



# *Chromatic scale*

PTOLEMY MANN DOESN'T SHY AWAY FROM THE BIGGER CHALLENGES



With their sleek surfaces, striking motifs and vivid planes of colour, Ptolemy Mann's fabrics are some of today's most visionary textiles. They are hand woven and pulled taut over wooden frames, much like an artist would mount canvas onto a stretcher. Whereas a painting is typically flat, her painterly artworks are formed by the fibres she weaves, merging structure, surface, colour and motif in a single expression.

Rooted in abstractions such as feeling, perception and atmosphere, and tangibles such as architecture and urban cityscapes, Mann's work defies traditional textile terminology. She conducts extensive research on colour theory and its effects on human behaviour. Through her colour consultancy and collaborations with architects and interior designers her work has had an impact in clinical environments and institutional

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settings. 'I'm not a scientist or a psychologist,' she says. 'I respect what they do but my approach is different. Years of working as an artist submerged in a practical dialogue around colour has taught me to use a more instinctive approach. Observing reactions to my artwork informs how I use colour. I've noticed that people like the transition created when two or more colours merge together. It stimulates the eye and engages the viewer.'

Mann's point of departure came while studying at the Royal College of Art, where she exhibited her fabric by stretching it over a frame made with 'deep' edges.



'My tutors didn't like the idea at all,' Mann recalls, 'telling me that mounting my fabric onto a frame denied its drape and fluidity. Luckily, I ignored them, which enabled me to explore the architectural aspect of textiles and take my work in an exciting direction.'

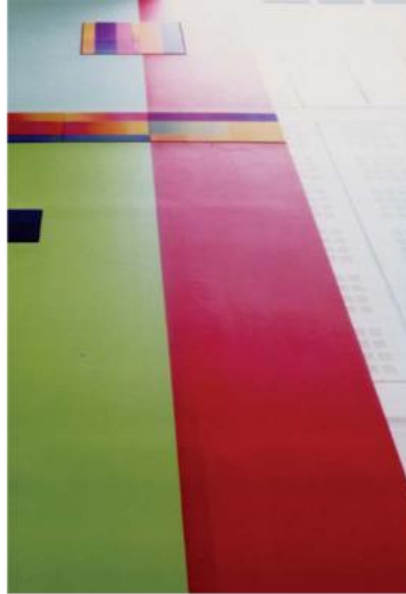
Mann graduated in 1997, and routinely turned down opportunities to design curtains and other interior fabrics. 'Finding environments where my work would fit led to collaborations with architects, which enabled me to use my knowledge of colour and texture in environments where no textiles were used at all.'

A commission from Swanke Hayden Connell in 2004 resulted in textile panels designed for the Open University's new library in Milton Keynes. Mann created monolithic panels for two 12-metre high areas, which the architects built into the walls. 'They became one with the architecture,' Mann says. The architects later invited Mann to create the external architectural colour scheme for King's Mill Acute Care Hospital in



Nottinghamshire, commissioning her to create a colour palette that would be used across the entire façade of the scheme. 'It's a rural hospital, so I looked at the scenery surrounding it and felt inspired to use greens and blues to help anchor the building's outer edges to the landscape,' Mann explains. 'The "hottest" colour I specified was a vivid orange at the entrance. Many children visit the hospital, so I wanted it to be welcoming. I used colours to guide people through the space. There are three towers, and each has a distinct palette of seven tones of a single colour. If someone is looking for the green tower, they will see green details to guide them.'

Some of Mann's dialogues with architects have yielded surprising insights into how clinical colours are perceived. 'A hospital opened in the United States and



it became apparent that many people felt unwell when spending time in the building,' she says. 'A specific shade of lavender had been used throughout the scheme. In time the staff realised it was the colour that was affecting how people felt. In fact, people were not reacting to the lavender itself but to its after-image.'

After-images occur when the eye has had a concentrated burst of a single colour for a period of time. It triggers the optic nerve to create a brief flash of its complementary opposite, so fleeting that it hardly registers. Ever wondered why surgical scrubs and operating theatre textiles are blue-green? It's the complementary opposite of blood red and, because the optic nerve recognises the complementary colour when they look up, it prevents the surgeons getting an after-image when they look away from an open wound. In this case, it turned out that the complementary colours of lavender were the colours of vomit and bile - which was enough to make anyone feel ill.'



Mann typically looks beyond the brief to take the client's enterprise into account. A commission from Prof. Lesley Regan for 15 textile panels to decorate the 'Save the Baby Unit' at St Mary's Hospital in London resulted in a body of work titled 'Life Spectrum' (2008). 'I developed a colour scheme to create a sense of optimism. Colour is an extraordinary tool, and when used deliberately, it can help people feel much better.'

As Mann's works explore the dualities of hard and soft, colourful and colourless and unyielding and tactile, she successfully bridges the distance between the physicality of architecture and the ephemerality of textiles. In designs that centre round these extremes, Mann reveals that textile designers and architects share a wide repertoire of skills. ●●● **Bradley Quinn**