Hella Jongerius’s colourful career
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Kengo Kuma raises the stakes

VIBRANT VISIONS

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Designed for a major retrospective of her work, a new installation by HELLA JONGERIUS is not only 300 COLOURED VASES - it’s also the story of its creator’s career.

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PHOTOS Gerrit Schreurs
In 300 Coloured Vases, all the major themes of your work are present and correct – craft, industry and, of course, colour.
Yes. It's very representative, almost a microcosm. It also summarizes the new monograph about my work, which is arranged by colour, and that's appropriate, as the project crystallized after my publisher asked me to think about doing a new piece. The idea was to make something that could be sold with the special edition of the book. So each of the 300 vases is in an edition of two – one remains in the installation; the other you can buy when you buy the special edition. But I'd wanted to do this project for a long time; the exhibition and the book were the catalysts for it.

So there's a long story behind it?
Going back to 1995, in fact. I made a red-and-white vase, on which I used red vehicle paint. By using a colour associated with the car industry, I wanted to make a point about the role of industrial colour in design today. That was the start of my collaboration with the Royal Tichelaar ceramics factory in Makkum. For this new installation, I've used the 1995 vase form again. It's like a blank canvas.

Then, in 2003, I used RAL colour-chart industrial paints on the same ceramic vases to explore the relationship between industry and craft. By 2007 I was working with Vitra on their colour history. But the more I researched industrial colour, the more I found it lacking – especially when I compared it with the palette used by artists in their paintings.

What's the problem with industrial colour?
Industry defines quality mainly in terms of quantity, we have hugely expanded our colour palettes, but in recipes the pigments are poorly chosen, it's a standardization that kills the quality. Modern colours exist because of their stability – companies don't want to be sued if products fade or run. They focus on binder research, UV resistance, scratch resistance, cost – everything but the aesthetic effect of paint and dyes. For example, to make dark shades industry always uses carbon black, which makes every colour look grey. But an artist knows you can use green to make red darker, and it gives a subtler and more living result. Colours should change with the light, but our modern ones are so flat and dull. That's why I'm interested in finding alternatives to the industrial palette.

How did you find these traditional glazes?
They still use them at Makkum – but only on
‘Colour is material — it transforms itself according to the surface’
Hella Jongerius

things like roof tiles, not porcelain. They’re old oxidation glazes, based on minerals, and they’re irregular and unstable, not qualities that industry likes. I wanted an overview of the possibilities, so they spent nine months mixing glazes for me. Eventually I chose 150 colours from eight different pigment groups.

But the point was to combine them with industrial glazes, to layer the colours over one another to mix them optically. So I selected 150 modern synthetic glazes, too. Then we applied rectangular patches of one traditional and one modern glaze to each vase, always in a different combination. We settled on a series of 300 as being the limit for meaningful variation. Finally, 150 vases got a third layer, consisting of industrial paint, because I wanted to research saturation.

Have you drawn any conclusions from that step of the process — or from anything else? Not yet, because we’re still doing that third layer. But we’re all amazed at the mineral colours — they’re unbelievably rich and irregular. They really melt into the ceramic, while the industrial glazes remain on the surface. And it’s noticeable how the vase changes form because of the colour—colour reacts with shape. The idea is to make a product range for Makkum based on the reaction of colour with form.

You’ve worked on colour with companies like Vitra and Deutsche Bank, and now Camper. What do you think business needs to learn about the subject?
That colour is powerful — it can make or break a product. Colour is the first thing we see; without it, in fact, we see nothing. Colour is material.

It transforms itself according to the surface. The same colour on five different surfaces actually becomes five different colours. Another important lesson: one colour is nothing. It’s the mix that’s important.

Will we see a Hella Jongerius range of colours anytime soon?
I never dreamed I’d make my own colours — but now I am. At the exhibition we’re launching 15 shades of black. These are used on the walls of the show, and people will be able to buy them. I’ve developed them with the Swiss company, KT Color, which produces Le Corbusier’s colours. They’re based on pigments that industry doesn’t find easy to use, and the result is softer, richer, more complex blacks. Because black can be colourful, too.

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