



ABBOTSLEIGH



**SIoux GARSIDE**

# **SENSE OF COLOUR**

**RACHEL M SCOTT**

**5 OCTOBER – 2 NOVEMBER 2024**

Gallery hours Tues to Sat 10 am-5 pm | Gate 7, 1666 Pacific Highway, Wahroonga | 02 9473 7878  
gcsgallery@abbotsleigh.nsw.edu.au | www.gcsgallery.com.au | An Anglican Pre K-12 Day and Boarding School for Girls

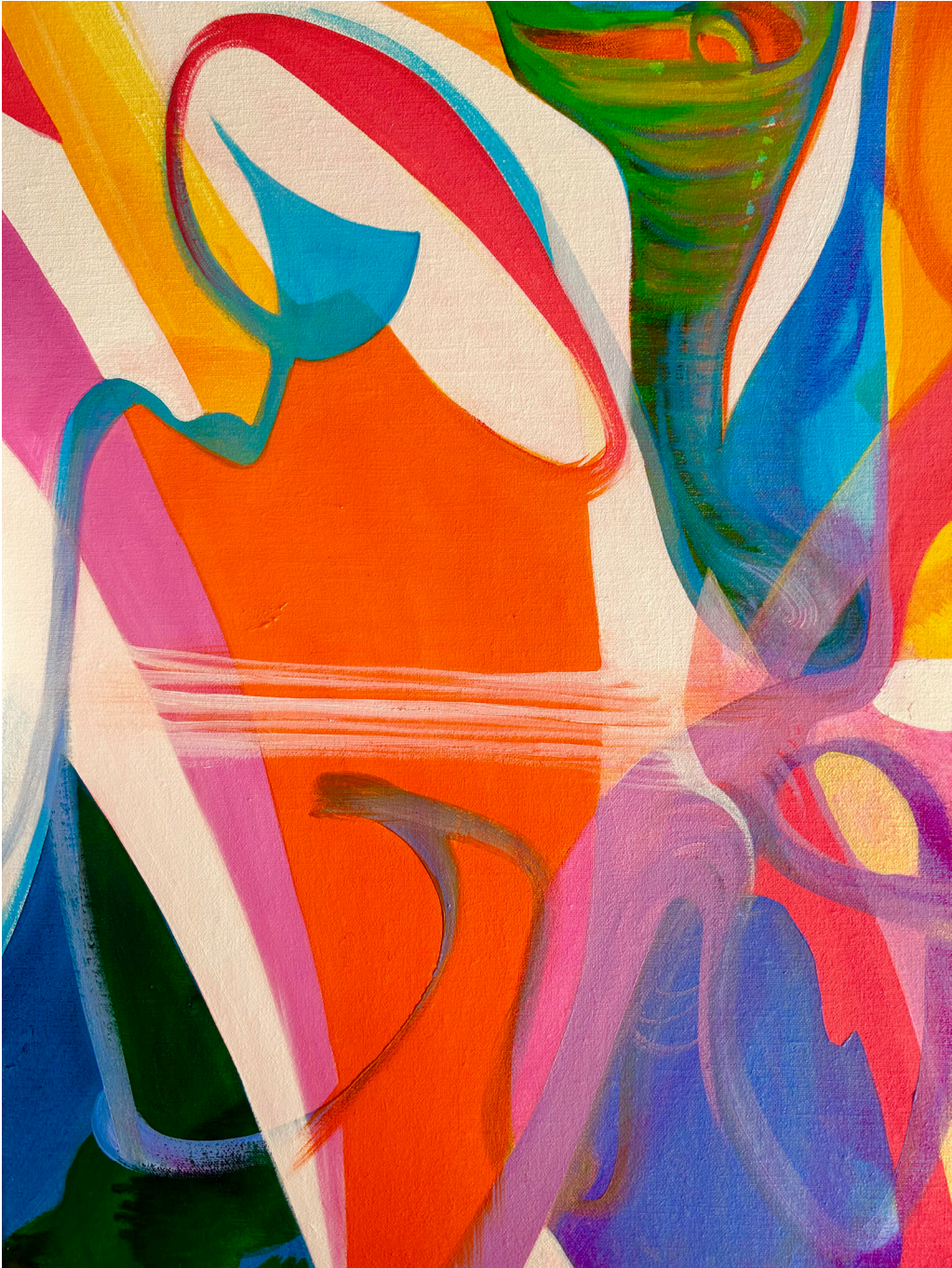
The Grace Crossington Smith Gallery acknowledges the Dharug People as the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which the gallery rests.  
We acknowledge and pay respect to elders, past and present.



Crossing paths, 2024, acrylic on board

**SIoux GARSIDE**

RACHEL M SCOTT



Untitled, 2024, oil on linen

## Black and Blue

Pamela Hansford

What immediately comes to mind when I think of colour is Yves Klein's invention – *International Klein Blue*. It's blue with an open throttle – the rich quality and intensity of Ultramarine held in the eternal embrace of a matte resin binder. A close encounter with one of the artist's IKB paintings creates a unique experience. His monochrome canvas transforms our everyday experience of blue – the colour we perceive in the infinite space of the sky, and the limitless depths of the sea, into the more prosaic frontiers of surface and mass. The boundary of Klein's painting grips its blue in an immaculate hold so intense it unsettles the retina, and creates a mesmerizing effect that attracts but repels on closer inspection.

