

All Shades of Blue: Artists' books by Roelof Bakker and Caren Florance speak of loss through colour and texture, visual allusion and sensory touch.

Ultramarine Blue is historically a colour aligned with rarity and unattainability in the Western world. Used extensively during the Italian Renaissance for its association with religious purity, representing the unreachable sky over the browns of touchable, base earth. More recent artists, writers, film-makers and musicians have been inspired by blue's emotive powers, from Picasso to Yves Klein; Billie Holliday to Maggie Nelson; Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours: Blue*, and the infinite possibilities of composition for Miles Davis. In artists' books such as Julie Johnstone and Nancy Campbell's *Grass of Parnassus, Lindisfarne* (2023), it celebrates the tidal island's landscape and grasslands and ever-changing hues of its sky.

How do we articulate a sense of what is missing through colour? Two books by artists living on different sides of the globe explore loss in blue. Roelof Bakker, a Hastings-based artist and writer originally from the Netherlands, has lived in the UK since 1984. His work addresses queerness, nature and ecological collapse. Caren Florance (aka Ampersand Duck) from Bega, Australia, works with press-based and hand-printed relief printmaking, creating artists' books and prints. She has been awarded a 2024 National Library of Australia Research Fellowship to research artists' books from the Graphic Investigations Workshop (1978-1998) held at the NLA's archives.

Touch has played a part in the creation and reception of these two books. We feel physical loss through tangible touch. *Some Queer Animals** by Roelof Bakker records British wildlife killed on roads and fields; each dead body found during his walks delicately handled; its portrait rendered in cyanotype... 'producing fossil-like copies in white and blue, before being returned to nature, [each body] placed under a shrub at the edge of a field'. Florance created *DisRemembering* for a collaborative artists' books project with Sara Bowen and Rhonda Ayliffe responding to published texts. This particular text is Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (Penguin, 2015), which explores the effect of trauma on the mind and the body. 'Sara and I made work directly about our families; Ronnie is exploring the trauma inflicted on her community by the 2019/20 bushfires.' *DisRemembering* is one of a series of books about her mother's early-onset dementia triggered by the suicide of Florance's younger brother as a teenager.

Florance explains: [the book is] 'materially complex because I finally had access to a letterpress studio [after lockdown]. The duality of sadness and beauty plays a part. I chose Reflex Blue as an intense colour that seems to hold grief but also contains a lively vibration; I used large woodtype letters and made them turn their backs to the reader, exposing their wavelike woodgrain, their wear and tear, their flaws. The text thinks about forgetfulness as a desire path, a thin foot-worn shortcut between more established thoroughfares. Meaning exists in the pages, behind the blocks and amongst the gridded watercolour brush-marks that evoke routine, medication, or blue gas flames.... By early 2022, mum had completely forgotten that she had a son. This upset my father a bit, but I started to feel that forgetting is not always a negative action, because mum is happier, less burdened, and more able to appreciate each moment than she was when she was weighed down by grief.'

Bakker's *Some Queer Animals* is an environmental lament: 'Articulated from experiences recorded during lockdown walks 'around the village of Linton in Cambridgeshire. I cruised nature, putting my physical self within it, reducing the distance between animal being and

human being, recording British wildlife killed on roads, as well as animals found dead in the surrounding landscape.' It speaks of 'the global loss of 70% of wildlife in the last fifty years. The 33 prints including: song thrush, kestrel, fallow deer, wood mouse, brown hare, toad, fox, are 'post-mortem life-size portraits, queer impressions of wildlife violently killed, memorials to non-human persons who once lived in my locality, each with their own life story and family.' The book's epitaph is a quote by Derek Jarman (from the manuscript of his film *Blue*, 1993) "Blue is darkness made visible". 'The process of documenting through cyanotypes in the field proposes a closer, mutually caring relationship with nature and wildlife'. For Bakker, it's also 'a project about hope ('white is hope lit up') - a call to nurture wildlife/nature not destroy.'

These artworks, while deeply personal, speak of universal loss, tracing out further to wider worlds of conflict, displacement, losses of routines and stability. They show how lives are inextricably linked no matter how much distance or memory removes us from each other or our surroundings. They render this sadness tenderly through a colour that connects us all under one blue sky.

**Full title: Some Queer Animals: postmortem cyanotype impressions of British wildlife killed on roads and in the landscape of one English village, May 2020-September 2021.*

<https://rbakker.com>

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