



THE INVISIBLE SUPPLY CHAIN

Colour is one of design's most invisible supply chains. This invisibility is not accidental. It is structural. We have built our design systems on the refusal to see where colour comes from, who makes it, what knowledge produced it, what labour and extraction sustains it. Most hues arrive through fossil fuel extraction, detached from place, labour and consequence. Circular design has reached fibre, garment and material. But colour—one of the most chemically and colonially loaded steps in the entire system—remains largely invisible. We call this a symptom of deeper structural miscoding: in how we relate to extraction, to knowledge systems, to what we imagine possible. Chroma Waste Lab exists to make that question visible again. It treats colour not as surface decoration but as material, as history, as a shared cultural act. And it asks a fundamental question: what colour would look like if we designed it honestly—if we refused extraction at both ends, upstream and downstream, and reframed colour from property to commons.

Dr Tonya Meyrick
Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow,
School of Design, RMIT University

Jacinta Kay
Associate Lecturer, School of Communication
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THROWING COTTON AT COTTON

The Lab works alongside the scientists at Deakin University's Institute for Frontier Materials, who engineer pigment from post-consumer cotton textile waste by ball-milling discarded cloth into a fine, chalk-form powder. There is no solvent, no synthesis, no dye bath in the conventional sense. Colour is recovered mechanically and can be returned to new cloth—cotton deposited onto cotton. Closed loop. No new extraction. What the current trials keep showing is profound: the cloth itself decides how much colour stays. Fabric architecture, not chemistry, is the dominant variable in the current conditions. This is a colour that cannot be standardised, owned or reordered, because it is contingent on what was thrown away. It is colour with a biography. Colour that refuses the logic of commodity. This is not a solution. It is proof of concept. An option. A provocation. It demonstrates what becomes possible when we stop extracting.

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COLOUR, CO-AUTHORED

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WHAT COLOUR REMAINS

Chromatic Afterlives is the idea at the centre of the entire programme: colour persists, transforms and carries cultural and material life beyond its first use. A discarded garment is not the end of a colour. It is a chromatic resource with a life still ahead of it. The Lab studies that afterlife, treating waste-derived pigment as a material entity with a history it continues to transmit. The question is not “how do we dispose of colour?” but rather “what colour remains, and what it still has to say?” This is a refusal of disposal. It is the assertion that colour can circulate endlessly, that waste is not an endpoint but a starting condition. This is not about sustainability rhetoric. It is about imagining colour differently: as something that moves through systems without disappearing, that carries memory, that belongs to places and communities across time.

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