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Philippe Starck's Miss Wirt (1982) illuminated by neon at MADD.

IMAGE M. Delanne

DESIGN ARCHITECTURE FASHION | REVIEW

## Complementary Prisms

London and Bordeaux  
29 June 2017

One wonders whether there is something in the water.

in association with

**Ally Capellino**

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Within the space of a day, two European museums have opened major exhibitions exploring colour and its relationship to design. *Breathing Colour*, Hella Jongerius's show at London's Design Museum, is predominantly research-based in focus: an exercise in looking at "how colour behaves, and how it is affected by factors such as shape, texture and light." Meanwhile in Bordeaux, *Oh, couleurs! Design through the lens of colour* at the city's Musée des arts décoratifs (MADD), offers an overview of the field: "Everything around us has color. We see the world adorned with color." If *Breathing Colour* represents one practitioner's deep dive into their chosen field, *Oh, couleurs!* is an encyclopaedic gallop through that field and surrounding environs.

Of the two, it is *Breathing Colour* that possesses the more immediately apparent curatorial position. Jongerius has built a career around her sophisticated work with colour for brands such as Vitra and Maharam, but *Breathing Colour* is her magnum opus on the topic. For a practitioner celebrated for the way in which she has prioritised colour, however, there is a prima facie surprise that Jongerius's predominant message in *Breathing Colour* is to encourage a reading of colour as being essentially relational. Colour, Jongerius argues, cannot be meaningfully divided from the form upon which it is applied, the light by which it is seen, and the method of its production. In *Breathing Colour*, colour is not king, because no meaningful separation can be made between it and its subjects. The way in which the exhibition then unfurls is an effort to unpack the implications of this position.

Central to the show is a series of colour catchers, a collection of large, faceted objects that are created from folded cardboard and which approximately gesture towards everyday objects in their form – vases, jugs, containers and bowls. The complexity of the catchers' construction allows for gradations of their base colours across their facets, creating panels of subtly variegated colour, while additional difference is delivered by the tight clustering of the coloured panel platforms on which the catchers are exhibited – the appearance of each form is as much defined by its relation to its neighbour and surroundings as to any property intrinsic to itself.

Lighting is the next complicating factor to be introduced. The exhibition is curated around three time periods – 'Morning', 'Noon' and 'Evening' – and Jongerius makes hay with the variation in perception of a colour that occurs naturally over the course of a day. The Woven Movie is a series of 10 textiles that each depict a colour catcher at a different time from 7am through to 7.30pm. Each panel differs in its construction, material choice and overall aesthetic – from textiles that capture the precision and resolution of digital renders at 9.00am and 2.45pm, through to the chaotic thicket that is 7.30pm, where the colour catcher is swaddled in a mess of dangling shadows represented by loose black yarns. Throughout the exhibition, Jongerius' textile work is staggeringly beautiful.



*Breathing Colour*, however, is not a purely theoretical or aesthetic proposition: Jongerius has an axe to grind and her focus on the relational quality of colour is a targeted rebuke towards industry. In their desire to produce economically viable colours that are stable and uniform, industrial colour systems, Jongerius argues, have encouraged a standardisation and deadening of colour. An industrially produced dark red is created by the addition of black, Jongerius notes, whereas an artisan would produce this effect with the addition of a green pigment. The former route requires less pigment and the results are more easily managed by mass production, but it comes at the cost of the richness engendered by the latter. *Breathing Colour* allies itself firmly with the latter route, standing as an exultation of colour's changeability. Even within the exhibition's title, Jongerius has encoded the suggestion that colour is something living and shivering. Tremulousness ought to be prized within industrial design.

*Oh, couleurs!* sympathises with this position, although it takes a broader sweep of the field than Jongerius's taut message. Curated by MADD's director Constance Rubini, the exhibition is unabashed in the sheer number of topics within colour that it approaches. The exhibition is loosely structured around two core rooms. One is a celebration of pigmentation curated by exhibition designer Pierre Charpin; the other an analysis of iridescence, which is defined as representing colours generated by the interaction between light waves and the structure of a material. Springing off from these rooms – and housed within the prison cells of the former jail into which MADD has recently expanded – are a series of micro-exhibitions that each take in one aspect of colour for consideration. Among these rooms are 'Color and symbolic power', an assemblage of national flags; 'Color and chronology', a reading of changing social mores told through the colour palette of seven decades of Tupperware; 'Color and space', a history of Le Corbusier's Pessac housing estate in Bordeaux's suburbs; and 'Color and industry', the story of how the textile designer Paule Marrot developed an industrial colour palette for Renault in the 1950s and 60s.

In spite of the broadness of its subject, *Oh, couleurs!* does not pretend to be comprehensive. If Jongerius's exhibition is an examination and celebration of the vagaries of colour from a technical design perspective, Rubini's ambition is to highlight the vagaries of even attempting to pin down colour to any single discussion or definition: dependent on context, colour may be political, symbolic, industrial, geographic or historical. Even within the exhibition's constituent sections, there is considerable variation. The display of iridescent objects, for instance, has room for gallery design such as Dan Friedman and Alessandro Mendini's large oxidised titanium Double cabinet Hip-Hop modernism; commercial products like Nike's Air Force One shoes in iridescent pearl; a series of Paco Rabanne dresses and jumpsuits executed in mother-of-pearl-esque plastic; a selection of taxidermy birds and beetles; as well as a selection of broken glass excavated from sites around Bordeaux.

It is Charpin's section of the exhibition, subtitled 'Todo es de color', that highlights the differences and similarities between *Oh, couleurs!* and *Breathing Colour* most clearly, however. Whereas Jongerius excels in drawing out the beauty of colour through nuance and careful selection of tones and pigments, Charpin's curation revels in comparative naivety. 'Todo es de color' is unashamedly pop and brassy, with walls of deep pillar box red, fluorescent yellow, blue and pink against which Charpin has displayed a series of design stalwarts such as Ettore Sottsass's valentine typewriter, Philippe Starck's Miss Wirt chair and Mendini's Poltrona di Proust armchair.

What is pleasing, however, are the sociologically colour-coded objects that Charpin has placed alongside these design works. A green pharmacy cross radiates soft, medicinally-inflected light across all that surrounds it; a prison jumpsuit comes layered with sociopolitical connotations that are interwoven with its lurid orange fabric; and the multi-speckled Proust armchair is paired with a series of hardhats executed in the constituent block colours of the chair, each of which is suggestive of a different profession. The colours that Charpin has worked with in 'Todo es de color' are not in themselves complex, but his exhibit shows how they have nevertheless been woven into complex – and immediately recognisable – social symbols.

In this respect, *Breathing Colour* and *Oh, couleurs!* make fine companion pieces. While the focuses and curatorial strategies of the two exhibitions differ, both encourage the visitor to take colour seriously, and argue for the complexity with which colour has and might in future be deployed. Jongerius's masterful analysis of the ways in which richer, more ambitious colours might be developed by industry finds a social and historical background in Rubini's breakdown of some of the ways in which colour has hitherto been treated. Both exhibitions are essentially in agreement: a colour is rarely simple.

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Words Oli Stratford.

*Breathing Colour* runs at the Design Museum, London, until 24 September 2017.

*Oh, couleurs! Design through the lens of colour* runs at MADD, Bordeaux, until 5 September 2017.

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