

Ongoing Work in Enamel

Chelsea Spengemann: Let's start with the color chart. These colors you have mapped are taken from your grandmother Vera Ronnen's archive. How did each color get assigned a number? Can you take us through the making of this chart? Were you assigning new details to the powders?

Carmelle Safdie: I sourced the colors from Vera's studio but they were originally produced by different manufacturers, like Thompson Enamel and AllCraft in the US, Schauer Jewellery Enamels in Austria, and Camden Workshops and CB Latham Co. in the UK. Each company has their own system for numbering and naming the colors. Schauer colors are assigned anywhere from one to four digits, very occasionally followed by a W, A, L, T, or D, and are largely named for their Newtonian hue and value. 2A is Flux Bluish; 150 transparent Violet; 6824 opaque Green Light. Thompson colors are almost always assigned triple digits, and tend to take their names from the mineral and vegetable world — with occasional cultural references: 198 is opaque Princeton; 166 opaque Lettuce; 160 transparent Lawn.

The one thing that all these manufacturers have in common is that the logic behind their numbering systems is either completely arbitrary or impenetrable to the consumer. The factory printed charts are not organized numerically, chromatically or alphabetically, and besides categorizing transparents and opaques there don't seem to be industry-wide standards. 111 Schauer is Garnet Red, but 111 Thompson is Sapphire. As one can find with most systems of standardization, there's a lot of space left open for randomness and subjectivity.

Vera stocked up on colors and kept them labeled with their commercial names and numbers, because her practice was about making scale models and their reproducibility. But for me, since I am working with her colors as a finite collection, and to account for duplicates, I created my own system. I put all my data about the colors into a series of charts in Microsoft Word, and organized them numerically, regardless of brand, by their factory assigned number. My list goes from 1 through 7139, followed by a short alphabetized section. I assigned each color in the list a new number between 001-250, and I now reference my collection this way.

Your grandmother was using these enamel colors in her public architectural installations. How else were these enamel powders used either commercially or artistically in her lifetime and by her ancestors? What was her relationship to this set of colors? What is this particular language you've inherited and are passing on?

The material we are speaking about is vitreous enamel, which is glass and oxides fused onto metal in a kiln. Vera worked with powdered enamels intended for use in jewelry or on small decorative objects, traditionally used over copper, silver, or gold. It's this medieval craft with Byzantine roots (later adopted by the Chinese) that most enamelists still work with today. Vera's big innovation was combining this traditional process with industrial developments in enamel, which allowed her to work on an architectural scale. She invented not only her own technique but a business model too, contracting with design firms and convincing large factories to let her set up a dedicated studio space amidst their commercial operation.

A language that I inherited from Vera is the language of enamel color tests — because the powdered form doesn't necessarily look at all like what the melted glass will be — and understanding how colors behave together both chromatic and chemically is a big part of the process. But procedural tests have been an important part of my own painting practice too; in previous projects I've intentionally blurred the line between test and finished artwork. It was my interest in material tests more broadly that made me reconsider our enamel firing tests as potential subject matter, and propelled me to make my own work in enamel.

How do you separate the work you make with this archive from the work you do in creating the archive? Is the archive of the colors integral to the preservation of her work?

When Vera passed away I took a sample size of each unique color from her studio. I packaged them in zip-lock bags and labeled them with their factory number, or whatever information I could find on printed labels or in Vera's hand. And while I am working on an archive of Vera's studio papers, I don't see my own work in enamel as part of that. What I'm making is indexical of her studio and of her work, and of the enamel industry from the 1950s to late 2000s, but as soon as I fire those colors they go through a transformation, and the work takes on its own physical and spiritual presence in the world. It's not just that the enamel goes through a material transformation in the kiln, but the way that an artwork has

autonomy from the artist, transcends the limits of their being.

Can you discuss how/why you decided to divide the black pan into thirds and place the color down the middle?

I wanted each unit to be like a miniature painting in itself, but that they'd also fit together into larger constellations, something that functioned both as a color chart and an artwork. I was looking at historic color charts in my own collection, like the *Duo-Color Guide: A Standard Reference Book on Two-Color Reproduction* (1955), and examples archived in Patrick Baty's beautiful book *The Anatomy of Color*. I noticed that the charts with rectilinear blocks felt so much more dynamic than the ones with square or circular swatches. I also thought about what I learned from Albers via my color teacher Irwin Rubin, that the *Interaction of Color* happens along the edge where two colors meet, and I wanted to design a format where the colors could meet each other.

The Japanese silver foil I place under transparent colors played a big part in determining the dimensions and proportions of the units. I landed on a ratio (which divides the square in three, but not equally in thirds) in which the center stripe reads as a bolt or conduit. At the time I was reading the journals of Anne Truitt. Her writing gave me confidence to move forward with this project after years of dreaming and only timid planning. I oriented the stripes into vertical bands as an homage to her totemic sculpture.

The black pans and the white grids feel like very different outcomes in your process of experimentation and record-keeping — color narration or color stories or color sentences.

The purpose of the white grids was to work quickly through my collection. Loosely sifting samplings in numeric order, I was able to fire and view my entire stock of colors in very little time. They were really fun to work on because they were so immediate, and my standardized formal parameters opened up a space for a more haphazard process than I am used to. They remind me of Jennifer Bartlett's *Rhapsody*, not just because she also worked on gridded enamel tiles, but in how she set up a system of rules only to play with and negate them. I'm excited by the way the white grids and black pans contrast singularity and multiplicity, chance and order.

It's interesting that you refer to color narrative and color sentences. As the black pans come out of my kiln and I configure them into vertical arrangements, I've been thinking of them as

poems. Some groupings of colors have very strong associations for me. For example, a series of pans that I fired in reverse numerical order from 086 to 082 came out as a blast from the past to paintings I made in the mid 2000s. I titled this grouping *086/085/084/083/082 (color poem for early work)*. And a small triad countering a pair of reds with an illusive gray-blue reminds me so much of Deborah Remington's paintings, that sexy evilness I've been aspiring to with my work on the black pans, that I named that color poem for her.

In the 001-250 series the pans and grids are distilled even further and all of the processes and all of the colors seem to be combined in one relatively small square. Can you talk about your interest in distillation? Does this feel like a desire to simplify? Does this feel like everything and nothing? Like zero? Or is this the infinite realm of outer space?

As a byproduct of my grid series I was left with remnants of all the colors in my collection: little bits of powder that mixed together on my work table and couldn't be put back into my archive. I decided to see what would happen if I sifted this combination of 250 colors all together onto one stenciled stripe and fired it. The first time I did it the colors blended so completely in the sifter that the resulting stripe was solid gray, and I didn't find it very interesting. But as I refined my process, experimented with different ways of spooning the powder, using different mesh sifters, I was able to get quite a range of results, from zero to outer space. Like you get a gray stripe and it's like a canceling out of all the colors. But in the last of the 001-250 series I achieve a sort of granular harmony, where it feels like each bead of glass is levitating, singing its note in unison with the rest. You use the same materials, the same tools, the same format, but then you tweak the process ever so slightly and get this intergalactic experience where the granular is both microscopic, but also there is no scale. Distilled to the essence of what enamel is — grains of glass.

Ongoing Work in Enamel by Carmelle Safdie
On view at the Mothership Gallery in Woodstock, NY
June 4, 2023

