



Source: Kirk Semple, 'McCain's Baghdad market trip branded a stunt', *New York Times* in *The Age* online, 04/04/07.

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I nearly lost my hat in the crush of bodies racing up the stairs. I was at this display at Burdekin House in the city. Someone gave me a catalogue. It said 'Modern Rooms'. I was the only one there who knew Roi from the old days at the military hospital... It'd been a long time since I was there but lots of the tougher cases were still there scaling the walls. All those blank, bewildered expressions. I count myself one of the lucky ones: most days I can face the world and I have a job in the potting sheds at the Botanic Gardens. In fact that's where I'd bumped into Roi—first time in ten years. He came in to select cacti for the display. Didn't recognize me at first, until I reminded him that I was Blue, one of the boys on the inside who helped him paint the 'colour ward', though back then I didn't speak, not that I didn't want to, I just couldn't. Not until I'd been through the treatment...

They'd found me wandering in a French village clad only in my shirt and a pair of army socks. I have no recollection of getting back to Australia. I can only remember the explosion. Under hypnosis most of us began to talk about how we were harmed...the moment of impact, the sound of the shell coming before it burst, seeing arms and legs flying through the air, of being buried alive. For months on end my knees would shake, same with my hands...I still wake up in a cold sweat from that nightmare...crawling out of the crater and seeing the headless bodies of my mates...

At the hospital they wanted to get me to paint the 'colour ward', to steady the hands, steady the nerves. We were the same age, Roi and I, though he'd never seen active service, lucky bugger. TB—meant his chest measurements weren't up to scratch. For a short and shy man he certainly had a grand vision for his Society for Colour Research, based on light vibrations and optic nerves. Sounded like a Communist, except *his* world wide movement was a Colour movement with promises of deep and lasting happiness—what he called the very song of life. For us damaged souls it sounded alright.

I helped him and the Doc strip down and paint the little cottage we were lodged in at Five Dock. Both were great enthusiasts for the English colour treatment which was meant to remove us patients from any sense of confinement, at least as far as colour ever could. They made the ceiling look like a clear blue sky, they called the paint 'firmament blue'. The walls were done in 'Sunlight Primrose' the palest shade of yellow with just a touch of green, like the colour of spring foliage after rain. The floor was a darker green and if you squinted your eyes, it passed for grass. All the furniture was covered in a pale

tint of yellow so that in an absent, dazed state, a chair or locker would seem to fade into the wall. Even the bedspreads and the tea sets were covered in the same pale yellowish tint. The only highlight was a mauve curtain and that was double hung with an outer drop of pale yellow material. Patterns of any kind and any trace of red or brown were excluded because, according to the theory, these colours bring you down. I guess they were too much like the mud and the blood that filled our brains.

One weekend the matron, who wasn't convinced by their radical methods, placed a brown army blanket on each bed, they all disappeared without a trace the following night. Roi finished up by painting over the fireplace in each room an abstract colour study, he said, 'You are the first Australians to live with abstraction.'

That morning in late October after ordering all the cacti, Roi came back to my shed for a chat and convinced me I should come along to see how he and his artist friends had turned the Colour research into something modern. Now, I generally avoid crowds and noise. But I couldn't say no to Roi. At the top of the stairs what really stopped me in my tracks was an empty Japanese room without any colour or decoration just benches but filled with light. You had to take off your shoes before walking on the mats. The other rooms had strange colourful geometric furniture, just made of primary forms—cylinders, cubes, prisms, pyramids. And the chairs; they were made just by slicing a cylinder diagonally and twisting it around, and the bookcases were shaped like New York skyscrapers.

And then I stepped into the room described as Roi's 'Man's Bedroom' and there was that familiar canopy of sky and buttery yellow walls. I understood then why he'd been so insistent. No one would have believed how that colour scheme could have nursed our shattered minds. I sat spell-bound on a sofa until the crowd thinned out. Then Roi introduced me to the artist whose painting I'd been staring at most of the afternoon. It was a still life, just glassware and a row of white cups and saucers on a white cloth, nothing special, but lit from a strange angle, so that the shadows were like dark blue pools like the Blue Lake at Mount Gambier. She explained to me that its title 'Implement Blue' was just taken from the manufacturer's paint chart. It turned out that she'd done a lot of pottery and weaving with shell shocked men in England, and was part of Roi's Society of Colour. I told her I was a founding member.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ann Stephen.*