



Labours for Colour (notes on a collection)

Hung in a gold gilt frame, in the Musée d'Orsay lies a famous painting of gleaners. Two women bending down at the waist, each with one arm outstretched to the ground and the other placed on their back. A third woman stands to one side, the angle of her back framing the painting. They are gleaning. That is, they are picking up the unwanted remnants left over from a wheat harvest.

Gleaners are ones who recover value in what has been discarded (a gleaner will humbly stoop down, as Agnès Varda reminds us). They carry out a process of renewal, by extending the worth of an object's life.

To glean in the collecting sense, reveals a small moment of encounter, of discovery. To my ears, the word *glean* sounds like a small golden nugget. Pulled out of someone's ear. Like a magician's trick.

I am thinking about the difference between a gleaner and a collector. A gleaner, as in Millet's painting speaks to marginal women's labour. Of working along the edges of respectability. In contrast, a collector collects not out of professional need, but out of a love for the object, and their collection is conserved as a lineage to be passed on. However, contained within the folds of these two modes of acquiring and possession there is a margin of cross over: the collector also gleanes objects into lasting value.

When a collector encounters an object, as with gleaning, they reach out and pluck out an object from one context and then they reconfigure its meaning by placing them into a new context. They place these objects in relationship to other objects, and a collection is forged by arranging them in categories according to geography, material, or time period.

This is a story about a collection. Or rather, about how objects migrate through collections and how their meanings change through this process. It is about the many hands that pass over an object during its lifetime. And also, how their handlers change in this contact.

This collection is housed not in a museum, but in a person's home. These objects are contained within the daily rhythm of a person's life. They sit alongside books stacked up in piles on the floor, paper bills on a kitchen table, cups of tea on the sofa. Beethoven sonatas, played through a home sound system, wraps around them. *Do objects hold an aural imprint?* These objects are cared for, in ways no museum archivist would allow. They are picked up and handled with bare hands. Dusted and wiped in acts of domestic cleaning. Those made from cloth, have once been washed in a bathtub, in PH neutral soap. For this collector knows about the biology of things, that material objects are host to the microbial.

This collection began with a chance sighting of the colour blue. An indigo dyed ikat. A deep blackened blue that some say has the ability to possess, born from witchcraft and magic.

Ikat means to tie or to bind. The pattern is made by resist dying along the warp threads that are tied vertically on a loom. In the village of Tanglad, on the island of Nusa Penida, weft ikat is used to make *cepuk*, ritualised cloths that hold the power to protect the vulnerable body in rites of passage, or to enclose a ritual space in *upacara* (ceremony). Weft ikat is a complex process where the pattern of a cloth is dyed along the horizontal threads. It requires immense skill to calculate a pattern before the weaving begins and to keep the pattern sustained. The traditional colour of *cepuk* is the red orange from the morinda plant that can take months, or up to a year of repeated dying.

The diamond motif associated with *cepuk* is linked to the geometrical patterns of *patola* weaving from Gujarat, India, revealing trade routes going back to the 16th Century. Weaving patterns reveal transcultural trajectories. That is, new cultural formations that occur through processes of exchange, entanglements, contact between disparate cultures, arising from uneven power relations. Transculturation reveals how material things, and the processes that they arise from, change in their signification as they migrate.

There are two strands of thought being traced here. One of weaving and the other of collecting. Perhaps one can think of collecting as akin to the process of ikat. A collection is the gradual process of accumulating things over time. It is in the simplest sense, an archive that draws connection between multiple points in time, where disparate cultural threads are woven together into a discerning pattern.

And how to traverse this archive now, as it sits in someone's home, in a context so removed from its origins, where the names of their makers have been subsumed in networks of exchange and trade? Archives are never neutral, they tell the story of the collector, of their sensibility, their discernments, their personal navigations of places and people. And this particular collection holds surprising appetites for things that have not always been conventionally valued – woven harvesting baskets, a decorated rattan baby carrier, smiling buddha statues made as wishing objects, to be left at a temple shrine. It tells the story of a collector who gleanes.

— Leyla Stevens