ALL ABOUT YVES

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT "YVES KLEIN BLUE."

BY SASHA FREPE JONES

Yves Klein in 1961, during the shooting of the movie "The Heartbeat of France," directed by Peter Morris.
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In her collection *Blues*, the poet and art critic Maggie Nelson writes about visiting London and seeing *Propositions Monochrome*, a collection of objects and canvases painted by Yves Klein in 1957. The only color used was a shade of ultramarine. Three years later, Klein would submit that color, under the name *International Klein Blue* (IKB), to the French patent office, resulting in patent number 63971. Nelson writes:

Standing in front of these blue paintings, or propositions, at the Tate, feeling their blue radiate out so hotly that it seemed to be touching, perhaps even burning, my eyeballs, I wrote that one phrase in my notebook: too much.

Writers have reported seeing IKB appear in runway shows in the last decade, citing collections by Diane von Furstenberg, Giorgio
Armani, and Prada, Schouler. The problem is that International Klein Blue isn’t a color you can stop—it’s a process. Unless you are standing in front of a work by Klein, or visiting an art-supply store in Paris, you’re not looking at it.

Klein started painting ultramarine monochromes in the late 40s but entered the 50s dissatisfied with his results. Soon after his first exhibition 60 years ago, Klein began working with an art supplier in Paris named Édouard Adam, looking to create a blue that was evoking him. As he wrote in an unpublished paper, quoted in Philip Boff’s book ‘Klein, Klein was struggling with the fixatives used to turn powder into pigments. "The attractive magic of the color had vanished. Each grain of powder seemed to have been extinguished individually by the glue or whatever material was supposed to fix it to the other grains as well as to the support." With the help of Adam and the chemical manufacturer Rhône-Pouilanc, Klein found a synthetic resin called Rhodogla M60A in 1956. When combined with an ultramarine pigment, this colorless medium allowed the powder to retain what Klein described as "pure energy," which may be what Nelson experienced as "too much."

In 2011 I had an encounter with muchness in Nice. Klein’s main home until his death in 1962, at the age of 34. After missing a flight to Paris, I ended up in the city on a brutally sunny day. I wandered away from the airport, walked up a hill, and found Nice’s largest modern- art museum, MAMAC. The MAMAC was showing a piece made in 1960 at Klein’s apartment, a solid sheet of ultramarine covered in white handwriting. It was the manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, a brief, not entirely coherent artistic movement named in 1960 by art critic Pierre Restany, Klein’s friend. I wasn’t that interested in what the collective was up to—days were kept secret by 1970 and I had managed to be invested in 20th-century art without ever having seen them. I walked past the manifesto, directly into Klein’s area. A branch, about two feet high, was standing on end. It was painted entirely in IKB. Next to that was a dusty pyramid of IKB pigment. I felt the color much into me and into my nerves. I had never understood the alleged intensity of monochromes in art, yet here I was, in love with a color and unaware it had its own name.

You can go to right now, to Adam Montmartre (22 Rue de Berthe, 75018 Paris), to see IKB, or (Klein). You cannot patent a color. The 1960 patent covers only a chemical procedure that fixes ultramarine pigment in a certain way and connects it to a family name. Hold a jar of IKB and you see something lighter and more intense than all the other things you thought were Klein blue. This is not so surprising, as you’re not looking at paint but at powder granules coated with polystyrene sarcophagi; the unblended form of Klein blue’s energy. This is part of Klein’s coalesced triumphant. His arrogance was unchallenged, but his idea ended up being more than just conceptual trompe-l’ceil. The idea of blazing the great blue monochrome came to him as a teenager, when he was "signed the sky" while lying on a beach in Nice. The color he ended up fitting on had a universal appeal, even as he struggled to make it unique to Klein. Klein’s work hasn’t started flipping like Basquiat, and we aren’t seeing more museal retrospectives for Klein than for any of his contemporaries. Klein simply helped make ultramarine popular and fed people to believe they loved a color they may have never seen.

This is logical. In is hard to think a person claimed a color, turning the mundane into something you can root for and be slightly smug about: "This color is the famous blue, not just blue." And IKB does, empirically, live on; anyone can buy the pigment, which is where Klein’s concept turns back on itself. For a painter, using IKB was an act of reaproposition, like writing a song using one of Sonic Youth’s guitar tunings. An artist using IKB is in Klein’s country, working around and against his rules. So many of the artists who might paint with Klein blue likely won’t, and the people confessing their love for IKB are talking about a different color. And it’s a lovely confusion.
And Proenza Schouler. The problem for the international Klein Blue isn’t a color; it’s a color story—it’s a process. Unless you are in front of a work by Klein, or in a Klein-supply store in Paris, you’re not at it.

