



Many of my earliest memories are encountering colour with my parents, both practicing artists, and learning to know them as forces, personas with emotions and powers all their own. At three years old, I remember standing on a black paved driveway with my mother standing adult-tall above me. We were both looking up into a canopy of spring green maple leaves, the sun gleaming through them. I asked, “What colour is that?” and she said, “**Chartreuse.**” I stood feeling full of the gleaming gold colour, smelling the spring green scent of evaporating rain from pavement and leaves. I wanted to know the colour and there, sitting at the base of the tree, I ate the sprouts of budding spring maple and knew the taste of green.

GATHERING COLOUR

written by
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I LEARNED HOW TO COLLECT

pigment with my father in the La Cloche mountain range close to home. He taught me how our ancestors made paint to make “mizzins” designs on rockface with hematite to share their histories, proud moments, and cautions. Now in my adult life I have returned to this practice with children of my own, experiencing making paint and colour with them. I have given myself the authority of my experience, and as a paintmaker I have decided to name all my colours in my own language. The act of paintmaking has continued to be a powerful shamanic act for myself as I learned it from my father, and now as I share it with other artists. Giving names to the colours is claiming an experience of the world, saying that it is not just the purview of European colour men and that tradition but also my own, which includes them and encompasses more, giving back to all creative people an experience of colour that grounds them in this land and all the stories it holds.

Reading lately various authors and compendiums of colour, histories, and names, I recall my experience of meeting colours. My early childhood home was an enveloping world of colours and the feelings of them. The backyard had a white picket fence with one board loose. Slipping it to the side and crawling through the soil, I came into a tented canopy under a peony bed in the neighbour’s yard. Laying there flat on my back looking up at a ceiling of red/vivid/pink *giiniande* rose-coloured peony blossoms backlit by the sun, a sky glowing this fervent colour, the smell of the flowers in the sun, the air dark and not moving, filled with the scent of garden and black earth.

Heading inside, my parents had an etching studio in the dining room, and a painting studio in the living room. The piney smell of turpentine and linseed oil. Even the Windsor and Newton silver watercolour pans my mother used in her sketchbook had a pleasant and distinctive scent. Some of these I recognise now on my journey exploring colours. A mix of



gum Arabic honey and tea tree oil runs fragrant like the smell of cut rose stems, things you think you don’t know the smell of—but you do! Limestone and green shales sprayed with clean-up water and the room is full of summer rainstorm. Wet country dirt roads, droplets of rain on dust.

Each of these vivid encounters had eventual introductions, like feeling physical attraction to a beautiful stranger, or admiration of a powerful figure, and then enquiring their name, polite and questioning. Foreign and romantic Rose Dore. Scientific and stern Caput Mortuum Violet, Mars Violet, Titanium White, Chartreuse Alizarin Crimson, Rose Madder Genuine, New Gamboge, Aureolin, and the most serious of the bunch, Van Dyke Brown. Colours that remember places: Naples Yellow, Prussian Blue, French Ultramarine. Colours raw, burnt, lake,¹ all precious, like their namesakes. Gold, silver, pearl. Others painfully fugitive,² as not all colours can cross the veil of time and continue to convey the vitality once held pressed and static.

Driving around on family trips as a homeschool kid, I was in the back of our turquoise station wagon, rattling along from Manitoulin Island and my father’s ancestral home, to Brooklyn to see the Statue of Liberty and my grandfather, on down to the “Gateway to the West” St. Louis, on along through Missouri and its red, red earth, stopping to fill tiny jars and bags, empty yoo-hoo bottles. Crossing the Texas Panhandle and finding fossils at Animas Creek in New Mexico. We finally arrived at the pueblos of the Southwest. My father traded three bear skins, tobacco, and hominy corn for the elusive black paintstone with Dewy and Juanita Healy at First Mesa in Hopi. Eventually, when the station wagon would go no more in the sweat of summer, we had to leave it behind. I stood on the other side of the road with my mother as my dad rushed across the traffic to stand at the turquoise hip of the car and, pulling a file from his art bag, remove a sampling of the turquoise paint.



The value of colour to artists, a physical static substance that can express emotion.

In my explorations I have found deeper and deeper aspects of these long-admired substances. As I began to obtain larger and larger quantities of pigments, I reached deep into this lifelong love affair, and crossed some sort of invisible line. As an indigenous woman, who does make paint from nearby sources of colour, I also make paint from pigments not native to this land, and there is always a pause after I state that as a fact, as if people wish they could unhear it, and stay in their imaginings that I have found lost caverns of ultramarine and neons under my island home. Through my own lens of experience, I feel no awkward tension. I approach making and naming and using paint as an indigenous woman, a mother, a daughter, a lover of Walt Whitman, a painter, human, all these things. As I drive around in the summer with my boys, and a car with rock hammers and buckets, we jump out at rockcuts, explore gravel pits and the edges of construction. I am happy in a silly joyful way. There are sometimes strawberries on the sides of hills, they love the red clay gullies over glacial limestone flats. And I remember my Dad wearing a black cowboy hat with his ever-present art bag slung over one shoulder, brushes and files peeking out of the top. That was how I learned what a pigment was, five years old on a rockcut in the La Cloche mountains, late in July picking blueberries and looking for hematite. The white quartz sheer rockface looming brilliant. He found a small rock in a crevice and knocked it free. He held my hand, drew his file and gently a thin dusting of red appeared. He rubbed it into my palm and told me: "Try to wash it off, it'll stick. That's hematite, the marks from other rocks will just wash away." ■



- 1 This term is derived from lac, "A dark red resinous substance produced as a protective coating by certain scale insects, esp. *Kerria lacca*...Lac was used originally in medicinal preparations and as a dye, pigment, and varnish" (lac, n.1, OED). Changing from *lac* to *lake* over time, the word referred to various red paints or pigments. Eventually, it came to mean "a pigment of any colour made by combining an organic colouring substance with a metallic oxide, hydroxide, or salt" (*ibid*).
- 2 A fugitive colour is "a pigment that, when exposed to certain environmental conditions such as sunlight, humidity, temperature or even pollution, is less permanent. Over time the color can change, lighten, darken or even almost disappear" (O'Connor, Birgit. "What is Fugitive Color?" Artistsnetwork.com).