Malene Bach

The Danish artist discusses how to use color intelligently at home.

Malene Bach creates symphonies of color. She uses paint in audacious but measured doses, in meaningful places and studied hues. The effect is thrilling.

Bach's portfolio reflects an eclectic career dominated by a sense of fun: She has painted on canvas and grainy wood, but also masterminded a contemporary reinterpretation of a Romanesque church, outdoor sculptures, an indoor swimming pool, installations, ornamentation and videos. Her work is deceptively simple: What you see are bold shapes and pigment, but what you feel is energy.

You work in so many mediums. Which was your starting point? My father is a painter, so I've been working with paint since I was a kid. But after my studies, I started to get more interested in the relationship between color and space. I worked more and more in three-dimensional spaces, still with paint but using it as a material—as a form with volume. This process took me away from the canvas. We call it painting in the extended field, or painting beyond the frame.

How do you think about color? Color never stands alone. When I think about how color meets the space, I consider how much space it takes up and where in the space it's situated. Material is also a part of it: If you have a yellow raincoat or a yellow carpet or a pane of transparent yellow glass, then the yellow looks different in every context.

Even the same shade of yellow? Exactly. So, this is why yellow is not only yellow. It's always related to something else, always bound in a material.

Is there a common mistake people make when adding color to their homes? Often people say, "Oh, we should add some color," so they'll paint the walls red or blue. But what happens then is that all other colors in the space are rejected. I always work with colors in which all other colors would feel good. I learned a trick from Le Corbusier, the architect. If you have a blue and want to make it grayer, the way they do it today is by adding white and black. The right way to make a color grayer would be to add its contrasting color.

Do you dislike white walls? Oh no. Sometimes you just need white because maybe you have a lot of nice colorful objects in the space. But do you know what I think is a nightmare? When you walk into these big companies and everything is white, black and gray. This is tyranny. It's like brainwashing. What color does is actually connect people to a space, to a place. When there's color, it welcomes senses, feelings, happiness, sorrow, laughter, lust, dreams, memories. If there's no color at all, there's no space to be a human being.

How do you approach site-specific work? I always work within the context. How deep can you dig into the history of a place, the site, the geography of the building itself? This is very important because this is part of the identity of a space.

What do you wish for people who interact with something you've created? When people suddenly realize what they are sensing, that's enough for me. The present moment becomes totally clear and you feel alive. It's very life-affirming.