



The Blue Afar Amanda McCavour



Installation View: Far Away Blue Fields, Thames Art Gallery

Blue Distance: Amanda McCavour

By Matthew Ryan Smith

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away.

– Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*¹

A cavalcade of blooming blue flowers suspends from the ceiling on tiny threads. Walls replete with blue bees, leaves, weeds, and birds look like an immense picture book. Amanda McCavour's *Far Away Blue Fields* and *The Horizon, The Ocean, The Sky* anticipate worlds beyond the confines of the gallery, far away from the throes of winter in Chatham, Ontario.

McCavour is recognised for her unusual stitching techniques and large-scale embroidered object installations. Her works are utterly fantastical, dreamy, and ethereal. She poignantly considers the response of light on matter and pushes imagination to the margins. The installations that comprise *The Blue Afar* speculate on the physiological, cultural, and metaphorical meaning of the colour blue.

Historically, the colour blue has continually gripped the minds of artists. During the early Italian Renaissance, Giotto was so enamoured by it that he painted the night sky in the Scrovegni Chapel an inimitable, glowing blue. Yves Klein's mid-20th century preoccupation with blue led him to invent and trademark his own hue: International Klein Blue. Obsessed with the metaphysical symbolism

of the sky, Klein declared, "the blue sky is my first artwork."² The cultural significance of blue has been studied extensively throughout the complex history of painting, but rarely has it been investigated within the context of contemporary embroidery practice. McCavour's work opens new trajectories for blue's entanglement with needle and thread.

Still, the colour blue is terribly polysemantic: though it remains the world's favourite colour,³ it is routinely associated with feelings of melancholy and sadness; it can typify a beautiful sky, or, in contrast, a violent sea; it is the colour of the fruit we eat, but also the incarnation of Snow White's poison apple. Studies have shown that being in a blue room impacts the body by reducing heart rate and body temperature.⁴ The colour blue is, therefore, elemental to the core of human beings at a very primal level. Blue is connected to the textures of our psyche and is deeply imprinted upon the human condition. It is a way of expressing the infinitesimal breadth of our feelings and emotions. Understanding this history and context, McCavour's embroidery aspires to determine what is beautiful about blue.



Installation View: *The Horizon, The Ocean, The Sky*, Thames Art Gallery

In her book *A Field Guide for Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit poetically observes that, “The world is blue at its edges and in its depths.”⁵ The peripheries of the world that she elucidates are those spaces most distant to the naked eye, such as the finite border where the horizon meets the sky or the abyss of the ocean depths. Her conceptualisation of blue holds an emotive quality that no other colour visible to the human eye possesses. Solnit finds that these most distant of places, where the visible light is the bluest blue, “gives us the beauty of the world.”⁶ This is where McCavour’s exhibition derives its name, the beauty of blue from a distance, *The Blue Afar*.

The largest installation within the exhibition, *Far Away Blue Fields*, dares to materialise the blue

of distance that Solnit identifies in her writings. A constellation of powder blue orbs resembling cumulus clouds rest above a vista of azure blue flowers, which sway and twist with the natural currents of air inside the gallery. The saturation of blue in the viewer’s visual field is a critical attempt to manifest the beauty of the horizon’s edge up-close, but just out of reach. It is in this space, Solnit reminds us, that blue is at its most beautiful and affecting. Thus, *Far Away Blue Fields* closes the physical distance between us and the edges of the world—where the earth meets the sky—so that the audience finds themselves thoroughly immersed in blue.

The companion piece to *Far Away Blue Fields*, titled, *The Horizon, the Ocean, the Sky*, is similarly intended to forge a, “blue reality” that exists, “always out of reach.”⁷ It is not a huge jump to equate McCavour’s blue reality to a divine, even Edenic, paradise. This is deliberate. Positioned where they are in the smallest space in the gallery, viewers are invited to move amongst these natural objects. In doing so, they are reminded that they are not only in nature but are of nature. It is true, as Henry David Thoreau said in *Walden*, that “We need the tonic of wildness [...] we can never have enough of nature.”⁸ This message is needed wholeheartedly during the slushy doldrums of winter in Ontario, when most of our time is spent indoors waiting for spring.

Sometimes, however, blue has little to do with beauty at all, and more to do with the sting of poignant emotions like desire and longing. Solnit suggests that, “blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in.”⁹ Her words allude to a fervent desire to stand where you are not, to get away from what is entirely familiar, and to start anew somewhere that’s perfectly

