LA WEEKLY

Kate Middleton Helped Make Emerald the Color of 2013. An L.A. Art Exhibit Asks Why

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY THURSDAY, APRIL 11, 2013

Meg Cranston's painting of Kate Middleton, now at LAXART
PHOTO BY MICHAEL UNDERWOOD, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LAXART, LOS ANGELES

Last year's color was Tangerine Tango, a deep orange "energy boost." In 2011, it was Honeysuckle, a hot pink that "lifts spirits and imparts confidence." This year, it's emerald, a color of "elegance and beauty" that enhances "our sense of well-being," according to Pantone, the company that has been naming one color "color of the year" since 2000. Artist Meg Cranston, who follows such forecasts closely, takes emerald green and all its connotations as her subject and material for her current exhibition at LAXArt.

The exhibition includes one long wall and one shorter one, both painted emerald. On the shorter wall hangs a painting Cranston did of Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, smiling, wearing that hyped emerald dress with a peace-sign print made by luxury brand Mulberry. She wore the dress to an opening at the British Natural History Museum in November.

On the remaining white wall hangs an emerald green monochrome. It's artist Josef Albers meets tabloid *Daily Mail*, a concise treatment of just one shade of green with a flash of celebrity fetishism interrupting the minimalist veneer.

The directness of Cranston's execution means you get the thrust of the exhibition, titled "Emerald City," as soon as you walk in. "I knew that emerald was the No. 1 color by November 2012," she says — by then, Pantone's 2013 choice was general knowledge among industry insiders. "Then Kate Middleton wore this color — the No. 1 color and the No. 1 girl."

Middleton had worn the No. 1 color a few times before, most notably in May 2012, when she dressed in a flowing, lace-backed evening gown by

designer Jenny Packham, who has said she does not "feel the need to be quirky or avant-garde," though she is on trend enough to have likely begun using the "it" color before Pantone completed its color of 2013 deliberations.

"Most of the time, artists wouldn't say they're influenced by design," Cranston says. "But I'm interested in how, in our culture, the built environment looks the way it does, in part, because of companies like Pantone."

Pantone is not the only color-forecasting company — a number of paint companies, like Sherwin-Williams and Benjamin Moore, also forecast — but it may be the best known. And, unlike its paint-making peers, color is Pantone's main business. The company first gained a reputation in the 1960s for its color-matching system. Lawrence Herbert, a young employee at what was then a print company called Pantone, developed this system because he recognized how widely printers, ink-makers and designers could vary in their conception of color. He wanted a "universal" system, so that a designer in Indiana could be sure that a producer in New Delhi used the same red or green.

Herbert, who bought out Pantone from his employers in 1962, assigned numbers to tones and hues and began printing the Pantone guidebooks. Designers and printers still use these guidebooks — thick with removable color chips that were updated as computer monitors and ink-jet printers became the norm — to coordinate their colors, or for other purposes. As Lisa Herbert, Herbert's daughter and current consumer licensing VP at Pantone, recently told *The New York Times*, Calvin Klein kept a chip in the kitchen so his chef would always know how brown to make the coffee.

Pantone also has a chip for International Yves Klein Blue, the powdery ultramarine French artist Klein made his signature in 1961, which means the company may be propagating the late artist's legacy better than any museum could.

"No one can own a color, but Pantone owns the standard for describing it,"

journalist Allison Fass wrote in 2003, considering the company's past and future for *Forbes*.

Pantone began its color of the year announcements when "it became apparent ... that people were looking to us for specific information — what does color mean? What is the symbolic value?" says Leatrice Eiseman, the Pantone Color Institute's executive director. "The light bulb went off for us."

Eiseman, a color specialist who studied psychology at Antioch University and counseling at UCLA and began consulting with Pantone around 1985, points out that because the company sells primarily information, it has "a degree of objectivity and a degree of dependability." Designers and companies who have trusted Pantone to describe color trust it to define trends.

"We look for the little nuggets of information that make our antenna start to wiggle," Eiseman says of herself and her colleagues. They pay attention to colors of car finishes, the popularity of certain gemstones, films in production — for instance, they knew *Oz the Great and Powerful*, starring James Franco, would be out early in 2013. They noticed Kate Middleton's green dresses, too.

"You do have to track the trendsetters," Eiseman says. "It doesn't mean [Kate's] going to wear [emerald] to the exclusion of other colors, but it does say something, because she is someone who is getting a lot of attention."
When Meg Cranston began her acrylic portrait of Middleton, based on a slightly awkward photo of the Duchess half-turned, with one hand pointing and bent at the wrist and the other on her belt, the first official portrait of Middleton had just been unveiled. "That was a coincidence," Cranston says, but a funny coincidence, given how harshly criticized and out-of-touch that official portrait was — showing Middleton smirking, ashen-faced and looking more like a 51-year-old than a 31-year-old.

"Her eyes are dead and she wears the strained smile of a woman who really wants to tell the painter to bugger off," Booker Prize–winning

novelist Hilary Mantel said of the portrait when she spoke at the British Museum in February.

In that same lecture, titled "Royal Bodies," Mantel noted that "Kate seems to have been selected for her role of princess because she was irreproachable: as painfully thin as anyone could wish, without quirks, without oddities, without the risk of the emergence of character," capable of "going from perfect bride to perfect mother, with no messy deviation." Tabloids and newspapers that don't usually care about museum lectures accused the novelist of reducing Middleton to a body.

But Mantel's point seemed to be that the No. 1 girl was so good at playing her role and not rocking the boat that it had become easy to see her as more symbol than person, a symbol with a well-tailored, stylish surface.
This actually dovetails nicely with the effect of Cranston's exhibition. That green, presented in a seamlessly deadpan way with Middleton's likeness hung over it, mimics everyday sights that it's easy to take for granted.

"I see my use of color as a kind of realism of the built world," says Cranston, who has been tracking emerald in magazines and department stores and gauging its success via stock-market sales. But realism is, in this case, also absurd: How strange that, in a world this big, one color could have such reach.

The exhibition title, "Emerald City," a reference not only to the subject of a new Hollywood film but to a monochromatic, palatial place with an authoritarian ruler, when paired with the duchess's likeness suggests an almost tyrannical connectedness between these different strains of the commercial and aesthetic landscape.

Says Cranston, "Kate Middleton going to Oz — it's a poetic connection."

MEG CRANSTON: EMERALD CITY | LAXART, 2640 S. La Cienega, Culver City | Through April 20 | laxart.org