

172 Invited Artists Q&A - Maria Lalic in Conversation with Fiona Robinson PPRWA



Each year the Annual Open Exhibition spotlights an Invited Artist, showcasing three of their works alongside the selected artists.

Former President of the Academicians, Fiona Robinson PPRWA, sat down with Maria Lalic to find out more about her practise, and how her work explores time, history, place and most importantly - colour.

1) You have been working in a purely abstract way making paintings about pigment, using earth, how important is place in your work.

In this group of works, 'The Landscape Paintings', place is very important and is threaded through the work in a number of ways. The work gestated over a very long period of time. I could go back much further but in 1994 I was working on the extensive group of paintings I've made continuously since then called the 'Colour and Metal Paintings' and alongside I had begun to work on the 'History Paintings'. At the same time I also knew there was something I was looking for, needed to find, in the collections of earth I'd made over the preceding years, collected with no particular sense of why I was drawn to doing this except that they were a reality of the landscape I was in, that I wanted to hold, to contain the experience...at its most humble level, the earth we walk on.

I knew I didn't want to 'picture' it, I didn't know what I could contribute to that long and extensive genre of landscape painting, I wanted to see it, feel it, make something of it without depiction

that connected with a discourse in contemporary painting that had a connection to nature, as in Agnes Martin's paintings 'This Rain' 1958, 'Grass' 1967 and Brice Marden's 'Grove Group' series of paintings 1973-76 and that had something of the spirit of Michelle Stuart's earth drawings like 'El Florido Tunill (Stones Precious of El Florido) 1980.

As well as collecting earths, the second way in which place was important was in my constant collecting of artist's oil paints that had a geographical place in it's name, some very familiar like Burnt Siena, Naples Yellow, Paris Blue and some less so that I had found on travels around the globe. One of my first stops in any new city is always to an artist's material supplies shop, looking for eponymously named colours that at the time were new to me like Tasmanian Blue, San Remy Yellow, Bohemian Green.

And the final thread of the importance of place in the 'Landscape Paintings' is their relationship to an extant landscape painting that I had seen and come to know well over the years and where the painting had the name of the place depicted in its title. These paintings set off a life-long passion to travel to find the places where the artist may have stood to make notes, drawings, paintings. My journeys are a kind of pilgrimage to these sites to stand in the footsteps, see with the eyes, feel with the heart of artists long dead but still vital through their paintings.

In the paintings I try to bring all of these threads together equally. The paintings are always 2 panel paintings divided horizontally along the mid line. The upper panel is painted with the eponymously named artist's oil paint and the lower panel with oil paint that I have made from the earth I've collected at the relevant site. Titling of these works is, as with all my paintings, really important to me to get right and, in the way I lay it out, mimics the structure of the painting and acts as a kind of key. An example of one would be;

'Sèvres Blue Landscape Painting. 2004'
(Le Chemin de Sèvres. Corot. c1855-65)
34 x 49 cm oil paint on canvas

The top line of the title refers to the upper panel of the painting and takes the name of the manufactured blue paint I used to make this Landscape Painting, Sèvres Blue, followed by the date I made it. The line below is the title of the painting by Corot that I'd seen many times in the Louvre. It's a gentle bucolic scene, a woman leads the way down a country lane followed by a man slumped low on horseback, most of the painting is of the wonderful sky full of wind blown clouds. The lower panel is painted in the orange brown oil paint I made from earth collected in Sèvres. The final line of the title is the size and each painting is always the same size as the extant painting.

I made it in 2004. In 1998 the Corot painting was stolen from the Louvre and is still missing.

2) What was the original impetus for working in this way.

None of the 3 groups of paintings I've been working through since the mid 1980's come from a theoretical premise or intellectual gambit, they came from working at, looking at and thinking

about the place of non-figurative painting in particular towards the end of the c20th, the century in which it had developed so strongly. I can see how in retrospect it may look like a smooth, linear development. It was anything but. It was a very difficult and frustrating 10 years when I was working in my studio and constantly making paintings about colour and constantly failing to find what I didn't even know I was looking for. I just knew I needed to make paintings that were predominately about colour. Colour is the visual language that is indescribable in any other way - we have such paucity of its equivalent in verbal language - you have to see it, to feel it's resonance, to understand the implication of it. And of course I was constantly looking at painting, historic and contemporary, and the influences on my methodology came from what I admired and stimulated me emotionally and intellectually. In the early years of my development as a painter I saw, in a short space of time, solo exhibitions of a number of artists that affected me deeply: the politics of democracy in the work of Sol LeWitt, the powerful material expression of Eva Hesse's work, the expansive invention within the tightest of boundaries of Robert Ryman's painting, the meditative tranquility of Agnes Martin's work.

