the oil baron

ROBERT GAMBLIN COMBINES SCIENCE AND INTUITION TO CREATE PAINT THAT IS USED BY ARTISTS AND MUSEUMS ALL OVER THE WORLD.

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IN THE BEGINNING, ROBERT GAMBLIN CREATED WHITE. TITANIUM WHITE. ZINC WHITE. TITANIUM ZINC WHITE. FOR MOST OF THE YEAR 1980, HE DISAPPEARED INTO A SINGLE-CAR GARAGE IN THE SOUTH-EAST QUARTER OF PORTLAND, OREGON, TO PRACTISE WHITE. IN HIS SUBSEQUENT PAINTINGS OF THAT MAKESHIFT FACTORY, THE GARAGE IS A WARM LAMBENT RED. BUT IT WASN'T REALLY RED (IT WAS GREY) AND IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN THAT PARTICULAR RED ANYWAY, BECAUSE GAMBLIN HADN'T INVENTED IT YET. HE STILL NEEDED TO LEARN WHITE.

After nine months locked away, Gamblin walked into a Portland art supply store with his white. He felt the colour was ready to sell and a few places seemed open to trying it. Kids didn't come knocking with homemade oil paint all that often, plus this was white: the easiest colour to offload, the colour every painter needs to work a canvas. "If you look at the value of the palette, it's very dark," Gamblin says, gesturing to the 200-something hues of oil paint that Gamblin Artists Colors now sells. "And if you look at the value of the world, it's light. The white is the light of the canvas."

Thirty-three years after he stepped out of his garage, Gamblin Artists Colors has become the largest manufacturer of oil paints in the United States. More tellingly, it is the one company in America that makes only oils – no watercolours, no acrylics.

The Gamblin workshop and studio now occupies an anonymous warehouse in Portland's eastside industrial waterfront, one block from the churning Willamette River. It's a neighbourhood that has proven largely impervious to the influx of young bohemians who define the city. New-age tea company Tazo has its headquarters here, and performance-artist-turned-filmmaker Miranda July once squatted nearby in a semi-abandoned apartment with some serious mouse problems. But today the blocks beneath the bridge overpasses are largely home to greengrocers and wholesalers.

When Gamblin finished his post-grad work at the San Francisco Art Institute he planned to become a painter, but soon realised that he understood next to nothing about paint. "I thought I'm out of here, but I really don't know much about paint, and I don't think anybody else does either," he remembers thinking. "I couldn't tell you the difference between cobalt blue, ultramarine blue and cerulean blue." After working out white he decided to try other colours, and his company has followed his immersion into all sorts of shades. "After years of standing in front of a three-roll wheel there's now a place in my soul where ultramarine lives and a place in my soul where cobalt lives," he says.

When we visit the workshop, Gamblin is standing in front of one of those three-roll wheels, a machine that literally reflects its name: three wheels, that roll. It's kind of like a newspaper printing press shrunk to the size of a foosball table.

The three-roll marks the final step in the paint-making process. The production begins at the other end of the factory, where barrels of pigments sit. Pigments are powders of pure colour, either made from materials buried in the earth – think of the charcoal first used in cave paintings – or synthetically refined from organic elements by chemists. These latter recipes are more expensive; cadmium red costs around $2000 a barrel. "It doesn't take very much until you've got $100,000 of pigment just sitting around," Gamblin observes.

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THE GAMBLIN FACTORY SOUNDS MORE LIKE A CARPENTER'S SHOP THAN AN INDUSTRIAL PLANT. THE FUSING AND MIXING IS OVERSEEN BY 21 WORKERS, ALL OF THEM ARTISTS AND MOST OF THEM (THIS BEING PORTLAND) MUSICIANS IN SOME STAGE OF FORMING A BAND.

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To make any shade of paint, pigments are fused with oils such as refined linseed oil and safflower oil, using blenders in large metal mixing pots. The friction alone heats the oil and pigment to around 37 degrees Celsius, but it's a remarkably quiet process. At the height of production, the Gamblin factory sounds more like a carpenter's shop than an industrial plant. The fusing and mixing is overseen by 21 workers, all of them artists and most of them (this being Portland) musicians in some stage of forming a band.

The newly mixed paint must wait a day to cool, then it's on to the three-roll wheel, which mills it into an even viscosity and fully displays the hue. Compressed between the wheels and scraped off with long metal paddles, the paint undulates in a round mound like greasy, brightly dyed gelato.

