

Poster girls: Yves Klein's 1960 performance piece, involving naked models and lashings of International Klein Blue



so his *marchand de couleur* set about tinkering, dabbling with this and that until, meeting a chemist from Rhône-Poulenc, he finds a polyvinyl acetate resin called Rhodopas M, used for waterproofing maps. Mixed with ultramarine, Rhodopas allows the powdered blue to retain its granular look, its matt depth. In 1960, Klein patents the new pigment under the number 63471 and the name, International Klein Blue.

It is quite possibly the only work of Klein's you'll be able to name, by far the most famous thing he ever did. And, of course, he didn't do it. We can't hold that against him – nobody imagines Grace Kelly ever stitched a Kelly Bag – but it does raise the question of just what Klein's legacy is.

According to the Barbican's new show, "Colour After Klein", it is the broad freeing of individual colours from the vassalage of function. Before Klein, blue had to justify its place in art: delineate the Virgin's robe, light the sky, suggest bucolic peace. After him it could just be, an existential thing, self-answering, or, in Klein's word, "absolute".

This is nonsense on several counts. Malevich had begun working in single colours a decade before Klein was born and artists such as Robert Rauschenberg were painting true monochromes a decade before IKB. Klein's blue – Adam's blue – is lustrous and deep: but it is a finish as much as it is a colour, standard synthetic ultramarine rendered granular and matt. You can bring all kinds of metaphors to it, recall Klein's upbringing under a Mediterranean sky or his amazement at Giotto's frescos in Assisi. But each one makes his blue slightly less pure, marginally more kitsch. As Edouard Adam recalls, Klein's earlier interest in pink reflected his fondness for his *tantine*, Rose. It's an unlikely basis for revolution.

The question, really, is where the stress falls in IKB: is it IKB or IKB? For my money, it's the latter. I very much doubt that Titian called Titian Red Titian Red, although he probably had a better claim to do so than Klein did Klein Blue. But then Titian lived in a time before branding. As with the Kelly Bag, IKB is about fame rather than facture, about the power of labels.

For by 1955 (and certainly by 1960), Klein had turned himself into a commodity. He made pictures by getting naked models – *pincesaux vivants* – to roll on fabric while smeared in IKB: "It took a long, long time to get those girls clean," says Edouard Adam, with a roguish wink. In April 1958, Klein had held the notorious first night of his show, *Le Vide* ("The Void"), which members of France's Republican Guard were hoodwinked into attending in full dress uniform. Guests were fed on a cocktail – mixed, naturally, by La Couplée – made up of gin, Cointreau and a dye called methylene blue. As Klein had hoped, they pissed IKB for a week.

He had decorated the foyer of the theatre at Gelsenkirchen in Germany with a vast frieze of

sponges dipped in International Klein Blue, descendants of the one filched from Adam's shop window. ("Yves drew a square one metre by one metre on the shop floor and filled it with sponges," Adam recalls. "Then he turned to my sponge dealer, a Greek, and he said 'I'll have a hundred of those'. It's the first time art sponges had ever been sold by the square metre.") And he had surrounded himself by what Adam calls "un *cinéma*": a claque of admirers – "hystériques," says Adam – who sat at his table at La Couplée and stoked his ego.

Klein's real bequest to today's art may not, in other words, be the cult of colour so much as the cult of celebrity. There is a straight line to be drawn from his Gelsenkirchen frieze to Tracey Emin's bed, from the blue Adam invented for him to the factory-made vitrines of Damien Hirst. It's the K in IKB that matters.

I like to think of Klein's blue alongside another bespoke colour, the *Braunkreuz* or "Brown-cross", run up for his fellow self-publicist, Joseph Beuys. Where Klein's blue was joyfully synthetic (to the point, as it turned out, of being toxic to breathe), Beuys's brown was made of eco-friendly rust and hare's blood. Where the Frenchman's ultramarine draws the eye, the German's shit-brown appeals to the mind. And where Beuys's brown remained reticently anonymous, IKB was IKB.

What was Klein like? Edouard Adam mulls over the question and says, "A charmer, a seducer. He had those eyes, you know, that innocent smile; but he was ambitious beyond measure. He pushed himself to be the best – took benzedrine at first so that he would win at judo and then, after he'd stopped the judo, he went on taking it, more and more.

