ART

A Residency Invites Artists to Work with Scientists Who Design Art Materials

Winsor & Newton has returned to its roots through the Griffin programs, where artists and scientists benefit from each other's expertise and perspective.

Sarah Rose Sharp
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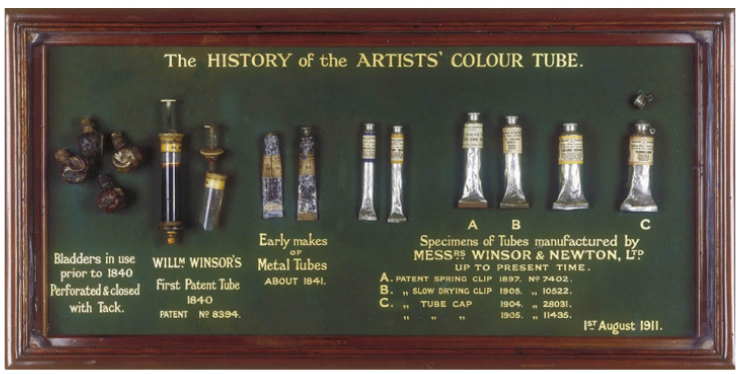

The development of the Winsor & Newton patented paint tube (image courtesy Winsor & Newton)

Winsor & Newton has a long history of collaboration between science and art. The company was founded in 1832 by William Winsor, a scientist, and Henry Newton, an artist, who recognized the need for pigment makers to work in the service of the fine art sector. Winsor & Newton boasts a deep connection to art history, including its patenting of a collapsible metal paint tube with a screw cap that enabled the *en plein air* painting style of Impressionists like Monet. It also designed the Series 7 kolinsky sable brushes (made by order of Queen Victoria) that would create the standard for watercolor brushes, and consulted on products with some of the biggest names in painting of their time, including J.M.W. Turner and John Constable. Where previously Winsor and Newton were just a couple among a handful of colormen in London, their close connection to the needs of artists allowed them to break away from competition, making them a legacy company that has changed hands several times over nearly 200 years in the color business.

The company is presently a piece of an international conglomerate, Colart, which represents eight different art-related brands that distribute in 120 countries. Over the years, Winsor & Newton experienced a bit of mission drift, emphasizing standard manufacturing practices above the intersection of artists and scientists. But an initiative created by the Colart board some five years ago founded the Griffin Gallery and Residency Program, and brought in curator Rebecca Pelly-Fry to develop and direct the gallery, international education program, and unique residency (coordinated by Matthew Gibson), essentially from scratch.

The Griffin suite of programs has exhibited the work of about 300 artists since its inception, and brought at least 50 more through the residency program, which situates artists in proximity to the specialized scientists working in the Colart Innovation & Development Laboratory in London — allowing both cohorts to benefit from each other's expertise and perspective on the materials they hold in common.

Image of "Gold Zero" by US-based artist Corrie Baldauf, under the auspices of the Griffin Residency program (image by Jack Johnstone and courtesy Griffin Gallery and White Noise)

Corrie Baldauf (left) and a team of volunteers at work painting "Gold Zero" (image by Jack Johnstone and courtesy Griffin Gallery and White Noise)

"When I came into the company, at head office, there was one other person from an art background, out of 100 people," said Pelly-Fry, in a Skype interview with Hyperallergic. "And then in other countries, there were a couple of artists from an art background — mainly running the education program. It was surprising for me, to come into this organization that is, on the face of it, all about art and artists, and to find that was very, very, very little knowledge about artists, about the art world, about what artists's need or want or think or feel — or any of that."

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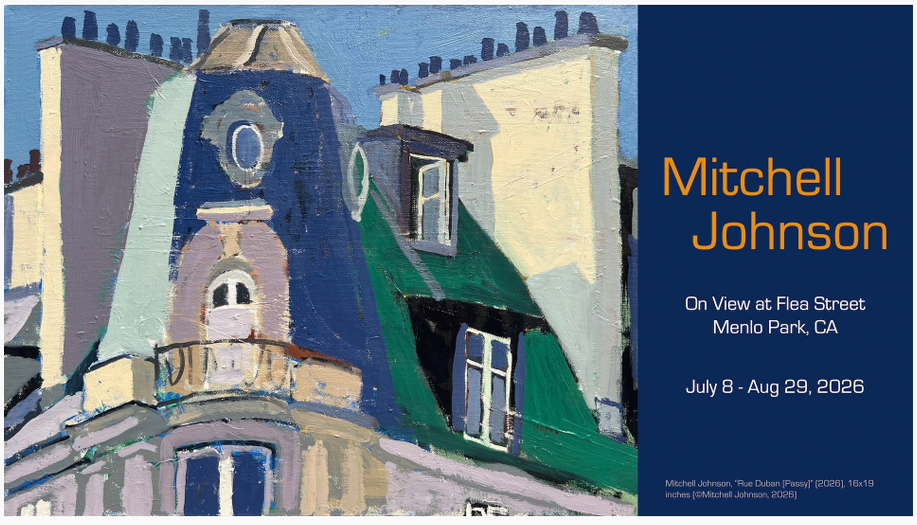

Pelly-Fry and her team have had a tremendous impact on the culture at Colart, effectively bringing Winsor & Newton back to its roots. The artists coming into the residency studios have also had a palpable influence, through casual, intensive, and surprising pair-ups with members of the Innovation Lab. Artist Bea Haines, for example, applied to the residency with the idea of turning a box of her great-uncle's ashes into an art pigment.