At 64, Gamblin – who still rides his bicycle to work most days – has a shock of hair as white as the colours he first mixed. As he watches the science of paint making at work, he begins to describe the art of making the colour that's currently on the wheel. It's a rich but muted variation of cerulean blue, invented after leafing through past volumes of *Smith Journal*.

"After you get over the idea that it's absurd to try to formulate a colour that expresses what it is to be a guy these days, the first way to get there is: Is it going to be warm, or is it going to be cool?" he explains. "This one is going to be on the cooler side, but the man we're describing is not a cold son of a bitch. So that puts me into the warm blue part of the palette. So here I am, getting intellectual pretty quickly about a warm blue."

Gamblin goes on in this vein for a while, his gentle, reedy voice outlining the contours of the colour: not too grey, to keep a sense of trust; not too bright, to avoid ostentatious display. The fascinating bit is that he can do this with any colour. Give him a shade, and he can tell you its emotional resonance in a way that seems both well reasoned and intuitive.

Sap green. "It has two very different faces that it puts on. When it's thick, it can almost function as a cold black. But there are certain parts where it can feel very, very warm."

Raw umber. "It comes from the earth, and has an element of manganese that makes it so dark. The light that comes off raw umber is really soft and very calm."

Cobalt violet. "There are certain parts of the violet hue that are very noble, and also spiritual. And then there are sides of purple that are just deathly; the colour of a corpse."

Cadmium yellow. "It vibrates at a very high intensity. If I've had too much coffee, I'm feeling cadmium yellow light."

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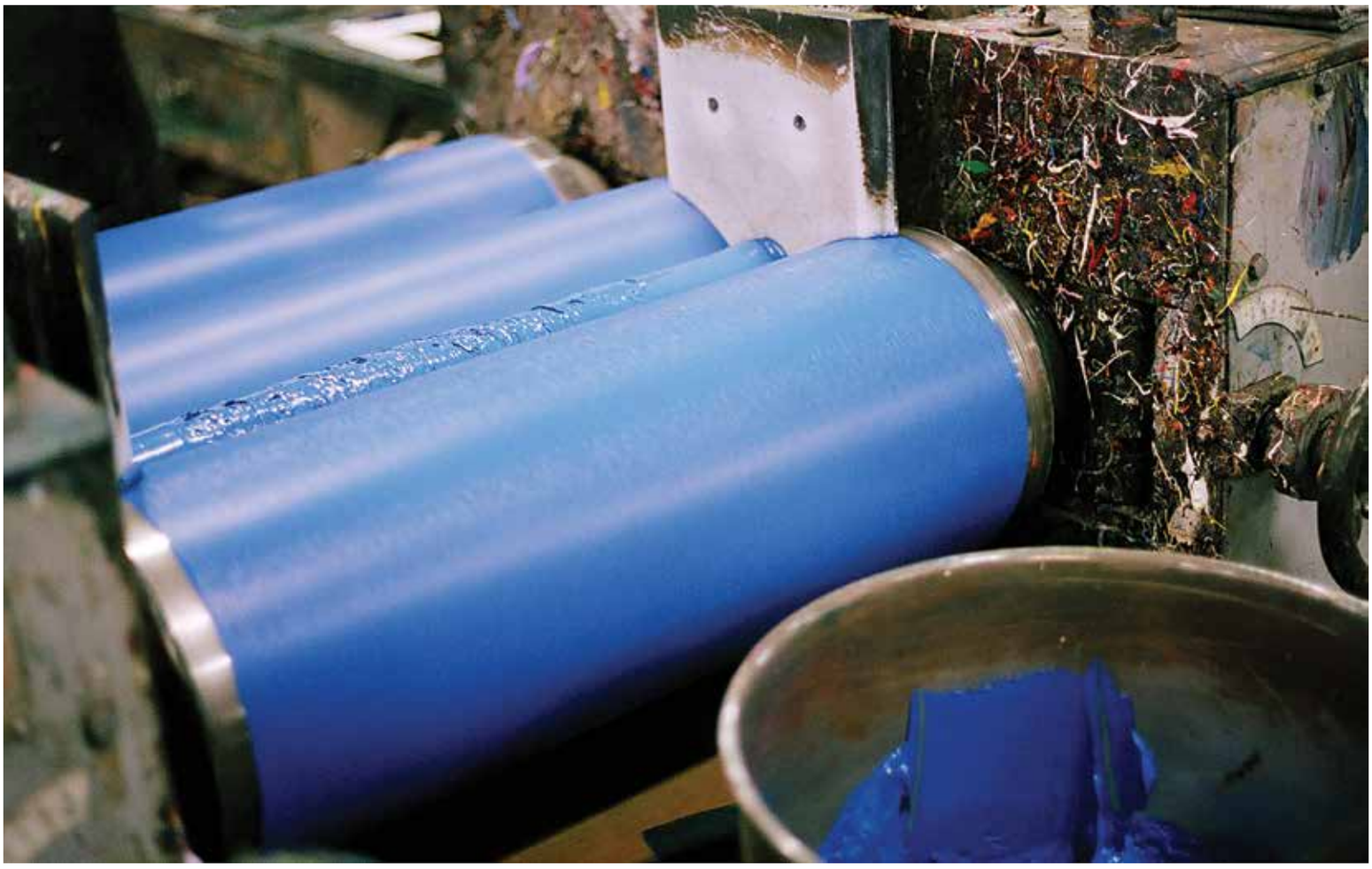
YOU CAN NOW BUY STUFF AND MAKE A PAINTING AS IF YOU WERE LIVING IN 1554, AS IF YOU WERE LIVING IN 1848, OR AS IF YOU WERE LIVING TODAY. I WOULD HAVE LOVED FOR MONET TO USE OUR PAINTS – AND HE WOULD HAVE USED A LOT OF THEM.



