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RAINBOW WARRIOR

BY MICHELE KOH MOROLLO

Hella Jongerius, Dutch industrial designer and creator, talks about her recent exhibition at London's Design Museum, and the way in which we all view the world

A particular shade of blue can determine whether or not we buy a chair for our home, while the wrong kind of pink can mean a perfectly cut shirt still won't find a place in our wardrobe. The emotional and psychological influence of colour is undoubtedly powerful. But exactly how important is it when it comes to design?

One person who can shed light on the matter is Dutch industrial designer Hella Jongerius, who was awarded the 2017 Sikkens art prize for her contributions to the field of colour. Jongerius has created products for brands such as Droog Design, IKEA, Camper and KLM, but is best known for her textile, furniture and crockery designs. In 2007, she became the art director for colours and surfaces at Swiss furniture company Vitra, where she has spent the last decade developing new shades for the fabrics and finishings in the company's colour and material library.

This year, Jongerius presented *Breathing Colour* – an installation-based exhibition at London’s Design Museum. Employing hundreds of dynamic elements – from textiles and porcelain tiles to multi-faceted geometric mobiles that Jongerius calls ‘3D colour wheels’ and ‘colour catchers’, the exhibition explored the way colour interacts with form, materials, light, reflections and shadows, and examined the dynamics of colour in life, art and design.



Rotterdam’s Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen exhibited 300 porcelain vases in shades applied by the designer



Hella Jongerius with samples of the Vitra colour library

“My studies on colour are inspired by its effect on volumes and shapes, hard or soft edges, smooth or tactile surfaces, shadows,” says the designer. “Many questions pop up, such as ‘How do shadows interact with a colour?’ and ‘How can I make use of colour reflections?’ This research is an endless study on the nature of colour, which is strongly related to the individual’s perception.

“I try to develop this knowledge with daily objects in mind. After all, high-quality colours can engender a fascinating and subtle communication with people, and thus deserve to be experienced in our daily lives,” adds Jongerius, who believes that ‘seeing colour’ is an activity. “It is my task as a designer to trigger this process and re-emphasise experience. My goal is to call attention to colour as a mysterious, ever-changing entity. Questioning the nature of colour and our relationship with it is, in essence, a never-ending process,” she says.



Vitra’s East River chair range



Jongerius’ Knots & Beads curtain for the United Nations North Delegates Lounge, New York

Photos – This page, left: Gerrit Schreurs; right: Studio Likeness. Opposite, top: Marc Eggimann / Vitra; bottom: Frank Oudeman

“OUR BRAIN WORKS AS A MECHANISM OF CORRECTION OR DISTORTION”

Jongerius believes colour informs all aspects of design, and much of her research involves asking how coloured objects affect other objects within a certain space or setting. “Certain colours can accentuate horizontal shapes, while others are better for vertical forms. The lighting conditions or colour temperature also changes a space,” she says. “Through colour, I want to relate to the user, so the subjectivity of the colour experience is my starting point. I don’t want to educate people in colour harmony. My goal is to design colours that celebrate shape and surfaces. We aim to create a new colour vocabulary, as a reaction to the flat globalised colour industry, and above all to celebrate the full potential of colour.”

The exhibition made a plea for a more authentic way of making colours. “When we look at how colours are mixed for industrial production, we see a great difference between the industrial way, and the way

Photo: Marc Eggiman / Vitra

artists make their colours. Industrial colours need to be stable in all lighting conditions and of course the selection is limited for financial reasons. Industrial limitations take away the quality and richness from the colour world we live in,” she says.

Nostalgic for artist-made colours that alter when light changes, the exhibition demonstrated how high-quality, non-industrial colours respond to their environments and are open to the influence of light. “The all-encompassing RAL, Pantone and NCS colour systems offer millions of colours, categorised, structured and sorted for us. We can choose from a large amount of varying hues. As a tool, this can be helpful for designers and interior architects, says Jongerius. “But how can we ever intimately relate to colour and its subjective effect in this scenario? The largest part of the effect of a colour is made up of its quality. The perfectly sorted colour systems with their

immaculacy seem to neglect this aspect,” she says.

The intake of colours begins with our eyes. “Our eyes follow the reflections that objects emit. At a certain moment, under certain conditions, a colour acquires another tint because of the surrounding colours, because of the colours that you previously saw, because of the light intensity. The same colour exists under different conditions. Our brain works as a mechanism of correction or distortion,” she explains.

Through her work, Jongerius offers a perspective on colours that has been long forgotten. “Experiencing the changeability and splendour of colours can be stimulating to the human mind in many ways. Just think of how we feel when we see a Vermeer painting, rays of light touching the wet morning grass, or blossoms in spring. The objects that surround us in daily life deserve to evoke a similar sensation.” ■

jongeriuslab.com

