



Rowland Ricketts—immanent blue

“**THE SPEED** at which we do something—anything—changes our experience of it,” wrote John Freeman in his essay “A Manifesto for Slow Communication” published last summer in *The Wall Street Journal* (August 21, 2009). His observation is germane to *immanent blue* (2009), an installation by Rowland Ricketts presented at the New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art in New Harmony, Indiana (August 22–October 4, 2009). The town is a historical and arts center located on the site of two early-nineteenth-century utopian communities. The small, nonprofit gallery focuses on art and artists of the Midwest. This was its second fiber art exhibit in recent years.



Ricketts is known for his involvement with indigo—its “raising and nurturing”—and for his art and functional textiles in which this indigo is central. Trying to understand how it has become not just a color but a focus for art, I began our interview with a simple question: What is indigo? He answered that it is a dye and a material first, but one that carries historical and cultural connections. In diverse cultures across the globe, indigo-dyed cloth has for generations been symbolic—of humility, divinity, status, loyalty, sadness, and transformative human experience. Its depth evokes the universe. People are drawn to indigo without being able to rationally explain why. “In my actions—the farming, processing, dyeing—I do what people have done and others still do around the world. This is inherent in the dye. Without this and without the time and energy I invest in the dye, it is just a color.”

Constant observation and control are required to process indigo and to create subtle variation in color. The more Ricketts observes, the more the material reveals, and the

Rowland Ricketts, *immanent blue* (installation shots with details), 2009; indigo-dyed kibira textile partition, felted stones, dried indigo (*Polygonum tinctorium*) plants; gallery dimensions about 22' x 40'; large textile partition dimensions in the center of the space 11' 6" x 30'. Courtesy of the New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art, New Harmony, Indiana. Photos by Rowland Ricketts; detail of felted stones by James Nakagawa, 2008.

more he reflects on its *extramaterial* properties. His title, *immanent blue*, is drawn from philosophy—the concept of a divine essence, which manifests itself through the material world.

The installation is characteristic of the artist's work, although in this display he consciously shares the slow-moving process with viewers. It is spare, understated, and laid out so that viewers are guided through with few distractions from the color. Semitransparent bast-fiber panels dyed sequential shades of blue—evoking indigo's tangible and intangible qualities, its material substance and its extramaterial connections—reach almost from floor to ceiling and hang diagonally across the gallery. On the floor underneath are dried indigo plants, startlingly blue. Hundreds of dyed, felt-covered stones, in colors ranging from deeper than black to the blue of an April sky, are mounted on pins, gradually ascending and descending the walls. Spotlights cast shadows on white walls beneath, creating myriad abstract shapes, also tinged with blue. There is in this work a wonderful combination of textures, dimensions, and shapes, mirroring nature and the hand of man in concert with each other, all elements working together to celebrate connections indigo has forged for 2,500 years between humans and nature. All that is required is to slow down and reflect. 🌿

The gallery website is www.usi.edu/nh_gallery.

