

The search for the PERFECT BLUE

It was already the colour of heaven, of peace, of melancholy... But the artist Yves Klein yearned for a blue that was “absolute” – and 50 years ago he found it, a dazzling ultramarine that changed art forever. *Charles Darwin* meets the mixer who sourced Klein’s magic ingredients; and, overleaf, *Phil Johnson* gets kind of blue and metaphysical, from Kandinsky to Jarman

Though it was half-a-century ago, it’s as clear to Edouard Adam as day, “Here, at that time, there were *tiroirs* full of different pigments,” says M. Adam, waving to a patch of wall and mining a cabinet with his hands. “I took one of them out like this and, like this, I said ‘Follow me.’” I pad after him, the old man carrying his spectral drawer, through to the storeroom of a Paris shop. “There was no ceiling here then,” he says. “Just daylight through a glass roof, north light – Jérôme, give me some *bleu de Prusse*, please – and I said to him: ‘You have only two choices. It’s either this’” – Adam throws the Prussian Blue onto a sheet of white paper – “or this.” He empties the contents of the second jar onto the table and we stand back, staring at the two small mounds of powder. “It’s as I had said to him on the way back from La Coupole: that’s your choice, between these two. You have to decide, Yves.”

If a new show at the Barbican Art Gallery is right, then I’ve just seen, re-enacted in this close room, one of the seminal moments of modern art. The contents of Adam’s second jar is a powdered pigment known in French as *bleu d’outremer*, in English as ultramarine; the man he showed it to was Yves Klein. The outcome of this moment was a new colour – International Klein Blue, IKB – and the outcome of that colour was a way of thinking that has shaped the art of everyone since, from Andy Warhol to Anish Kapoor, from Joseph Beuys to William Eggleston. Maybe.

Let’s consider what we’ve just seen. It’s 1955. Klein, a Rosicrucian, fourth-dan judo expert and budding artist from Nice, is 26 or 27; Adam, a third generation *marchand de couleur*, or colour-man, is three years younger. His grandfather, Gaston Adam, set up shop here at 11 boulevard Edgar Quinet in 1898. Albert, the oldest of Gaston’s five boys, took over the business in the 1920s and Edouard, his son, born above the shop, followed in the early 1950s. Chez Adam pre-empted the avant-garde’s debouch south from Montmartre into Montparnasse before the Great War. Picasso, who moved in around the corner on

the rue Vaugirard, became a customer in 1912, and the family has served every artist who is any artist since: Braque, Derain, Fernand Léger, Max Ernst, Chagall, Dalí, Vlaminck, Francis Bacon (“a shy man, fragile”), Robert Motherwell.

Adam wears the trademark black turtle-neck of 1950s Montparnasse, still lives over the shop where he was born. What he loves more than anything is – a glorious word – to *tripatouiller*: to tinker, to meddle. Artists have ideas, he makes them work. Calder’s mobiles are crazing in the sun? Adam will run him up a little *vernis* that sorts the problem out. Dubuffet can’t get a sticky enough impasto? Edouard *tripatouilles* with fish-oil and invents a medium called Pierrolin that allows the old man to be as *informel* as he likes. But it is Klein who intrigues him, who becomes his friend. What first draws the young artist to Adam’s attention is his unusual consumption of sheepskin rollers; when Edouard asks Yves about it, it turns out that Klein, typically, can’t be bothered to wash them and throws them away once he’s used them. One day, strolling back again from La Coupole, the pair stop in front of the window chez Adam to look at a display of sponges Edouard has had installed there. In a fit of generosity, he offers Yves his pick; Yves, also typically, chooses the biggest, a giant of the *Porifera* world. A few weeks later, he drops by the shop to tell Adam that he’s sold it in London, dyed, for £120.

This is to run ahead, though. What has happened in the meantime is that Yves has told Edouard of his search for the perfect blue – he’d already experimented with pink and orange – and Edouard has faced Yves with a choice: *bleu de Prusse* or *bleu d’outremer*. There was, says Adam, no contest, and you can see why. Prussian Blue is sombre, good for shadows. Even in this windowless room, ultramarine glows.

But there are problems. When the powdered pigment is mixed with the traditional binder, rabbit glue – Adam mimes bunny-ears – the light goes out of its eyes. Klein is mortified: “Each grain of colour seemed to have been individually killed,” he wrote later. “The magic colour had disappeared.” And ➤



Remix artist: Edouard Adam, above, the ‘marchand de couleur’ who showed Klein, main, the pigment ‘bleu d’outremer’

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