"While he was burning it up, he was OK; but afterwards... *hop*." Adam shrugs. "Two weeks before he died, he came to the shop and said, 'I've had a heart attack. The doctor says I've got to start working on a smaller scale.' But it wasn't in his nature." Klein had a second attack in June 1962 and died in front of his wife, pregnant with their first child. He was 34.

I ask Edouard Adam if he wishes he'd had a colour named after him. He thinks about it for a while and says, "I'm not into honours. I know all about art, the materials, the techniques, the history. Sometimes it gets me here" – he touches his head – "sometimes here" – he slaps his chest – "and sometimes here, in the *tripes*. But no work of art has ever been as interesting to me as the man who made it." Then he pauses for a bit and says, "Well, there is this violet – there are violets and violets, of course – but an ethereal kind of violet. You can imagine it coming down from the sky like a pillar, entering through your head and filling up your entire body. It's a magnificent colour, this violet." ◊

'Colour After Klein': Barbican Art Gallery, London EC2 (0845 1207550), to 11 September

Mood indigo: further meditations in blue

"Represented in musical terms, light blue resembles the flute, dark blue the cello, darker still the wonderful sounds of the double bass." So wrote the painter Wassily Kandinsky – a cellist himself – in 1912, by which time an interest in the correspondences between music and colour was in danger of becoming a little old hat. The sciences of *Audition Colorée* (colour-hearing) and Chromotherapy (which noted the calming effect of blue light), the theories of Rudolf Steiner and the Theosophists, and the continued development of various types of colour-organ – in which musical notes were partnered with projections of coloured light, a little like Sixties light shows – had already been reflected in new total art-works by composers such as Scriabin and Schoenberg.

According to Franz Marc, Kandinsky's partner in the art movement *Der Blaue Reiter*, the colour blue signified "the male principle, sharp and spiritual". In antiquity, blue had been the colour of divine light, used to provide the ground in Byzantine mosaics. Later, it became the colour of heaven, attaining a kind of perfection in medieval French stained glass. True blue was the colour of constancy, while by the middle of the 16th century "to look blue" invoked associations with fear, discomfort and anxiety.

But at the time Yves Klein patented International Klein Blue, blue and blueness were also inextricably linked to the musical form of "the blues". In the mid-Fifties albums by Miles Davis (*Blue Haze*, *Blue Moods*), but especially in the trumpeter's Paris recordings for the soundtrack of Louis Malle's film *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* of 1957, the blues no longer denoted a mere series of repeated musical measures defined by bar-length, but an entirely new modernist evocation of mood: the interiorised sense of existential longing whose crepuscular evanescence could colour one's

whole world. It was a feeling also captured in popular vocals of the day: by Frank Sinatra, Chet Baker or Nina Simone singing "Little Girl Blue". You could say that Miles Davis patented his own musical formulation of the colour with *Kind of Blue* in 1959, the greatest jazz album ever made and the model for any number of subsequent pop and jazz attempts to key the emotions of the listener to a colour-field of deep cobalt melancholy. Listen to the track "Blue in Green" for the full ultramarine effect. The Blue Note saxophonist Ike Quebec's album *Blue and Sentimental*; Joni Mitchell's *Blue*; Tim Buckley's *Blue Afternoon* (especially the song "Blue Melody"), are a few of the best examples of what followed.

These days, the legacy of



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VISUAL ART

Something to make a big stink about



Charles Darwent

Gilbert and George

British Pavilion

VENICE

Long, long ago, in the fabled Sixties, Gilbert and George set to work on the project that was to occupy them for the next 40 years; namely, being Gilbert and George. A studiously Un-Dynamic Duo, the pair dressed identically, like fugitives from Magritte: off-the-peg suits, lace-up shoes, narrow ties – the model of dweebness in a day when everyone else was wearing crushed velvet and flares. All too soon, though, the joke wore thin, and suits and ties no longer spelt ordinariness but an unexpected kind of exotica. Gilbert and George then looked other-worldly, which spoils things since the point of their practice was to be laughably of this world, quintessentially banal. By *anno* GG30, the pair had come to seem like parodies of themselves: same-ish in the wrong sort of way, as shallow as the picture-space of their ever-more egregious work.