Bea Haines, "Jack's Black" (2016), detail view (image courtesy Bea Haines)

"She'd been given the ashes by her family, and she knew she wanted to turn them into some kind of artwork," said Pelly-Fry, "but she'd kept it for several years, really not knowing what to do with it. Artist pigment is basically dust, dirt, ground-up stuff, so she wanted to know whether it would be possible to turn the ashes into a fine enough grain to work, to be stable as an art material. We thought it was an amazing idea and took it to our scientists." After some initial nervousness about handling human remains, the lab got behind the idea with enthusiasm, and after several experiments and iterations (practicing with ashes from a pet cemetery), Haines made headlines, creating a watercolor with gum Arabic for her great-uncles earthly remains. The artist combined this material with lake water harvested from the place her great-uncle first learned to sail, in the end creating a large, beautiful, and cellular-looking abstract painting.

Bea Haines, "Jack's Black" (2016), human ash on paper, 152 × 91cm (image courtesy Bea Haines)

Artist Piers Secunda builds and casts dimensional sculptures out of industrial and house paints. Secunda came to spend time at the lab in the hopes of gaining insight into how he might make paint that was strong enough to build an actual bridge over water, that people could walk across.

Piers Secunda, "A Decade of Rejected Works Re-Configured into a 1 Metre Cube" (2012), industrial Paint, 100 x 100 × 100 cm(image courtesy Piers Secunda)

"It's an extraordinary project, and I think it will take many years to actually achieve it, but the few weeks he spent with us talking to our scientists and laboratory technicians were really helpful — he said it shortcut his research period," said Pelly-Fry. "In some cases, like with Bea, she did specifically need some of the scientists' time and spending time in the lab with them and their machines and things. That's quite unusual. … I think our scientists are constantly learning about how artists use the materials that they meticulously make, and they find it interesting any time an artist is trying to do something with the material that it's not designed for."

Detail view of sculpture made of cast paint by Piers Secunda (image courtesy the artist)

The Griffin Gallery and Residency Program underscore the way in which artists bring a useful perspective to industry. Though the connection between artists and art supplies is something direct, it is the tendency of artists to break rules or test the limits of materials that is their often unrecognized expertise. As Griffin Gallery closes its doors to enable a new phase — which includes Colart's acquisition of the publication *Elephant,* and a new gallery space called Elephant West that will assume the functions of Griffin Gallery in an improved location — it is fascinating to see the ways that Pelly-Fry and her team have brought artists and corporate culture into a beneficial union. One wonders how other companies might similarly benefit from bringing some professionals into their process who are able to present experiences of a different color.

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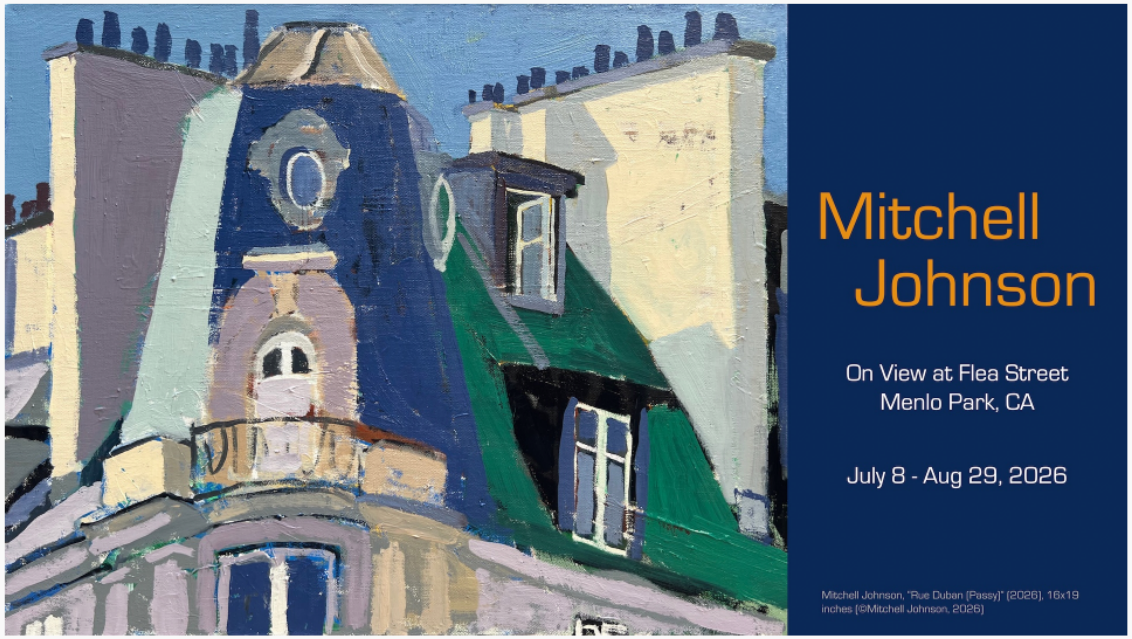

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