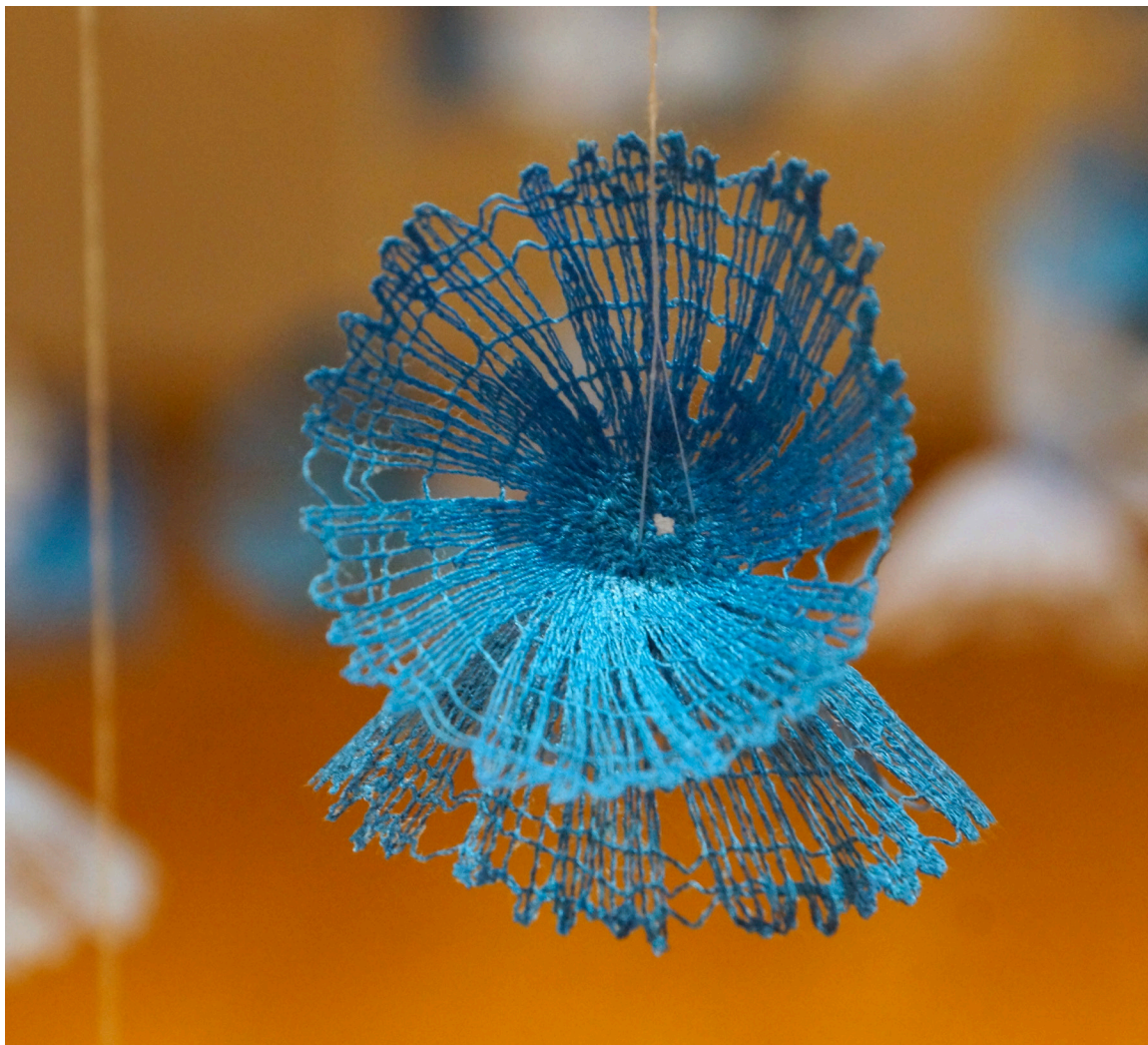
hidden. While the occasional longing to flee from circumstance might be a universal human emotion, blue is the colour that embodies this elusive, impossible destination. Turn on the news or read a newspaper and the world is not blue; it’s far from it. This makes longing for the refuge of blue all the more powerful.

The Blue Afar reaches out to the edges and depths of the world, pulling them into the gallery for viewers to experience the sublimity of blue light. Materially, McCavour’s blue embroidery takes hold of our innate physiological predispositions to manufacture calm, quiet, and repose. Metaphorically, it aspires for the unbearable distances between here and there, and between the woefully ordinary and the captivatingly unknown. By examining beauty through the creation of ethereal environments, McCavour illustrates the enriching value of nature to our lives.

Though one question remains: is blue the artist’s favourite colour?

Endnotes

1. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide for Getting Lost* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2005), 29.
2. Yves Klein quoted in Alastair Sooke, “Yves Klein: The man who invented a colour,” BBC (27 August, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140828-the-man-who-invented-a-colour>
3. Doug Bolton, “Blue is apparently the world’s favourite colour,” *The Independent*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/weird-news/blue-is-apparently-the-world-s-favourite-colour-10305057.html>
4. AL-Ayash A., Kane R.T., Smith D., and Green-Armytage P, “The influence of color on student emotion, heart rate, and performance in learning environments,” *Color Research and Application* 41.2 (2015): 196-205.
5. Solnit, *A Field Guide for Getting Lost*, 29.
6. Solnit, *A Field Guide for Getting Lost*, 29.
7. Amanda McCavour, “Amanda McCavour: Artist,” Facebook, April, 30, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/amandamccavourart>
8. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1854]), 282-283.
9. Solnit, *A Field Guide for Getting Lost*, 29-30.



Far Away Blue Fields, Detail

Guest Curator Matthew Ryan Smith – Biography

Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD, is the Curator & Head of Collections of Glenhyrst Art Gallery in Brantford, Ontario, an independent curator, and the literary editor of *First American Art Magazine*. His writings have appeared in several publications, including *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings*, and *C Magazine*, in addition to a number of academic books and articles. In 2021, Matthew served as editor of Eli Baxter's memoir titled, *Aki-wayn-zih: A person as Worthy as the Earth*, which was awarded the Governor General's Award for nonfiction.



Installation View: *Far Away Blue Fields*, Thames Art Gallery

The Blue Afar Amanda McCavour
January 26, 2024 - March 24, 2024
Opening Reception: January 26, 2024 | 7:00 pm

Guest Curator: Matthew Ryan Smith

Gallery Director/Curator: Phil Vanderwall
Acting Assistant Curator: Tavis Lea
Program Coordinator: Irene MacCreadie
Design: Donna Nolan
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List of works

Amanda McCavour

The Horizon, The Ocean, The Sky, thread, wool roving, organza, linen, pins, 2021-2022

Amanda McCavour

Far Away Blue Fields, thread, 2021-2022

Cover image: *Far Away Blue Fields*, thread, 2021-2022



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