

Cosmic Colours

Painter and paint-maker **Barbara Diethelm** shares her very personal discovery of the deeper meanings of colour

Colour has been an integral part of my life ever since childhood. In 1963, shortly after I was born, my father founded his own company and started to manufacture artist paints, pioneering water-based artist colours in continental Europe.

Lascaux was a family company; my parents had very little means but lots of enthusiasm. Like an alchemist, in the depths of the cellar of our home, my father mixed ingredients and stirred them in large pots, turning them into beautiful and luminous colours. I remember the joy of helping to label the aluminium tubes and carefully putting them in a cardboard box.

As a child I painted and drew a lot. My closest friend was my cat, so naturally I painted her quite often. The drawings and paintings I made at school were 'pale and plain' compared to the more expressive ones I made at home. This was because the watercolours we used at school were of inferior quality; and so I understood that the quality of paints is crucial for the facilitating of expression. I also gained a sensibility for colour and an appreciation for the quality of material.

Every so often my father took me on his visits to a painter's studio, which I found inspiring – a rich world of senses: colours, imagery, paintings, books and music. Raised in a working-class family, my father was a craftsman – a house and decoration painter – until his artist friends motivated him to develop and produce artist colours. In this way he eventually came to painting and drawing.

When I was 20 I accepted the invitation of an art restorer to work as a practical trainee with her for four

months, and I travelled to the USA. While I was there I decided to enter art school. My father wasn't very keen on this, knowing how hard the life of an artist can be, but I listened to my inner voice and chose to follow this path.

In one of my first art-school classes, the teacher asked us to draw the energies of the chair – "which is what the chair is", he said, prompting us to read the book *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra. The book was a revelation to me: there it was, the bridging and the interconnectedness of things, which confirmed all my own beliefs and experiences.

The interdisciplinary approach of the art school I attended in San Antonio, Texas was inspiring and invigorating. It was a quantum leap from the fragmented education system I had experienced in Swiss high school. In art classes the focus was on process and dialogue: the teachers facilitated passionate discussions about modern physics, Jungian psychology, literature and philosophy, and their relation to art. We learned dialectic debate as well as observation. I became immersed in the landscape of the south-west of the US and in the history of the Indigenous peoples, the North American Indians. Their holistic view of life, their iconography and their spirituality had a great impact on me.

In art school I realised that my path should not be dictated or directed by the laws of the art world (i.e. the market). I wanted to follow my own rhythms, obliged only to my own inner voice. I expanded my studies to the humanities and social sciences, including studies in management, and eventually I decided not only to join my father in the company but, after his death, to continue it.

What I initially perceived to be two separate professions – painting, and heading a company manufacturing artist paints – have in the past few years become organically interwoven with colour and my interest in its holistic properties.

For me painting is a way of thinking; art is about relationships, revealing interrelations. Art has the power to sensitise perception, and a central function of art has always been to convey spiritual values. Continuing my father's credo to produce high-quality material for professional artists and paint users, I felt the need to include the more subtle levels; to instil the spiritual dimension into this world of business. Art and business can and should complement one another. Art is one of the few areas that does not orient itself to rational scientific thinking. In art, 'meaning' is considered, and interrelated and intuitive thinking is explored.

When I returned from the US, where I had lived for eight years, I met the painter Werner Schmidt, who later became my husband. This relationship was a founding pillar of my rainbow bridge. Shaped by our love – for each another and also for the sacred and beauty in art and in everyday life – it laid the foundation for our artistic and spiritual growth as well as creating a life of 'artful living' together. Our hearts' desire to see human, animal, Nature and the cosmos in balance again led to the setting up of the Lascaux Foundation.

What has become my major concern in painting over the years has become the pattern underlying my life. Whether as artist, entrepreneur or gardener my aim is to connect the mental and spiritual with the material and practical. My work is the alchemy of colours: as a paint manufacturer I am in daily dialogue with the material properties of colour and their aesthetic aspects, and also their invisible dimension, with which art is ultimately concerned.


