grey actually focused these searches because of the color's ephemerality, its shifting identity, ambiguity and constant transformation.

**Artists who work in grey do so to explore questions of memory, the past, the social and political responsibility of representation.**

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Coming back to why Giacometti became less important to *The Truth Is Always Grey*: a lot of the grey painting in postwar Europe was concerned, broadly speaking, with mourning and healing following the devastation of World War II. Artists such as Jean Fautrier, Antoni Tàpies, Anselm Kiefer, and even more recent artists such as Luc Tuymans, who work in grey do so to explore questions of memory, the past, the social and political responsibility of representation. In the American postwar paintings discussed in the book, the figurative, thus arguably, much of painting's relationship to the social world, is stripped away from the surface of the image. In turn, as I say, this reduction, or elevation, of grey to the entirety of the canvas enabled American artists to really focus on the material and aesthetic of painting. This, in turn, became my focus.

If this is what justifies the place of American postwar abstraction at the center of the book, what of grey? I discovered that not only was grey everywhere in the history of painting—all the way back to middle ages—but that it was under attended to by critics and art historians. For example, so much has always been made of Picasso's blue and rose periods, but what about the grey? And when there was an exhibition of Picasso's grey works, we were told they were black and white. Why is this, when very little of the work in that exhibition was painted in black and white? Why is it that grey is always so difficult to talk about? This raised another question of why art museums, historians and critics often struggle to name the color on the canvas when it is grey. For example, at the National Gallery in London's recent Monochrome exhibition, there was an awkwardness around the description and discussion of grey. The exhibition was titled *Monochrome*, and yet, throughout, there seemed to be agreement that grey is never monochrome. Added to this, the subtitle of the exhibition, *Black and White* was misleading because only a few of the works in the exhibition were painted in black and white. Grey may fill the scale in between the two, but it is neither black nor white. Typically, when grey is discussed by exhibitions and critics, they tend to gloss over the complexity and full significance of the color.

Take for example, the discussion of Richter's grey work; invariably, critics accept Richter's claims in interviews at face value and argue that grey is nothing and has no meaning on his canvases. When in fact, in Richter's paintings, grey has a formative role. For Richter, if grey is nothing and non-identity, as I argue in the book, it is an "element of nothing" a "non-entity" on the canvas that holds within it enormous possibilities for the development of painting as a medium. Indeed, his persistent return to grey across his fifty-year career, as well as his interrogation of painting through grey as a medium, are the basis for the book's situation of Richter's work in grey as an extension of the concerns of the postwar American painters. I should also say, it's not all critics who can be accused of dismissing, ignoring or undervaluing grey. Nevertheless, when I started the book ten years ago, grey hadn't attracted the attention I believe that it warranted.

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**It was striking to see how many concerns of American abstract painting were shared by artists using grey through the centuries.**

My intention is for *The Truth Is Always Grey* to contribute to the current renaissance of appreciation for grey. I say "renaissance" because while we might think of grey as depressing, somber, the color of melancholia, there was a time when grey was seen as vibrant, as signifying richness and hope. The recent insistence on the influence and provocation of grey is also not new. In painting, while contemporary art critics often refer to grey as a non-color, as the place on a canvas where painting is negated or nothing happens, this has not always been the case. Alberti celebrated grey in his discussions of light, and Baudelaire applauded Delacroix's use of grey for its intimate depiction of different intensities of light and mood. Moreover, irrespective of its mixed appeal for critics and the public, artists have always been fascinated by grey. Over the centuries grey has been chosen as the color of artistic experimentation, often at moments of transition and reflection in their careers. Alternatively, they have used grey as the color in which to explore their concerns without distraction, and as the medium in which they challenge the limits of painting. The recognition of the importance of the grey through exhibitions such as *Jasper Johns: Gray* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago in 2008, *Picasso: Black and White* at the Guggenheim, 2013, and *Monochrome: Painting in Black and White* at the National Gallery in London, 2017, thus comes as a renaissance of sorts.

If Giacometti's portraits mark the conception of *The Truth Is Always Grey*, my thinking about grey painting continued to grow and transform with the writing of the book. Today, I understand grey as a way of seeing the world. Because the identity of grey is more fluid and transient than that of other colors, we have to approach what is painted in grey on its own terms, without preconception. Thus, before a painting in grey, we are asked to see the mutations, the ever-transforming nature of painting and its relationship to the world in any given moment. The viewer's presence to the canvas that is demanded by grey is its unique lesson for seeing the world. Lastly, the title of the book captures this way of seeing the world through grey. *The Truth is Always Grey* comes from a quotation by Anselm Kiefer in which he talks about the in-conclusion and uncertainty of the truth of art and of its relationship to the world. Grey foregrounds uncertainty, and

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simultaneously, insists that abstract painting and the world are perhaps closer than we had ever anticipated.

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Frances Guerin is senior lecturer in the School of Arts at the University of Kent. She is author of *The Truth Is Always Grey*, *Through Amateur Eyes*, and *A Culture of Light*, all from University of Minnesota Press.

"*The Truth Is Always Grey* is a work of exceptional erudition, breadth, and clarity."  
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"Frances Guerin has done a magisterial job in selecting and combining a variety of points of views on grey as a color of major significance, in its own right, throughout the history of art."

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"A well researched, vibrant, and thoroughly engaging reconsideration of that widely underestimated color."

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