Yves Klein supervises the creation of Anthropométrie de l’Epoque bleue, in which models coated in IKB paint lay on the canvas.


And so, after spending some time with the works, I started painting ultramarine monochromes in the late 40s but entered the 50s with my results. Soon after his death, 60 years ago, Klein began his work on an art supplier in Paris named Adam, looking to create a blue that matched his. As he wrote in an unpublished letter quoted in Philip Block’s book Yves Klein, Klein was an art critic. He put into words the fixtures used powder into pigment. The reflective magic color had vanished. It is a new blue color that is still on the market today. Kleins new blue color is called M60A in Klein’s dictionary. Adam, combined with an IKB pigment, this color allowed the art world what Klein as “pure energy” and what Nelson did as “too much.”

I had an encounter with muchness Klein’s main home until his death in his 40s. After meeting a flight ended up in the city on a brutally wound day, and found Nicole’s largest museum, MAMAC. The show was a piece made in 1960 of ultramarine in white handiwork. It was a piece of Nouveau Réalisme, a brief, quickly coherent artistic movement of the 1960s by artist Pierre Restany. I don’t think that Restany was up to—there were people who had been involved in art without ever hearing of Klein. Klein, the artist, wrote the manifesto, directly Klein. A brief, two feet high, was standing on end. It was painted entirely in IKB. Next to that sat a dusty pyramid of IKB pigment. I felt the color reach into me and cost my senses. I had never understood the allegorical intensity of monochrome art, art here I was, in love with a color and an awareness of its own name.

You can go right now to the Adam Montmartre shop in Paris located at 29 rue Wagon, 75018 Paris, and there you can buy a one-liter or five-liter jar of Le Medium Adam25 and make your own Pike or mix it with a medium and paint with it. This would be a genuine encounter with International Klein Blue, but because the rules laid down by the Klein estate, you wouldn’t be able to refer to it as Klein blue. This is confusing, as Klein himself wanted Adam to create IKB—what is a jar of Le Medium Adam25 is—but the estates of dead artists tend to be less flexible than the whims of living artists.

Designer Yvonne McCallagh, who once claimed that she knew only Klein blue, and France Telecom, which sold a phone in 1998 under the name Klein blue, are only two of many acting under a categorical delusion that is perhaps the most precious part of Klein’s estate. All these disputes and phone simply embody various shades of bleu d’ici-d’amitié—ultramarine. France Telecom was sued by the Klein estate, as it was using the name “Klein” for commercial purposes, but otherwise the Klein estate does not legally dispute people of thinking they are painting things in Klein blue by raising a blue as long as they keep the name Klein out of it. (Hence, the Adam Montmartre shop selling Adam 25 and not “Klein blue.”)

You cannot paint a color. The 1960 patent covers only a chemical procedure that fixes ultramarine pigment in a certain way and contains it to a family name. Held a jar of IKB and you see something lighter and more intense than all the other things you thought were Klein blue. This is not so surprising, as you’re not looking at paint but at powder granules coated with polyvinyl nitrile: the undiluted form of Klein’s blue avenge. This is part of Klein’s coded triad. His arrogance was unchecked, but his idea ended up more than just conceptual cornucopia. The idea of ceasing the great blue monochrome came to him as a teenager, when he “igned the sky” while lying on a beach in Nice. The color he ended up writing about was the universal appeal, even as he struggled to make it unique to him. Klein’s work here’s started flying like Baudrillard, and we are seeing more museum retrospectives for Klein than for any of his contemporaries. Klein simply helped make ultramarine popular and led people to believe they loved a color they may have never seen.

This is logical. It’s fun to think a person claimed a color, turning the mundane into something you can root for and be slightly smug about: “This color is a famous blue, not just blue.” And IKB does, empirically, live on: anyone can buy the pigment, which is where Klein’s concept turns back on itself. For a painter, using IKB would be an act of appropriation, like writing a song using one of Sonic Youth’s guitar riffs. An artist using Adam 25 is in Klein’s country, working around and against his rules. So many of the artists who might paint with Klein blue likely won’t, and the people exemplifying their love for IKB are talking about a different color. And it’s a lovely confusion.