I believe that matter, be it our bodies or the materials we use to create art, is a vessel for the spiritual. To receive and integrate the spiritual a consciousness has to develop. Craftsmanship alone is not

enough. The disposition for art, for the visionary, for the truly creative is a mental-spiritual one. Simplicity, humility, endurance and patience are needed to develop that. And what seems effortless is the harvest of long and arduous work.

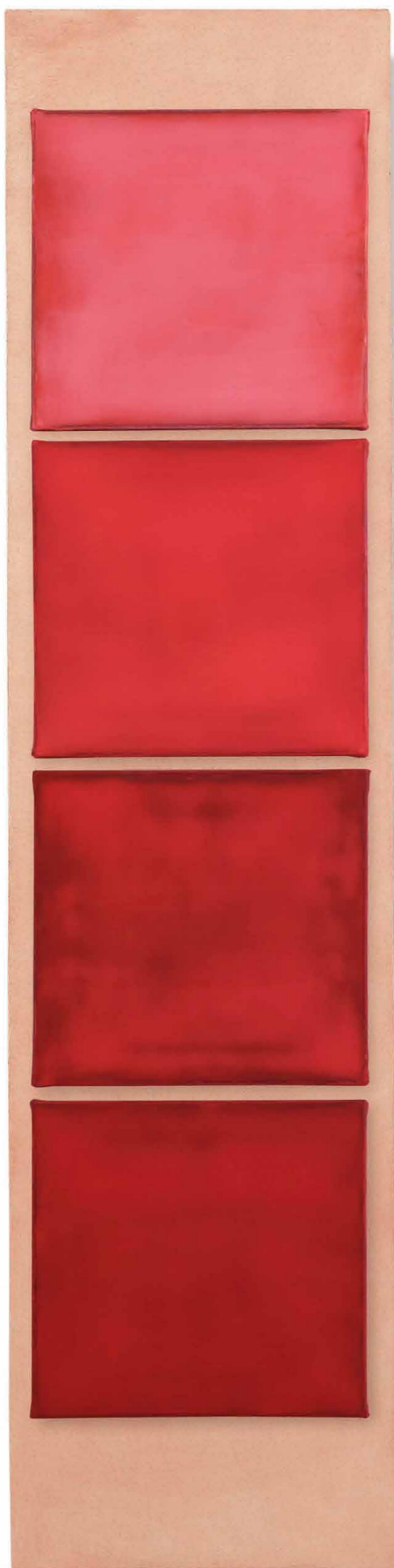
Light is the mother of all colours. From the unity of light the colours unfold in their diversity. This so-called visible spectrum is small compared to the entire spectrum of rays. It is perceived only when light encounters matter: a body, a star, a planet or a prism. Through this breaking of the light, colours appear, in their different wavelengths, from blue-violet to red-magenta. Colours are therefore simply waves of energy transmitting information.

I have been privileged to be able to paint with wonderful paints from early on and have always been intrigued by the mixing and blending of colours, but the limitation of systems based upon the intermixing of the traditional three primary colours taught from primary to art school everywhere always bothered me because it leads to very limited and imprecise results. What is explained in theory doesn't work in practice. For instance, mixing the primaries should yield black, yet it produces brown.

This led me to ask why there can't be a simple and clear colour-mixing system that transcends these limitations and bridges the concerns of art and science.

So in 1995 I began to research the development of an expanded colour system based on five primary colours, which works as a more precise mixing system. The purity of the colours and their balanced frequencies allow an effortless means of mixing an unlimited range of harmonious, lively and differentiated nuances. The new system, which I named Sirius Primary System (Sirius being the brightest star in the winter), demonstrates that every material colour inherits the metaphysical dimension of its cosmic origin. 

Barbara Diethelm (www.barbaradiethelm.com) will lead a workshop on Cosmic Colours at the Tagore Festival in May. For further information visit www.tagorefestival.com



Epithets of Sekhmet

Images: Barbara Diethelm