



Reach me a Gentian (2020) oil on canvas Jac Saorsa

Dr Jac Saorsa, Artist-in-Residence//

*Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!*

*let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of a flower*

*down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness,*

*even where Persephone goes...*

(extract from Bavarian Gentians, D.H. Lawrence)

For Wassily Kandinsky, the inclination of blue towards death is so great that the darker and more intense the tone becomes and the deeper the colour gets, the more strongly it calls us towards the infinite, until, in finally deepening – or descending – into black, blue assumes the overtones of human sorrow. This makes powerful sense, but, according to the psychologist James Hilman, even the darkest blue is not actually black, and therefore even the deepest depression cannot embrace ‘mortificatio’, the alchemical term that signifies the experience of death. Of the seven alchemical operations, ‘mortificatio’ is the most ‘negative’. Allied to darkness and defeat, mutilation, rotting and death, its colour is black, and, in being so, it is beyond the limits of blue. However, and again according to Hilman, since blackness can be understood as the beginning of whiteness, by the ‘law of opposites’, which states that ‘an intense awareness of one side constellates its contrary’, blue is the colour that intensifies the process on either vertical progression, descending *towards* black

(even if not actually getting there) or ascending towards white. 'Mortificatio' is thus associated with resurrection and rebirth. Out of darkness is born the light.

Similarly for Derek Jarman, the filmmaker, blue is 'darkness made visible' – it protects white from 'innocence' as it transcends the 'solemn geography' of human limits – and for Johann Wolfgang vonGoethe, who tells us that 'we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances towards us, but because it draws us after it.' Paul Cezanne perceived blue as symbolising the essence of things as it 'gives other colours their vibration', but, for all its history and meaning, blue is not on my list of favoured colours. Maggie Nelson, the writer, has fallen in love with the blue, as did Joni Mitchell, the singer, but I, an artist, have not. Blue baffles me. Its strength is overwhelming and paradoxical. The synthetic French ultramarine oil paint can swamp the palette, overly 'puissant' and unforgiving. Cobalt is brightly opaque but heavy, and pthalo blue is light, transparently yet brutally influential on other colours, and nurturing of greenish undertones. Blue is the colour that defines the lack of lack of oxygen in the blood, the colour that replaces the red of life. Blue is the colour of creeping Livor Mortis as a body's life force submits to the rigours of gravity in death. So blue is the colour of sorrow, of irreversible decay, and yet, it is also the colour of a summer sky, of clear, clean water reflecting the sun. Blue is the colour of Kandinsky's 'purity', of John Ruskin's 'delight'. I muse on my ambivalence even as the rich and heady blueness of the true ultramarine, genuine lapis lazuli in ground and oily form, sits brooding in luxurious splendour on my palette. Never something I could have afforded to buy for myself – the pigment was at one time considered more precious than gold – I accepted the gift of the small, much-coveted tube with the joy that only a painter would know. And now, as I take up the paint on the softest brush and sweep it transparently over pale painted skin, blue indeed becomes the colour of life. The effect draws a gasp from me, involuntary. I am still – always – incredulous. Blue, the centre of the flame; blue, the colour of the intimate relation between life and death.

And I am an artist who draws on that relation. I dissect a human form and I draw out a simulacra of life from what remains. From death, I steal a sinew, an organ, a plexus. To life, I give interpretation, celebration. By both the law of opposites and the law of nature, a life must end in death, and in this way at least, death can give life meaning. But whether death is ever meaningful in itself is perhaps a moot point. Even so, it is clear that where life is full of plurality, full of the tragic and the beautiful in individual measure, in death these are united in a singularity, a fact that is irreducible, and so the cadaver before me on the dissection table represents death's unique telos – a life extinguished, leaving only form and substance behind. But is there more? Yes, there is more...always more... further on as we descend into blue.

Death is paler than life. The abject certainty of it leaches living colour, leaving only complementary yet insubstantial translucent hues that lie superficially on the inanimate form; blue echoes of warmth, and of what was.

Death is smaller than life. The body shrinks, turns in on itself.

Death is heavier than life as the stone weight of rigor mortis sets in. It begins in the eyelids and moves to the neck, the jaw and spreads quickly, inexorably down the body. The trunk and limbs became taut and rigid, and the muscles of the chest close in on the heart. The heart itself, once the 'pump' of life, forcefully contracts early on in the process, and now, for the last *time*, it *beats*, expelling *blood*, *Guh Gum*, and the warm blood that once carried life within a constant circulation, the same blood that reddened the cheeks of the person that once was, becomes thick and sticky. It congeals and ceases to flow, leaving its own detritus in sanguine clots at the base of the now paralysed heart. And then, subjugated by gravity, the blood sinks through the body, hypostasis reddening the back, the shoulders and the buttocks with large areas of dappled rouge. After twenty-four hours, rigor passes, the skin blues, the flesh grows cold and the body, once vital, relaxes into the cold and purposeless flexibility of the corpse. It becomes just a thing, a dead thing, a corpse, lumpish and barren. 'She', or 'he' becomes an 'it'. The 'I' lost.

I am an artist in scientists' clothing. My blue surgical scrubs, my white coat, these clinical trappings of the task belie the subjectivity that I bring to my work in the cold, harshly lit expanse of the dissection room. But my subjects have become objects. As bodies donated, embalmed and steeped in Thiel fluid, they have transitioned from corpses to cadavers, all brought together in the name of science and depersonalised, deconstructed and – sometimes – decomposed. Face-to-face with anonymity, I have had to learn how to compose myself in the presence of death.