

MARY KARLTON

Yellow Opus, 2013
Acrylic on Canvas, 24 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CLAIRE CHENEY

Color Notebook

Translating
memory
through
pigment

You had many names for yellow. Aureolin, Winsor yellow, yellow ochre, cadmium lemon, bismuth yellow, quinacridone gold. Your handwriting is difficult to read, but the colors speak for themselves, each with a different tone one might use for a lemon, a field, the sheen of a leaf. These colors, mixed with others, create two pages of yellow squares in the notebook I received when you died. Your brother Jim and his wife, Brenda, gave it to me when I visited their new home in Hilo, Hawaii. They bought an old house by a busy road with a view of the ocean and a garden full of edible delights. Jim let me stand on his shoulders to cut the banana stem with his machete, and in the middle of the night I'd wake to the sound of avocados falling on the roof with a startling metallic *thwang*.

Brenda has taken after you in your love of color—she painted the dining room vermillion and the bathroom metallic gold. She told me I was staying in your room, but I think she only calls it that because of your paintings that cover the walls, the colors still bright and full of breath. Your brother told me how your color notebook, entitled “Paints, Pigments and Color Mixing 1999–2000,” was coveted by all of your friends from your painting class—that some had even called looking for it. I hope you don't mind that I have it.

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Scholars disagree about the Ancient Greek name for the color yellow. There's an old script called “Linear B,” which is found on ancient pots and tablets from the Bronze Age. The script is mostly symbols representing commodities, such as olive oil and wine, and the script's signs for the colors red, gray, and black have been deciphered, while the sign for yellow has not. I've been studying this period because of the beautiful frescoes preserved in ash on what is now known as the island of Santorini.

Santorini is southeast of the Greek mainland in the Aegean Sea. The dig site there is called “Akrotiri,” and the findings date from around the middle of the second millennium BCE. Minoans painted the interiors of their buildings a color we call “yellow ochre,” a pigment derived from ferric oxide, a naturally occurring compound found in clay. The pigments used in the frescoes at Akrotiri were mostly made of minerals from the surrounding environment. The paintings were done on lime plaster, applied