

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



11 / Mary Lance, film maker, Corrales, New Mexico

Why are blue jeans blue? Because of blue alchemy. Anyway, that is Mary Lance's take on it. That is why her newest documentary film is titled 'Blue Alchemy: Stories of Indigo'—indigo being the blue dye that has captured the human imagination for millennia. During the California Gold Rush, indigo coloured the sturdy pants made for miners that eventually became blue jeans, a symbol of youthful rebellion already in the 1950s and a present-day wardrobe necessity. But the film is foremost about remarkable people around the globe who are reviving indigo in projects that are intended to preserve cultural integrity and bring beauty to the world. Mary Lance travelled to India, Bangladesh, Mexico, El Salvador, Nigeria, and all over the USA, to research and videotape the stories of people who are using indigo according to their cultural traditions and those who are reviving it to improve their communities.

"The first time I saw images of an indigo vat was in the late 1980s," says Mary Lance, founder of New Deal Films (www.newdealfilms.com). "It was at a lecture about textiles in New York. I learned there about the magical transformation that occurs when fibers emerge from a vat into the air and are transformed from a dull green to a celestial blue. I was hooked and I knew that someday I would make a documentary film about indigo."

I first met Mary Lance some ten years ago through her partner Ben Daitz, also a film maker, who built a casita in Cañones, a small Hispanic village hidden in a narrow, dead-end canyon on the other side of the mountain behind my Abiquiu house. The films I first watched were her documentaries 'Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World'; 'Diego Rivera: I Paint What I See'; and 'Artists at Work: A Film on the New Deal Art Projects' (the 1930s WPA).

I was especially impressed by the Agnes Martin film and not only because I have admired Martin's work since the early 1970s, when I first discovered it in the Boymans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam; her abstract expressionist paintings (she refused to call her work minimal art) of luminous horizontal bands of subtle hues have continued to mesmerize me. The legendary New York-New Mexico painter died in 2012. Over four of the preceding years, Mary Lance interviewed the aging artist; the film gives a rare insight into her philosophy of art and life, and presents Martin in all of her intellectual glory: "My paintings are not about what is seen. They are about what is known forever in the mind." The interviews are undercut with Martin at work in her Taos studio, and archival footage and photographs.

The Agnes Martin film gives convincing testimony of Mary Lance's philosophy of documentary film making: "Know the difference between a subject that interests you and one that you will spend years exploring." Martin as well as indigo took long years to progress from inspiration, via development and research, and in the case of indigo also finding people and locations, to production, to shooting. "But, really, the story only comes alive in editing," says Mary Lance.

Watching 'Blue Alchemy', it becomes impossible *not* to share Mary's fascination with indigo textile dye. It was a truly global product already in the 16th century, in increasing demand due to the tremendous upsurge in textile production during the Industrial Revolution. "Near the end of the 19th century, all this came to a sudden end when synthetic indigo was brought onto the market. But outside the industrial world, in traditional societies, indigo dyeing continued to be culturally and artistically important. In many places it still survives. And indigo is being revived in vital new projects that are working toward poverty reduction and sustainable development."

In 2005, she began shooting in Japan. Hiroyuki Shindo is a contemporary Japanese textile artist and indigo master who honors a 1,000 year-old, disappearing technique of dyeing in fermentation vats. "We captured the process of making *sukumo*, the indigo compost that is the basis for Japanese indigo. In Shindo-san's studio in Miyama we filmed the entire process of making the vat. A few days later, we traveled with him to Nishiwaki, where we met indigo farmer Hiroaki Murai. In his barn was an amazing sight: a perfectly shaped mound of indigo compost. Murai-san then turned the pile and watered it, releasing clouds of steam that appeared blue in the late afternoon light. These were the first of many scenes that can only be described as magical."

"Another unforgettable experience was shooting in Hueyapan, Mexico, during the fiesta of Santa Filomena, and finding out that the saint's identity evolved from that of an ancient Aztec woman who is believed to have taught indigo dyeing to the women there. Indigenous Nahuatl women are carrying on the indigo dyeing tradition and use an indigo 'starter' handed from mother to daughter that is unique to their village in Mexico."

Says Mary Lance: "In all the places we videotaped, people showed a true affection, even a reverence for indigo. I hope that comes across in my film."

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Photo: from 'Blue Alchemy'