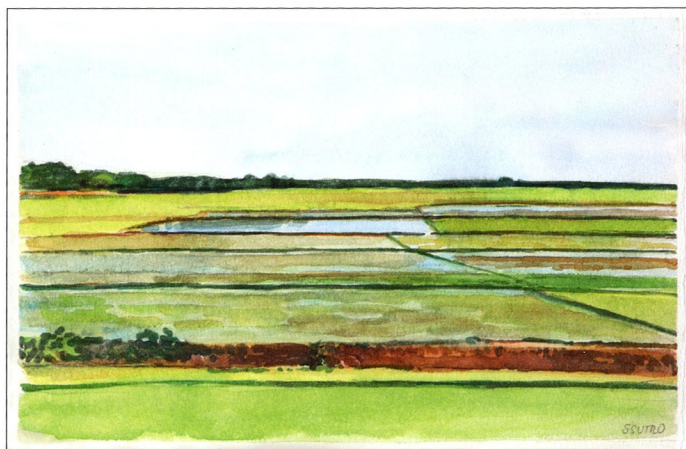


Colors: Passages through Art, Asia and Nature by Sarah Sutro. North Adams, Massachusetts: Blue Asia Press, 2010. 129 pp.

Review by Gail Leggio

This is a very personal little book, essentially a memoir describing how the author learned the dyer's craft while living in Bangladesh. But Sarah Sutro, a painter and poet who has been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony and a visiting artist/writer at the American Academy in Rome, the recipient of a Pollock Krasner Grant and a teacher at a number of colleges and universities, is fully cognizant of the cultural implications of her experiences. The painstaking process of harvesting plants, preparing different kinds of cloth for dyeing and setting colors cannot be rushed. The underlying philosophy is ecologically responsible and critical of synthetic, pre-packaged materials: "It strikes me as the days go on that what the West's time-saving devices are doing (besides polluting the atmosphere and earth) are keeping us—for better or worse—from doing all the small measuring, stirring rituals which make up a relationship to earthen materials and actual measure....These feel like ancient rituals we are doing, none of which can be hurried or abbreviated." Sutro avoids preachiness. During the classes at Aranya, a natural dye store, she realizes her limitations. She is not fluent in Bangla; her Japanese friend has to translate some instructions for her. And the others in the class are more skilled. "I doubt that I will become a true dyer of cloth," she admits, "but perhaps a maker of inks and pastes, which I will then use in my work." Sutro's book is part of the long and multidisciplinary tradition of reclaiming the slow-tech of previous centuries. The most famous proponent of the reclaiming movement, William Morris, fostered the Arts and Crafts enterprise, but other manifestations include the contemporary Slow Food trend and the revival of egg tempera painting.

Getting colors readymade out of tubes is actually a fairly recent convenience, and many artists are wondering what was lost when they gave up the labor-intensive but magical procedures of making their own paints, codified in recipe books and formularies. Philip Ball celebrates "the bright promise of pigments" in his thorough, fascinating history *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). Sutro's approach is more episodic. Her short chapters are impressionistic meditations, often keyed to raw materials—tea, indigo, iron and molasses—and moving back in time to discuss her experiences with plants, color and artmaking wherever she has lived. Detailed descriptions of what she calls the "nine steps of dyeing," each step an elaborate process that can yield variable results, are mixed in with recipes, autobiographical anecdotes and larger historical incidents. The pace of her prose is leisurely, but she is a graceful writer. When she visits Aranya, she is attracted



Sarah Sutro, *Rice Fields*
2007

COLLECTION OF THE
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to the colors “on a grid on the wall, soft and pure colors, like a late Mondrian of Asia.” All the colors are derived from vegetation, not from metallic ore.

Sutro’s personal narrative intersects the broader historical record at several points, most effectively in her discussions of indigo. India, Bengal and the Americas are prime growing areas for the plant that yields the beautiful blue dye, although the development of a synthetic version in the early twentieth century made the natural method of harvesting and processing largely irrelevant. There is now a resurgence in natural indigo, led by Ruby, the manager of Aranya, among others, but everyone is aware of the troubled history of cultivation under the British. Sutro briefly describes the Indigo Revolts, which peaked in 1859–60. A similar dynamic played out in pre-Civil War America, where indigo was cultivated as early as the 1740s. Sutro spent time in a small artists’ retreat on one of Georgia’s sea islands and learned about the importance of indigo in the South’s slave-labor economy. The reader is referred to scholarly examinations of this history, but Sutro has her own, more personal contributions to make, both pragmatic and sensuous. A recipe for indigo dye specifies the many steps in the process, which sounds complicated, tedious and yet undeniably magical. A field trip to a two-year-old cultivation plant is fascinating, with statistics smoothly worked into a narrative that captures the physical effort required but also the incidental pleasures of the process. As the plants are beaten into mulch, the dye begins to ferment, the warmth of the sun heating the vats. The water is drained out, and the sediment—“indigo mud”—is saved, then refined through a sieve and “dried into flakes that look like thick blue rose petals.”

The chapter on what she calls the “ecologically friendly” small-business model for indigo production, which she titles “Planting Blue Gold,” is one of the most satisfying in the book. In other places, her focus seems more scattershot, and some readers may find the mix of personal anecdote, broader

history, and recipes and how-to instructions confusing. But Sutro has a distinctive writer's voice that many will find appealing. And her interweaving of different kinds of writing grows out of a tactile response to words, just as the artist responds to the physical properties of paint, ink, paper and fabric. In Ewa Kuryluk's marvelous study *Veronica and Her Cloth*, the author—an artist as well as a scholar—notes the common root of the words *text* and *textile* in the Latin term meaning to weave, construct, compose, and the similarity of the German noun *das mal* (sign, mark, stain, spot) and the verb *malen* (to paint). Kuryluk's feminist model of the artist builds on the iconography of Veronica and the miraculous image, as well as the mythic weavers Athena, Penelope and the Fates. Sutro's book lacks the scope of allusion that Kuryluk commands, but we do see in *Colors* a similar respect for the physicality of materials and the alchemical transformations that occur when cloth—or canvas or paper—is stained.

Sutro's own visual work tends toward the modest. She claims that she went to Ossabow Island in Georgia a still-life painter and became a landscapist there. She has also shifted from oil paints to natural dyes and inks, preferring to use handmade banana and water hyacinth paper or silk. Many of the dyes have a limited life-span for art-making (a pot of indigo goes moldy before she can make much use of it), although properly processed for fabrics, it is colorfast. Some of her paintings are nearly abstract, just suggesting overlays of leaves or tree trunks, while her landscapes may be soft horizontal stripes of blue sky, blue water and yellow-green fields. *Colors*, however, is ultimately more philosophical than practical. Few will have the patience to go back to basics in this thoroughgoing way. But they may be tempted to test the artistic properties of a plant by rubbing it against paper. Certainly, readers will become aware that roots should be collected in autumn and lichens in August, "when they are most acidic and the colors strongest."