So the couple's "Ginkgo Pictures", Britain's contribution to this year's Venice Biennale, are frankly an undiluted triumph. The first thing you notice about them is their discovery of depth: a new, ambiguous picture-space made possible by the artists' experiments with computer design. The second is that this depth is matched by a parallel re-discovery with the world – a rediscovery of what Gilbert and George were about in the first place, Jungian shadows of the real.

As you'll probably have read, the recurring motif of this new series is the *Ginkgo biloba* tree, whose name refers to its two-lobed, symmetrical leaf. The appeal of this leaf to artists whose point is their duality and symmetry is easy enough to see, as is that of the second quality for which the ginkgo is famed; its smell of human excrement.

Gilbert and George have always revelled in the flip-side of their own ordinariness, taking the nicknames George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit while still at St Martin's. The two-ness of their art evoked other dualities, human dark and light.

What's been lost in their recent work, though, is the sense of the pair's own place in this two-step. For all their cuntiness and shittiness, Gilbert and George have come to seem remote from the world of their own art: an east-London stew of hooded youth,



homophobia, tikka touts and sexual threat. This is a pair who have regularly had their door kicked in, on whose step neighbours commonly leave turds. So alien from this context have Gilbert and George come to look, though, that their take on it – a kind of erotic rebelliousness – has lately been hard to follow.

Now, in these 25 pictures in the British Pavilion, it's as clear as day again; or as night. One thing picky critics will note is that the boys' fabled grey suits have been made over. In *Cited Gents*, they are printed with photographs of street life in Brick Lane; in *Twelve* they are dyed red and patterned with ginkgo leaves; in *Cowled*, Gilbert and George are wearing – get this – jeans. Their relation to the youths in hoodies who stand next to them – the kind, presumably, who gob through their windows – seems much more vexed than before.

And much more interesting. Put broadly, Gilbert and George have found a new idea of themselves, a new place in their metaphor of the city. Two things that strike you about the "Ginkgo Pictures" are their visual richness and how funny they are. The colours are saturated and masterly – sometimes mustard and grey, sometimes G'n'G red – but it's the patterns that really get you. There are Hebrew and Arabic typefaces, fashions and brand-names (Snapple, Puma, Reebok). But there is also a handling of these things that comes from a culture all of its own; a real place, made up of a thousand other real places – east London.

There's no doubting, too, that the boys belong to this place, maybe run it.

They are lords of misrule, but lords all the same: made ridiculous by computerised symmetry (George's mouth in *Move* is an arse-

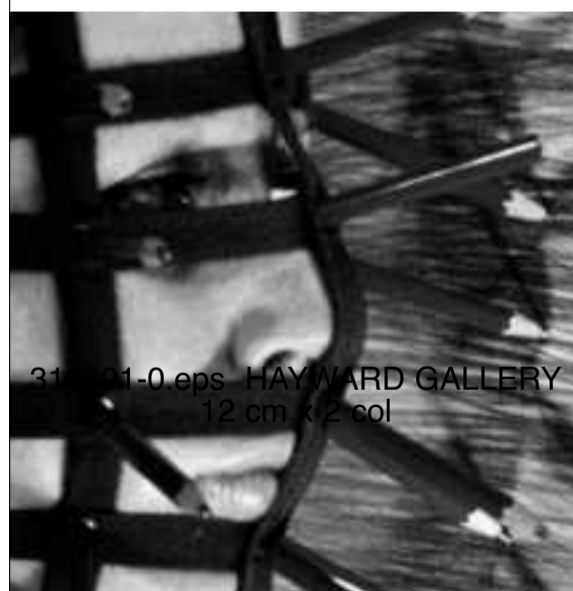
hole), pulling don't-make-me-puke faces or miming fellatio, but all the time triumphant. The feeling you get, looking at the "Ginkgo Pictures", is of those comic demons in Noh theatre; red-eyed, vampiric, funny and scary; utterly in control.

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Their relation to the youths in hoodies is more vexed than before

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REBECCA HORN BODYLANDSCAPES 26 MAY - 29 AUGUST

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