

The Portland Colour Chart

I am an artist and paintings conservator. Much of my work focuses on colour and how this intersects science and art and language.

Through my work as a paintings conservator and my interest in historic and modern pigments I developed an interactive public engagement project called the 'Colour Library' as an empirical experiment for collecting and categorizing colour names. (Figure 1)

This was exhibited at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton, UK, 2010. It is a small box with an exhibition window. Displayed on either side of the window are a selection of household paint swatches from a high street paint manufacturer. A complete spectral range of colours were chosen. Members of the public are invited to choose a colour swatch from the sample selection, and rename it via a small paper document. All colour swatches are British standard colours (BS) with

a printed code in the bottom right corner.

During the exhibition every 3 days I chose a new colour name and painted it in the exhibition window and the person who chose the winning name won a tin of paint with their new name on it. Approximately 600 people took part in it over a three-week period. All the names were catalogued and categorized and put into graph format.

The graphs show all the colours in the Library and how many people chose to name each colour. Generally the most popular choices were blues and greens – perhaps this reflected the impact of the local environment, Brighton is by the sea and the Gallery is just a few hundred metres from the seafront. (Figure 2)

Overall however one red was the most popular swatch chosen for re-naming, BS 6450 a bright red which 37 people chose to name with

Figure 1 – Public engagement project called the 'Colour Library'

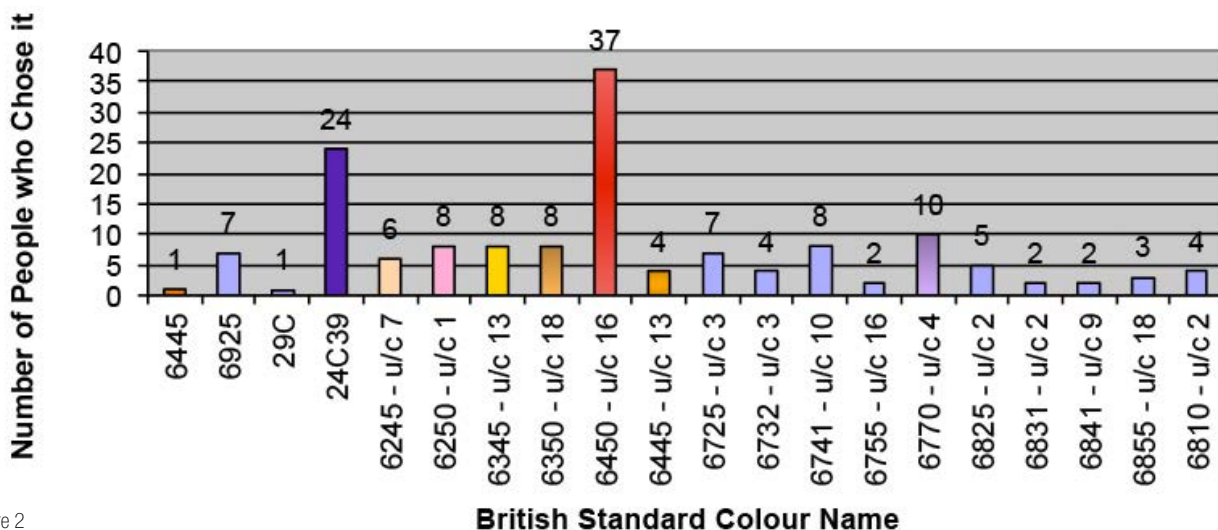
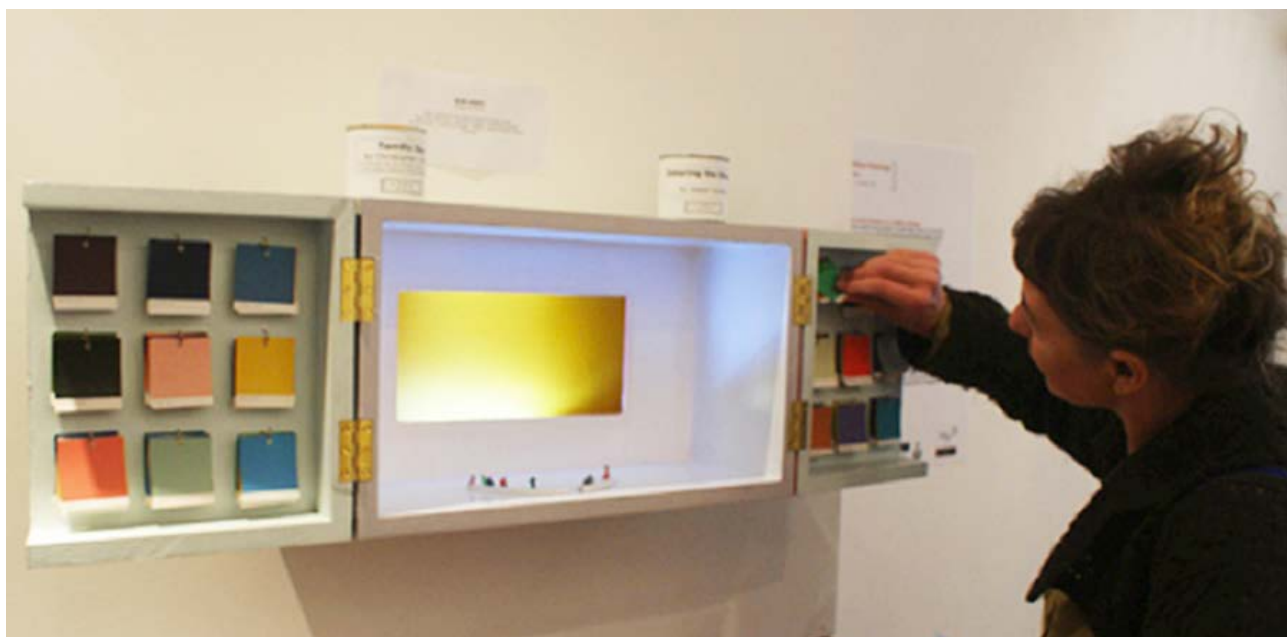


