

DESIGN » COLOUR CUES FROM MOMA

Fields of (decorating) dreams



JANICE LINDSAY
COLOUR WATCH

style@globeandmail.com

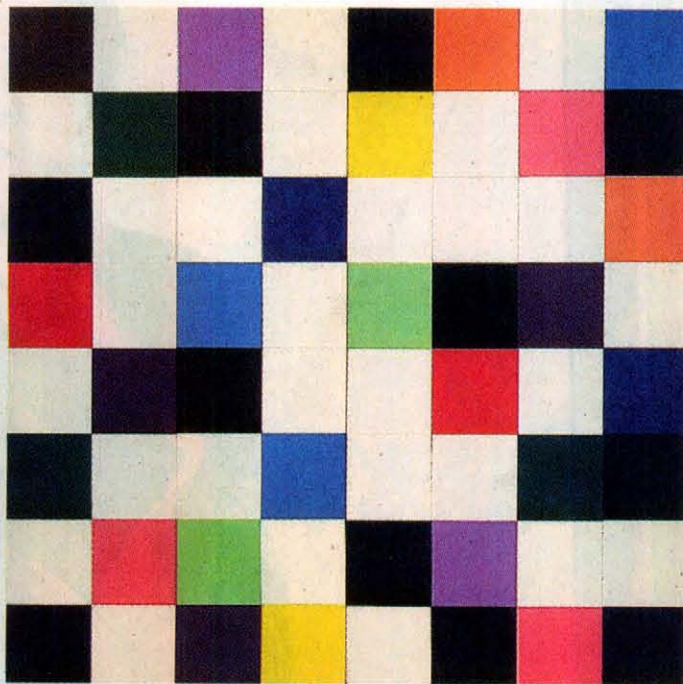
We've all done it: gone to a museum or art gallery, looked at bold, simple colour field paintings and thought patronizingly, "I could do that!" The question is: Why don't we?

As a colour designer who knows how good colour can feel, how great it can look, how easy it is to incorporate, enjoy and change, I often wonder what it is that stops us from integrating large swaths of bright, bold colour or colours into our homes and decor.

If it's a lack of money, time or space, these impediments can easily be overcome by touring an exhibition, Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950s to Today, on at New York's Museum of Modern Art until May 12. (If a trip to Manhattan isn't in the cards, the show can be seen online at www.moma.org.)

Of the 44 artists represented in Color Chart, it is the painters who provide the most effective DIY lessons in how to embrace out-of-the-can colour freely.

These artists didn't fear colour mistakes because there was no such thing in their view.



Take inspiration from Ellsworth Kelly's *Colors for a Large Wall (1951)* and mount your own graphic collage. THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A lack of money and space didn't stop American artist Ellsworth Kelly from making big, bold art. Sure, he lived in a French fishing village and not a contemporary condo, but he created many of his works using leftover paint because it was cheap and he applied it onto 12-square-inch canvases because they were small enough to store and transport.

Kelly's appropriately named *Colors for a Large Wall (1951)* comprises 64 of these mini-

canvases assembled in an ad hoc manner. No composing. No planning. It's a technique that offers considerable decorative inspiration, showing how easily coloured squares can be rearranged to suit wall size, decor, season or mood.

Since canvas and paint were often beyond his budget, Robert Rauschenberg painted on anything he could: old cupboards, salvaged objects, even his bedding.

He also scavenged his colour

materials, finding tones and textures in debris of every kind.

The artist glued cardboard paint chips directly onto canvases and used paint from unlabeled cans because he could buy it for 10 cents a quart.

His guiding colour principle had nothing to do with colour harmony. It was "use it all up before you buy any more."

By his standards, most of us have pretty good coloured materials in our storage cupboards and furnace rooms just waiting to be creatively recycled.

When German painter Gerhard Richter decided to abandon his usual palette of black, white and grey, he was one of several artists who looked for inspiration in paint chip charts.

In the 1950s, colour was already being used abstractly. And colour as isolated little squares in a paint chart was being freed from the rules of colour theory. Richter's paintings were like colour charts in which the hues were arranged randomly, then amplified to monumental proportions.

The artist's Ten Large Color Panels from 1966 to 1971, for instance, spans 31 feet. Today, rows of colour copied from a colour chart like Farrow & Ball's would look very pleasing scaled up to several feet tall. A whole chart could transform one wall of a long hallway.

Artist Sherrie Levine used a 1931 colour chart by Swiss architect Le Corbusier for her *Salubra #4 (2007)*. Good colour

combos, she proves, don't have to be invented, just discovered.

To avoid the mess of paint altogether, Germany's Blinky Palermo bought lengths of fabric in solid colours and had Richter's wife, Ema, sew them together. For *Untitled (1969)*, he used red and blue swaths seamed horizontally. Another work is green on green.

Zobop! by Glasgow artist Jim Lambie, meanwhile, foregoes paint in favour of glossy industrial vinyl tape in bold colours. To create it, he lays the tape across and around any gallery surface with which it comes into contact. At the MOMA, a structural post and sculpture of Balzac by Auguste Rodin fail to impede the installation.

Lambie says that ostensible obstacles are what make the work. The myriad coloured lines that form geometric patterns seem to blur and dissolve, turning hard spaces into sensorially enriched "dreamscapes."

For the chromophobic, the lesson is clear: using more colour can in fact make colour not seem too colourful at all.

And unlike other decorative investments, colour can be had instantly, sized to a space and changed with little cost or fuss.

After seeing these artists' bold use of colour, it is not an insult to say "I can do that" so much as a shame not to.

» Janice Lindsay is a Toronto colour and design consultant.

416-961-6281,
www.pinkcolouranddesign.com

DIY lessons from Reinventing Color

» Create graphic wall collages à la Ellsworth Kelly by painting and hanging a host of 12-square-inch canvases. Small canvases are available at any art-supply store for about \$3.50 to \$5.50 each.

» Do as Robert Rauschenberg might and buy recycled paint or mistints at bargain-basement prices. Habitat for Humanity's ReStores (www.habitat.ca) sell recycled paint across Canada for \$3 per litre, \$6 per gallon or \$10 per five-gallon can. And use up every drop in the cans. Paint the inside of closets and cupboards in one room with leftover colour from another. Create a medley of hues in basements with surplus paint from upstairs rooms.

» Transform floors, stairs, posts, bulkheads or old furniture in the eye-popping manner of artist Jim Lambie with rows of boldly coloured duct tape. It can easily be peeled off when it's past its prime.

» JL