In fact, an IKB monochrome creates mild nausea. But what lies behind this queasy experience? Is it apprehension born from relative unfamiliarity? After all, the ubiquitous blues of sky and ocean are descriptors of the infinite – of space and depth, but blue seldom adopts actual forms in nature. There are not many blue things. Blue mostly exists in the frail and changeable spaces between objects, and this may be why the object-related intensity of an IKB monochrome causes unease. Some linguists go further. They speculate that intermittent encounters with blue objects in nature is why certain languages developed their vocabularies with limited use of the word 'blue' – including variable (or no) distinctions between blue and green or, between blue, black, yellow and green.

It's debatable whether identifying such linguistic forms arises from a lack of functional encounters with blue objects. But it most certainly reveals the need for a poetry of blue. Blue is a colour we routinely grade by intangibility, instability, indefinability: the infinity of the sky; the shuddering optical effects of a mirage, or distant mountains; the hidden, murky, depths of oceans. Blue is the colour of meditation, longing, distress, loss: "We love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it." (Goethe) "Blue is the colour of wishes because we know we can't have it." (Robert Frost) Blue is also a perfect analogue for the difficulties the English language has describing all colours. Blacks, whites, reds, yellows, blues and greens are colours we think we know and can readily identify every day. But when it comes to more complex colours such as a 'reddish green' or a 'greenish red' what is missing is the clarity of their constituent components. The result is something specific but difficult to describe, and there are abundant examples where colours elude the precision of language.

Escapee colours are the bread and butter of linguists, opticians, philosophers, poets and artists and the American company Pantone, an iconic brand in the business of making and standardising colour since the late 1950s. Pantone's systems of colour development and colour matching are widely used in advertising, marketing, printing and graphic design. A 2024 press release by the company claims it can identify colours that reflect the spirit of the times. For instance, it depicts something very optimistically called 'peach fuzz' or PMS 13-1023, as the 2024 Pantone colour of the year: "Peach fuzz captures our desire to nurture ourselves and others. . . . It offers a tactile embrace and effortlessly bridges the youthful with the timeless."

Pantone's success (sic) is evident once we look. Beneath an ad for *Huggies Nappy-Pants* (with *new dry technology*) [Koreaboo.com](https://www.koreaboo.com) indexes the official colours for 2022 for 40+ K-Pop artists. The K-Pop bands' use of colour marketing harmonises various trending colours to (supposedly) chime with the zeitgeist. From the strawberry pink of Apink, to the vivid plum and space violet of Astro, the bands' boys and their fans dress in the same hues, which match to both brand and merch for effortless advertising: *Quid pro quo*.

Dark purple (Pantone #622f53), is the colour of a bruise as in the expression '*black and blue*'. But the expression is misleading because there is no black in dark purple, only red, green and blue. Dark purple is a chameleon of colours. Just watch as those big shiners transform before our eyes – from deepest purple-black, to greenish-yellow, with a fantastic psychedelic made when two ends of the spectrum meet: yellows morphing into lemons, apricots and gold-oranges; blues washing between ultramarine and cerulean then becoming lime-green when they meet their neighbours; and at the centre an eruption of crimson metastasising into fleshy pink.

True black (Pantone #0961), is part of the greyscale family which is an affinity of hues that exploit the generative powers of black: light and shadowy dark blacks, wet and dry blacks thick and thin blacks, bleeding and blotted blacks, matte and metallic blacks. In fact, true black is no more or less varied than any other colour and demands all the translation skills of poetry, art and imagination, philosophy, neuroscience, and the childish fear of the dark born from ghost stories to make its mark. But when it comes down to 'Black' do we picture Velasquez, Malevich, Mondrian? Soulages or Leger? Redon, Sesshū, or Reinhardt? Moffat, Martin, or Friedrich? Comme des Garçons, Gothic Horror, Paint it Black or Punk? Take your pick because only one thing is certain, colours are true nomads just as much at home on Goethe's colour wheel and a K-Pop stage.

But it can be a challenge keeping up with colour. It's a long way from the technology of Goethe's colour wheel (1809) to the algorithmic deployment of Pantone's software, pigment formulae and colour names (exactly 200 hundred years later), which are designed to consolidate its copyright. Pantone's commercialisation of colour promotes mutually beneficial deals with other global brands including Apple and Airbnb and limits free use in opensource applications. Meanwhile, my encounter with the confounding matte surface of an International Blue monochrome endorses Klein's artistry because it tells me something new about colour. IKB (a colour never patented by Klein) is not just a new colour; it extends an experience of blue and possible narratives about blue. I have a similar reaction to the works of any of the names on the 'black' list above. And in a modest way the humble 'black and blue' of the bruise can create similar surprise, wonder even, as the virtuoso of the spectrum, purple, finds new ways to discombobulate our senses.

This essay builds on extensive research by James Fox in *The World According to Colour: A Cultural History* (Penguin, 2023); the Pantone company website, and the Pantone entry at [en.Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org).

Pamela Hansford 2024

Hansford is a Sydney based writer and art historian.