



January 30–May 5, 2013

“I use the art of painting to represent color as the transparent appearance of light.”¹

Swiss-born artist Rudolf de Crignis (1948–2006) was a painter of exquisitely subtle and meditative chromatic surfaces. At first look his paintings appear to be richly saturated monochromes. Yet each is actually the result of a diverse array of pigments, such as ultramarine blue, zinc white, cobalt blue, copper, royal blue, Scheveningen Warm Gray, and Persian red, layered in thin oil washes. De Crignis’s radiant blues and grays, no two alike, are cumulative, light-infused, chromatic states. While working in his studio, de Crignis would often move his paintings from one wall to another to capture the shifting light; displayed in natural light, the finished works slowly unfold when viewed from different vantage points. **MATRIX 245**, de Crignis’s first solo museum exhibition in the United States, brings together fourteen paintings and a series of delicate graphite works on paper from 1991 to 2006.

When de Crignis first visited Manhattan in 1980, he was deeply affected by Minimalism, particularly the powerfully spare abstract paintings of Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, and Ad Reinhardt. He soon made New York his home and shifted from performance, video, and installation-based work to making abstract pictures (paintings and works on paper) about color, light, and space. He gradually narrowed in on painting ranges of blues, particularly ultramarine, aiming to “bring the blue onto a level where it becomes totally neutral... [the paintings] are just catalysts to create the space and the light.”²

De Crignis used ultramarine blue in many of the paintings on view in **MATRIX 245**. *Painting #02-27* is a large, bright, and deeply azure canvas built up by layers of silver, Crimson Lake Extra, ultramarine, and royal blue. Dianthus pink, cinnabar green, copper, ultramarine, and royal blue produce a delicate, dusty gray blue in *Painting #02-26*. Ultramarine blue is an ancient color derived from lapis lazuli that originally was mined thousands of years ago from a mountain valley in Afghanistan. Prized for its luxurious tint, lapis lazuli was transported to Egypt and Europe for use in jewelry and paint pigment, and was a mainstay of medieval illustrated manuscripts and Italian Renaissance painted panels. Cennino Cennini, the early Renaissance painter and author of *Il libro dell'arte* (*The Craftsman's Handbook*), distinguished ultramarine blue, along with gold and vermilion, as the purest of colors.

As with the blue paintings, de Crignis worked his gray canvases toward a fullness of color that becomes visible only gradually. “Glazes of complementary orange and blue, accompanied by an occasional layer of green and intermittent layers of zinc white result in a moving gray,” he wrote.³ In *Painting #06-10*, layers of Old Holland warm grey and copper produce a pale rosy gray, hinting toward blue. His body of work also includes delicate works on paper, which de Crignis called “paintings.” Using hard pencils, de Crignis covered the paper with horizontal and vertical lines, then erased them—a process that he repeated

several times with each work. The partially erased graphite lines create a slight visual vibration resembling the thinly layered brushwork in his canvas works.

De Crignis approached his paintings as works in progress, noting that one decision would lead to the next without a preordained plan. He would begin with a smooth white gesso ground, then, over days and weeks, add layers of semitransparent paint in glazes. Alternating layers in horizontal and vertical strokes gradually created a sense of surface depth. In 2005 he documented a painting from start to finish, photographing the surface after each new layer of color and noting the pigment, orientation of brush strokes, and time of day.⁴ On August 29, at 11:45 a.m., he began with “yellow-green” applied in vertical strokes. The next morning at 10:00 he added a horizontal layer of zinc white. After two more layers of zinc white, one vertical and one horizontal, the painting began to take on a blue palette. Twenty-five additional layers followed—copper, cold gray, yellow-green, and more zinc white—and with each a new surface color emerged, moving through blue, green, and violet hues. After a final layer of zinc white on October 2, de Crignis completed *Painting No. 05-30*.

The blue, gray, and paper paintings in **MATRIX 245** coalesce in a vibrant constellation of color and light. Each colored surface is unique to the conditions and decisions of its making, full but not fixed. Fluctuations in hue and intensity shift from one work to another and around the space of the gallery, linking the works in what de Crignis called a larger understanding.⁵ His insistent colors are indifferent to history and narrative. They stand forth as their own spatial experience, operating differently for different people, in different light, in different relational arrangements. Above all, his goal was for his painting to be perceived as an experience. Through “this lively act of perception, the work becomes a picture-space.”⁶

Lucinda Barnes

Chief Curator and Director of Programs and Collections

1. Press Release, *Rudolf De Crignis Paintings* (New York: Peter Blum Gallery, 2003).

2. “A Conversation With Rudolf de Crignis,” in *Rudolf de Crignis New York 1985–2006* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2012), 207.

3. rudolfdecrignis.com/work.html

4. “The Making of a Painting,” booklet inserted in *Rudolf de Crignis New York 1985–2006*, 190–91.

5. rudolfdecrignis.com/work.html

6. harvardartmuseums.org/art/172847

Public Program

Wednesday / 3.6.13 / 12:00

Rudolf de Crignis and Color: Lawrence Rinder and Karen Schloss in Conversation

Followed by a book signing of *Rudolf de Crignis New York 1985–2006*, published by Radius Books and with a foreword by Lawrence Rinder.

MATRIX 245 is organized by Chief Curator and Director of Programs and Collections Lucinda Barnes, in collaboration with the Estate of Rudolf de Crignis. The MATRIX Program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees. Special thanks to Michael Paoletta and the Estate of Rudolf de Crignis.

Front Rudolf de Crignis: *Painting #02-26*, 2002; oil on canvas; 30 × 30 in.; courtesy Estate of Rudolf de Crignis. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio.