

## **Launch of Merv Moriarty's COLOUR - the definitive guide. National Library of Australia, 6 September 2012**

Since this is a library and the word is the medium of a library, I thought I would begin with some extracts from two of my favourite poems about colour.

First an American one - Wallace Stevens' *Sea Surface Full of Clouds* (just the first part):

In that November off Tehuantepec,  
The slopping of the sea grew still one night  
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate  
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green  
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean, which like limpid water lay.  
Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude  
Out of the light evolved the morning blooms,

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds  
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?  
*C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme.*

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm  
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green  
And in its watery radiance, while the hue

Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled  
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea  
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue.

And an Australian one, *Colour* by Dorothea Mackellar (again, just a part):

The lovely things that I have watched unthinking,  
Unknowing, day by day,  
That their soft dyes have steeped my soul in colour  
That will not pass away -

Great saffron sunset clouds, and larkspur mountains,  
And fenceless miles of plain,  
And hillsides golden-green in that unearthly  
Clear shining after rain;

And nights of blue and pearl, and long smooth beaches,  
Yellow as sunburnt wheat,  
Edged with a line of foam that creams and hisses,  
Enticing weary feet.

...

There is no night so black but you shine through it,  
There is no morn so drear,  
O Colour of the World, but I can find you,  
Most tender, pure and clear.

Poems like these remind us how much we value the colour of the world. Yet, considering its importance to us, there seem to be very few *good* books and even fewer *reliable* books on the subject of colour.

Some years ago, I was trying to work out why it was that when I mixed alizarin crimson with viridian I ended up with a beautiful grey that perfectly described the colour of the sea. No book was helpful to me. (I should have asked Merv, he would have told me in an instant).

In my search for the answer to that and other questions about the behaviour of mixed colour, I discovered that of the books on colour in art and design there are a number of broad categories:

- books on mixing colour;
- colour pattern books – often consisting of not much more than palettes of colours used by designers;
- books on individual colours and their histories;
- artist's colour theories, some quite famous - Chevreul, Itten, Albers;

- books about the way artist's have used colour in the past (the work of the late John Gage, a frequent visitor to the ANU, stands out in this area); and
- scientific treatises on colour (these are often highly technical and unrewarding).

But none of these types of books do what Merv Moriarty has done in *COLOUR - the definitive guide*.

So what *has* Merv done?

- First, he has brought together 5 decades of looking, painting and teaching experience;
- Secondly, he has combined a technical and scientific precision with really practical exercises;
- Thirdly, he has provided a set of tools – such as the MM colour charts and DVD, by which the artist or designer can be absolutely precise about how to reach a certain colour.

These things make the book truly unique in Australia.

But the book is suffused with Merv's humanity and his passion for the subject.

*Passionate* is an overused word in our society. Yet I think it describes Merv.

There is a part of the book in which he describes working with a group of students on a colour exercise during which a particular revelation occurred to him – 'my excitement must have been obvious from my flapping arms and amazed expression' – that's Merv. (I won't tell you what that particular revelation was – you'll have to buy the book).

*Passionate* is related to *compassionate*. And that describes both Merv and Prue. Compassion is about sensitivity to the world around – to nature. That's another dimension of the book – it makes an attempt to find the root of colour in *nature*.

The last word of the book – it will come as no surprise to those who know Merv well – is 'beauty'. That's ultimately, what the book is all about.

It's also uniquely and deeply Australian – seeking to find universals in the colours of wattle, lilli-pillis, coreas, the sunset on Wallagoot lake and the king parrot.

For me though, the most instructive part of the book is the part about its real subject - colour relationships.

Just as 'No man is an island,  
Entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main' (John Donne)

- The same could be said of colour.

So Merv's subject is principally relationships. And it's here that the book really sings – intervals, linkages, harmonies, complementarity, simultaneous contrast – this last he calls 'the light maker'. If you read anything by Matisse – and Matisse is always rewarding to read on art – he talks everywhere about the capacity of paintings and drawings to *generate light*. I'm sure he would have seen eye to eye with Merv on many things.

So - whether you use *Colour; the definitive guide* as a tool to understand your craft, to hone your perception, to understand why certain relationships work (and others don't) or for its unique and personal insights into the deeper philosophical dimensions of the subject – you will be rewarded.

Sensitivity to colour is immensely satisfying – its one of the things that enriches our lives in the world. But I think most of us are unsure about, or insecure about our responses.

Artists share this sense; it is only after a day of painting – trying to see and match tones and hues - that the artist starts to see the immense colour possibilities all around.

*Colour; the definitive guide* is a labour of love. It is a beautiful production and you can see and feel in it all the care that has been taken to get it right.

I congratulate Merv and the team who produced the book. He reminds us that however precise we are about pigment – the printed page can but produce a simulacrum.

The real beauty of colour is out there, all around us and is something we can all experience with the right way of looking.

It gives me great pleasure to launch *COLOUR - the definitive guide*.

**Speech by Andrew Sayers AM,  
Director of the National Museum of Australia**