



## A Visual Language

by David Cohen and Scott Anderson  
Herbert Press (A&C Black), 2006

Softcover, with 280 line illustrations and colour photographs, 109 pages

Reviewed by David Smith

*"The visual language is in essence no different to other vocabularies that remain fundamental to learning any discipline, e.g. composing and playing music, the art of literature or working in the laws of science. These comparisons have led me to consider very carefully the possible construction, use and application of a language governing the visual."*

David Cohen is an accomplished Scottish ceramic artist and educator with original insights into the creative process, honed by over 40 years of practice. I first met Dave in 1971, when he taught a session at The Haystack-Hinkley School of Crafts, a summer school for high school-age students in Maine. I was immediately entranced by the seemingly effortless mastery and inexhaustible creativity which he brought to bear on everything from domestic ware to elaborate sculptural pieces. I later worked for a brief stint in his Juniper Green studio, and studied under his tutelage at the Edinburgh College of Art for a couple of years after that.

We stayed in touch over the years, and he sent me drafts of *A Visual Language* as he worked on it. I can attest both to the efficacy of the pedagogical method described in the book, and the powerful influence it continues to hold over my own development as an artist working in a variety of media, including ceramics, photography and digital design. Cohen has travelled and lectured extensively, and shown his work in numerous international exhibitions. His remarkable creative insights and oeuvre merit broader exposure and recognition. Fortunately, his first book *A Visual Language*, co-written with his son Scott Anderson, has just been published by A&C Black of London, U.K.

The book starts out with a series of step-by-step tutorial exercises covering basic concepts of abstract composition with line, shape, colour and

texture in two, and then three dimensions. This portion of the book is somewhat reminiscent of Bauhaus master Wassily Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*, but without any overtones of mysticism. Inconsistencies of layout, captioning and use of white space in the design of this section make comprehension of the tutorials unnecessarily difficult (more on this subject later).

Next, the principles of composition are applied to "analytical observation" of the human figure through life drawing. Academic study of the human form through drawing (derived from the 'Classical' model) is absolutely key to understanding the roots of Cohen's approach to artistic development: "working with the life figure has contributed immensely to my confidence in tackling visual problems of any magnitude." I vividly remember how he drummed the importance of this discipline into a very reluctant student – me!

The first half of the book culminates in a chapter that describes how the author developed a visual vocabulary for composing large installations from plates and tiles arranged in grids. This is valuable in showing a clear conceptual progression from simple units into complex visual statements. The dynamic, changeable character of the compositions (by rearranging and rotating units) is demonstrated in photo sequences. On viewing the physical installations at the Heriot Watt Business School in Edinburgh during a recent trip to Scotland, I encountered surprising optical illusions of depth, created by the masterful orchestration of light and shadow effects on rough, sand-blasted clay, shiny glazes and gold lustre.

Missing in action are examples of his earlier and concurrent three-dimensional pieces, utilizing more conventional craft idioms: functional pottery, sculptural stoneware and raku pots, for a highly personal and original body of work. Although the omission is partly compensated by the concluding essay, and pictures of extrusions in environmental installations, I believe the way he organizes wheel-thrown forms, with moulded relief, slab (etc.) additions, and elaborate surface treatments, would have contributed to understanding the highly abstract tutorials and emphasis on classical drawing.

The second half, "The Visual Languages of Specific Artists", is a compilation of essays (with photos) by eight contemporary Scottish craftspeople – a glass engraver, weaver, glassblower, jewellers/metalsmiths and two potters (including Cohen's essay on extrusions), with an introduction by Les Mitchell, a professor of drawing. The relationship between these essays and the first half of the book is problematic, because they lack common focus and structure. The selection shows that, in an era of global communication and exposure to virtually unlimited visual influences, divergent creative approaches can occur even within a relatively small geographic region. This raises an interesting question: is there a Scottish 'visual dialect'? Another

question: why is the selection of practitioners confined to traditional craft media, given the stated intention to obtain a wider scope of application for teaching visual language?

Pictures of Alison McConachie's profoundly enigmatic blown glass objects (the word 'cosmic' springs to mind) are accompanied by a text that gets bogged down in craft technique. She views the intention as inseparable from the process, and describes the technical procedures and decision-making along the way, that give shape to her vessels. Lost in all this are the elements of language and communication. McConachie declares in her essay, "The vessel draws together beautifully all the elements discussed in this book." Unfortunately this statement is not supported by any further discussion. A page of quite generic photos of her at work (with no caption explaining their relevance) would have been better used for other works, perhaps from a different series or phase of her development.

In contrast, the work and essay by jeweller Jack Cunningham fit the visual language theme like a glove. He creates small, rebus-like assemblages from found and beautifully crafted representational objects. The essay clearly articulates his conceptual method: "when [the objects are] assembled in groups...it becomes possible for one's imagination to construct a picture or story that has a certain personal recognition" – visual communication in a nutshell.

As a graphic designer, I'm always chagrined when an understanding of the book as a functional and aesthetic object is not manifested in books by and about artists and craftspeople. In the case of *A Visual Language*, the text and sumptuous photos are certainly compelling, but readability is compromised by inferior typography and page layout. The effect is of consuming a feast with dysfunctional tableware.

Although this slim volume doesn't entirely do justice to subject or author, it's a good introduction to both, and a great addition to the bookshelves of all visual communicators who are engaged in life-long learning. Given the low price of the book (US\$22.61, from Amazon.com), it is excellent value indeed.