Figure 2

suggestions such as:

'Old Sandals' 'Almudena's Flower' 'Small Wonder', 'Tantalising Pink', 'Peach Beach', 'Red Rosy', 'Dragons blood,' Arizona Sunset, 'Velvet Red', 'St.Jerome's Coat', 'Dead Coral Bloom,' 'Indian Red,' 'Portuguese Soil,' 'Wigan Bricks,' 'Delight,' 'Chilli Geranium,' 'Clowns Trousers,' 'Costa Rica Sunset,' 'Pale Red Crimson,' 'Happiness day,' 'Million Blessings,' 'Angel Delight,' 'Smush,' 'Burnt Pink,' 'Coral,' 'Retinal,' 'Capiscum Orange', 'Orgasmos,' 'Dancing daddies,' 'Wolf Whistle,' 'Skippy Dies,' 'Lady boy banging'.

What became evident was that the results showed that the majority of names expressed by participants were similar in style and structure, corresponding to types of names that modern household paint manufacturers employ in labelling and selling paint to the public.

Here are some Dulux examples *'Honey Drizzle' – 'Mystic Mauve'- 'emerald delight'- 'Golden bark'- 'Grecian spa' , "Caribbean Dawn'*

Farrow and Ball – 'Nancy Blushes', 'Dorset cream, 'Lulworth blue', 'Elephants Breath', 'Smoked Trout'

It made me wonder if this *'consumeristic'* language has permeated our thoughts and ideas on colour and if it has affected our conscious and sub-conscious colour perception, consequently effecting our perception of the world. Do we now assign these *'consumeristic'* names to the natural objects in our world.

It was American linguist - Benjamin Whorf, who suggested that our language determines how we perceive the world.

He said that because of linguistic differences in grammar and usage, speakers of different languages conceptualize and experience the world differently.

I believe that since the time of Whorf's writing in the 1930's, our colour language and vocabulary are now even more complex and varied than ever before. We now have a very sophisticated and elaborate colour language and terminology at our disposal. This is due largely to modern household paint and fashion industries, we as consumers are very accustomed to new and ever increasing and changing colour terminology from clothing to paint to Pantones.

In 2012 I had the opportunity to continue my investigations. Commissioned by B side festival as part of the sailing Olympics in Dorset. *'The Portland colour chart'* was created for this event. Based on the colour Library this time I was interested to see if the public, when asked,

would use colour names more specific to a place or area, rather than general *'paint industry'* colour terminology that was apparent in the original colour library. (Figure 3)

The *'Isle'* of Portland was a perfect location to undertake this project. The area has both rural and built up elements. It has a long and interesting history with many historic place names and with a small population of only about 12,000 . It has been relatively isolated for years. The first road to it was built between the wars, connecting to the mainland by one road only. The population has little migration/immigration and there is a distinct *'separateness'* and pride in the local culture from residents. Very different from the busy cosmopolitan city of Brighton.

