

Liz Coats – *Light in Mind*, artist's catalogue essay for solo exhibition, 2025. Civic Art Bureau, Canberra City 3 – 26 October 2025

(with) *Light in mind*

My work with colour painting is intrinsically experimental. I'm interested in ways that transitory qualities of colours as we see them through light, can be brought into relationship with colour media. Light is arguably the most important component of visual awareness. It facilitates perception. It makes things visible while remaining invisible. Since the 1970s, I have attempted to insert a level of open exchange into the predominantly formulaic language of abstraction. For me, the conditional holds far more intrigue than any absolute. In the early days, I was surprised to find that engaging with organic and generative components in abstract painting were lacking in much formalist, male-dominated discourse. I knew instinctively that perception cannot be separated from the body's inherent connection with natural phenomena.

I am drawn to a way of working that enables experiences to be held lightly. I like an image to breathe with the surroundings, rather than being pinned to representation. A place where the textures, translucencies, and opacities of paint substances become animated in a continuous and active engagement with light. My work acknowledges, without hierarchy, some of the many elements at play in the formation of perception.

I find complexity and companionship in the studio, by engaging with paint materials in light-receptive correspondences. The images are built out of cross-layers of paint, each layer responding to the last, and regulated by factors that continue to change as a painting develops. While fabric details are dynamically variable, the scale and spacing of each layer of colour, effects a network of linkages imbedded in the gaps between. An alternate framework that cannot be predetermined becomes visible, supporting rhythmic vitality in the colour formations.

The result is an organic process of discovery in which I collaborate with fluid colour media, moment by moment. A place to embrace chance and chaos. It is based on trust, where characteristics of the materials participate in bringing a painting to life. I never quite know what will happen as the combinations of disparate colour shapes progress. How will a natural order emerge through the spacing and scale? Will the reactions between colour and form become infinitely tangled in the detail while retaining overall autonomy? I embrace the unpredictable nature of working this way in which each painting becomes a new experience of seeing.

Over the years I've explored a range of nominally two-dimensional matrices for colour applications, each surface offering new possibilities for colour outcomes. By knowing and respecting the content and limitations of materials, I can recognise organic qualities that emerge within the process, rather than through conscious deliberation.

Since 2020, I have concentrated on distilling organic pigments for painting and dyeing from imported botanical extracts, including madder, cochineal, lac, weld, fustic, indigo. Working with the unique resonance and malleability of these organic substances, feels like I am engaging with live colour.

I learnt about historic pigments from my own research and by extensive testing in the studio, but I needed to connect in person with traditional organic colour practitioners. In May this year, with an Arquetopia Foundation Residency and travel funds from artsACT, I was introduced to ancient botanical colours that remain central to contemporary Mexican textile art. Zapotec master dyer and weaver, Fermina Ruiz, guided me through traditional processes of extraction and dyeing with local colours at her home and workshop in the Teotitlan Valley of Oaxaca.

Sensory and psychological influences continue to be a factor in the choices I make, and how I interpret those choices. I cooperate with colour media until it responds to my seeing. This is an experience that we can each discover independently. I can't claim metaphysical presence, but I am interested in healing polarities, in making art that can function across perceptual and cultural divides. My ambition is to contribute to a re-envisioning of the contemporary understanding of abstraction.

Liz Coats, October 2025

(with thanks to Hetty Gascoigne)