3) Your History Paintings currently on show at Tate Modern explore the history of colour pigments. I found them poignant in the way, for me, they reached back to individuals who worked with those pigments going back as far as cave paintings. Was there an intention to touch on those past lives?

Thank you for this perception, yes absolutely, it's impossible for me not to be moved when each of the 6 era's of colours designated in a Winsor and Newton Colour Chart - Cave, Egyptian, Greek, Italian, c18/19th and c20th - resonate so eloquently with what those times might have been. I look at the basic 4 colour palette in the 'Cave' group - Chalk, Yellow Earth, Red Earth and Carbon Black - and immediately I'm connected with colour derived from, and lives centred around, earth and fire. The Greek palette of White Lead, Massicot, Verdigris, Vermilion, Red Lead, all of them poisonous and I'm thinking of poisonings and Greek Tragedy from Euripides' Medea sending a dress and coronet laced with poison that kills Glauce for whom Jason had left her, to the commonly used white lead make up that slowly poisoned or disfigured those who used it ...and there are histories and stories to be found in all of the 53 colours used in this group of works that connect us with our pasts.

As a painter working at that time towards the end of the c20th my overriding impulse in relation to these colour charts was to work with the monochrome that came so shockingly at the start of c20th and with a challenge thrown down by Rodchenko's declaration on exhibiting the three paintings 'Monochrome Pure Red' 'Monochrome Pure Blue' 'Monochrome Pure Yellow' "I reduced Painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvasses: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: It's all over". It was irresistible not to follow my impulse and say maybe not. I have found it one of the richest strands that I continue to work with concurrently with the 'Colour and Metal Paintings' and the 'Landscape Paintings'.

4) There is scientific evidence that no two people see the same colour in the same way. I'm not sure if I understand how this is established. But do you account for this in any way in your research into colour or do you feel that it is irrelevant?

I am aware of this idea and I don't understand either how it can be demonstrated, or communicated with the narrow range of language we have for naming colour with any specificity. I don't think it's irrelevant, or uninteresting, but it's not anything that finds its way into my work, but the relationship of visual and verbal language does. What affects me is that we respond to colours viscerally as well as seeing and naming them differently according to our experience.

And in painting this includes a sense of colours being associated with place, having a history, including their material history and a history in painting.

5) I am fascinated by colour. You talk about discovering ‘new’ colours when you travel to different places. To what extent are these ‘new’ for example I have had a long-standing love affair with Naples Yellow - the first colour I returned to after a prolonged period of working entirely in monochrome. What is the connection between your San Remy Yellow and Naples Yellow?

When I find an eponymously named paint that is new to me it is generally the naming that is new, the pigment may be the same as a familiar colour. For example Berlin Blue, Paris Blue, Prussian Blue are all essentially the same pigment (PB27) and Antwerp Blue is a pale version of this pigment. I’ve made ‘Landscape Paintings’ using three of these colours collecting earths in each country according to a specific extent landscape painting. If you see them together the blues are virtually the same but it is the oil paint I have made from these earths that are specific and distinct from each other, each locating the named colour with its actual landscape.

On a visit to Nice a few years ago I went to Charvin Paints and whilst I was talking with a descendant of the Charvin family I spotted a colour called ‘San Remy Yellow’. Immediately through its high pitched, acidic yellow I thought of and could picture the paintings Van Gogh made during his self admitted stay at Saint-Paul asylum in San-Remy and in that specific yellow the almost blindingly, pellucid light of ‘Wheatfields with Reaper at Sunrise’ 1889, now in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

I don’t think there is a pigment connection between the colour, San Remy Yellow, (possibly an admixture of Cadmium Yellow and Chrome Oxide Green) and Naples Yellow (a lead antimonate). For me Naples Yellow was one of a group of non generic colours that I first became aware of as a child/teenager along with colours like Burnt Siena and Raw Umber and these, like the reproductions of paintings I saw in my school classroom, filled my head with images of places that I had no first hand knowledge of but felt a longing, a romantic draw towards. And that draw, those connections, remain persistent and continuing.