A Colour Chart *'base camp'* was set up at a site that marks the entrance and exit of Portland in Fortuneswell. 35 colours were chosen that were felt to represent the broad range of colours found on Portland. Participants were invited to choose three colour swatches from this set of 35 colours. They were allowed to take them away walk around the Isle (you can walk it in half a day). They were encouraged to colour match

Figure 3 – 'Portland colour chart'



them to the Portland landscape, and afterwards, come back to the colour chart 'base camp'. The users were asked to give names to the colours that specifically related to Portland.

Over a period 2 weeks 321 participants took part. Results were documented in a large book. The results were counted and separated into specific and non-specific names. Any name relating directly to Portland was counted as specific; otherwise the names were categorized as non-specific.

Results showed that out of a total 321 names received 118 were non-specific and 203 were specific. Which still shows about a third of people using non-specific names. The majority of these were again in the style of the paint industry names.

Examples for non-specific names:

'Turning Tide', 'Deep Blue Dive', 'Stormy Sea', 'Navy Blue', 'Beach Hut Blue',

Examples of specific names:

'Deadmans Storm', 'The Race', 'Viper's Burgloss', 'Portland Blue.'

A chart was compiled of the specific names and exhibited around Portland and online at www.portlandcolourchart.co.uk (Figure 4)

In 2014 a commission from the Maison de culture in Amiens allowed for further colour language investigations, this time in French. 'Jardins Chromatiques' comprises of two sculptures made of solid oak and vitreous enamel colour

swatches. As with the Portland colour chart, colours were matched and chosen to represent the area. (The hortillonnages or 'floating gardens' is a 300 hectare area on the river Somme next to the city of Amiens. The gardens have been cultivated since Roman times and comprise of small plots of land separated by canals, access is by small boat only.

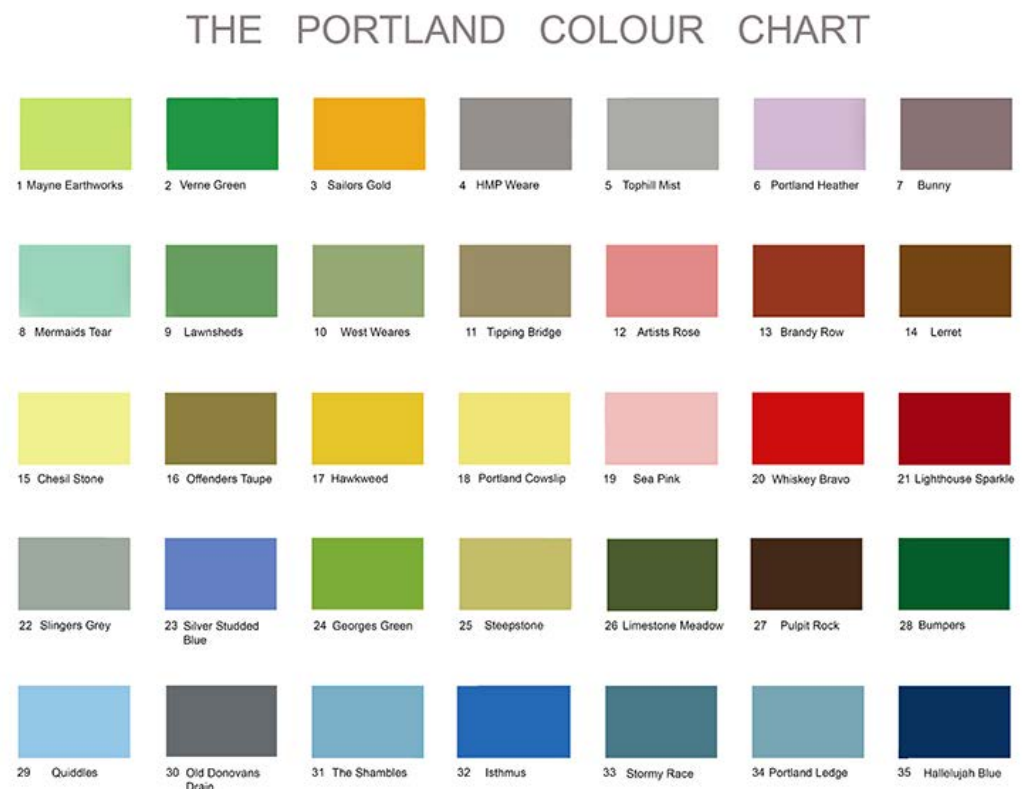
The sculptures (Figure 5) were positioned on two separate Islands. Signs on the reverse of the sculptures informed the participant how to engage with the pieces, QR code enabled users to access the "jardins chromatiques" website and social media. The results were posted onto the website. www.jardinschromatiques.com

Over 2 months the website collected 87 names with a mixture of naming styles.