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The array of colours and meanings goes on – far more than it used to. Gamblin describes this moment as "the richest time in history" for oil painting. He doesn't mean just for himself (although he no longer spends most of the year flying on commuter planes from one city to another, showing off his wares), but for painters, who have hundreds more colours available to work with than the masters of yesteryear.

So while David Hockney has been photographed with tubes of Gamblin paints on his shelves, and Wolf Kahn – one of Gamblin's mentors – wrote to sing the praises of transparent orange, Gamblin likes to imagine what past artists might have thought. "You can now buy stuff and make a painting as if you were living in 1554, as if you were living in 1848, or as if you were living today," he says. "I would have loved for Monet to use our paints – and he would have used a lot of them." It was this interest in the past that led Gamblin to his most ambitious and famed project: making historically accurate paint for the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1989, the world's largest museum needed to restore fading paintings from the 17th through 19th centuries. Gamblin bid on the job, telling the curators he was the only manufacturer who understood the details of the lost hues. Using 300-millilitre samples from old paintings (about 10 tubes' worth) he mixed paints that hadn't been seen since the Industrial Revolution.

But today, Gamblin would rather talk about the future. He's proudest of the role the studio has played in nearly eliminating the use of turpentine as a solvent, by making paints that can be diluted with odourless mineral spirits. He's made another line of oils that need no solvent at all. (The trick was making sure they didn't wrinkle.) Gamblin got rid of turpentine due to an unexpected but happy by-product of the petrol industry. The factory uses nothing but its signature mineral spirit, Gamsol, a petroleum distillate with all the aromatic solvents removed. Completely non-toxic, it has no distinguishable smell.

Those missing odours have changed things for artists too. A woman in Alabama once wrote to Gamblin in a panic. She was trying to paint in her second bedroom, but had been driven out by turpentine fumes. "Her body just hit the wall with these strong solvents," he recalls. "She couldn't even go in there anymore." He told her to remove all her old materials and just use Gamsol. "I got back this four or five page letter," Gamblin remembers, "about how we saved her life because we saved her career."

Gamblin's assistance to artists is not usually so dramatic. His heroes are painters like Wolf Kahn, who devote themselves to education, and Gamblin now spends much of his time creating less expensive paints for students and beginners. He can keenly recall the struggle of working with crappy paint at art school, and describes the difficulty of capturing simple landscapes — like a backyard or the muted colour of a lawn — with cheap paint. Modern organic oils are too bright for realist landscapes, he says, so what a young painter really needs are the mineral pigments of the Old Masters – the expensive stuff. What he's striving to do is make the right hues for the task, at the right price. "We're not making art," he says. "We're making the raw material for the artist that will bring out their greatest potential."

His art is providing the means for others to make their art, and his job is making and selling paint. As Robert Gamblin sits in the studio he shares with his wife, printmaker Catherine Kumlin, he reflects on how a little bit of the resonance in any oil paint comes from its name. He understands each colour precisely. But sometimes he has to lighten up.

"There was a colour that we brought out as "phthalo green yellow shade," Gamblin recalls. "Phthalo green sells really well. So I thought phthalo green yellow shade would sell even better. It sold terribly. I changed its name to phthalo emerald and its sales doubled. You can't be too correct in naming things. It's important in this job to leave a shred of romance."

gamblincolors.com •