Many results were names relating to the area, however the majority, again, were similar to paint industry names but the terminology appeared to be less 'romantic' than the UK colour responses and more pragmatic. Interestingly this corresponds to the pragmatic style in which the French Dulux uses for its paint names. Compared to the English names the French paint names are generally very matter- of - fact, with names such as Raspberry, Strawberry, Sea Blue, Emerald, Pearl Grey,

Dulux is the worlds largest house paint manufacturer and owned by ICI - they manufacture paints worldwide and a simple internet search will show how many countries

'Figure 4 - Portland colour chart'



they sell their paints in (over 100),– It is interesting to note that although all the colours and their codes are identical worldwide, the colour names are different for many countries. However it is curious that Italy is not on the list.

Looking through the various different Dulux websites it is interesting to see the differences and similarities. For example a Dulux blue for example (10BB 59/137) is called 'Amazon Beat 4' in the UK and South Africa, in the USA - 'Teton Sky', South America - 'Brillo Estelar'.

Another Dulux colour '36BB 46/231 is 'Blue Seduction 3' in the UK, in the USA- 'Elise', South America – 'Aguas de Lisboa', South Africa – 'Fragrant cloud 3' and France – 'Cobalt 3'

This has inspired a series of photographs were I hold up a Dulux swatch on a stick in front of the camera and match it to the surrounding colour. www.stigevansphotography.co.uk (Figure 6)

In conclusion - Although all three projects have not been rigorously implemented in a way that a scientific experiment would be, these initial data collecting experiments and artworks in colour naming show that the public are strongly influenced by contemporary paint and colour terminology.

If our language does affect the way we perceive and categorize the world, as Worf suggests then perhaps this consumer colour terminology is really affecting the way we view and experience the world.

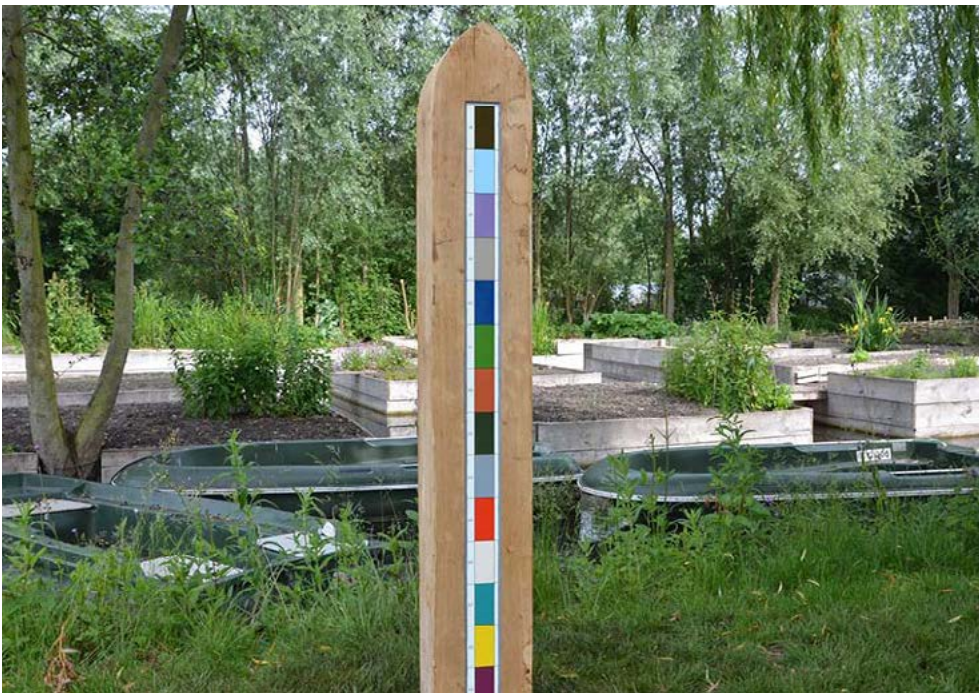


Figure 5



Figure 6 - Blue seduction 3' Stig Evans 2014