



**FRANCISCO JAVIER  
SAN MARTÍN**

## Plant Atlas

*Pantone* was founded in New Jersey in 1962 in order to systematise colour shades in the cosmetics, graphic arts and interior design industries. Its *Pantone Matching System* is a shade naming and distribution chart that leaves no room for ambiguity: each shade of colour is systematically identified by an alphanumeric code that records it accurately and also places adjacent shades in a logical chain. By claiming its invention, *Pantone* is the owner of the intellectual property in its finding, in such a way that the system cannot be used freely.

*Hoja verso* (Leaf verso), the project carried out in 2020 and 2021 by Belén Rodríguez for the V premio cervezas Alhambra (5<sup>th</sup> Alhambra Beers Award), moves in exactly the opposite direction: using natural pigments, unclassifiable in a logical chain, it recreates the ineffable poetry of colour, its unique and unrepeatable nature, the impossibility of its exact transmission. It is true that *Pantone* belongs to the cultural sphere of industrial capitalism and its imperious need for standardisation for mass production, while Belén Rodríguez's art of colour, on the contrary, belongs to that of the consciousness of nature and the return to a craft of colour capable of arousing the emotion of its imprecision, its openness to the world and the processes of entropy and uncertainty with which natural space expresses itself. Moreover, in contrast to *Pantone's* undifferentiated globality, *Hoja verso* is sensitive to the localisation of colour and attention to the chromatic resources of a specific space.

Belén Rodríguez's piece is based on the dyeing of a series of cotton fabrics with natural pigments from the pomegranate tree (*Punica granatum*), from its fruit, the pomegranate, and also with pigments obtained from the seeds, peel and roots. With this chromatic chart, Belén Rodríguez has created a canvas book —*recto* and *verso* on each page— which is a plant encyclopaedia, a book of monochrome landscapes and also a chromatic guide to walks around the city of Granada. The pigments obtained from the fruit of the pomegranate tree are complemented with others —ivy, fig, holm oak, saffron— plants that are all described in *Esplendor del jardín y recreo de las mentes* (The Glory of the Garden and Recreation of the Mind) by Al-Tighnari, the eleventh-century agronomist, botanist, doctor and poet from Granada. In doing so, they include not only the spatiality of colour in the environment of Granada, but also its history, the memory of colours faded by time.



Each page of this book is a specific place, a soil, a light, a microclimate, a human and plant geography. It is also a cultural context. Each leaf is a concrete print that does not show a specific place, but rather the spirit or the distillate of a whole landscape, a synaesthetic perfume, its essence. Each leaf contains the greatest chromatic concreteness and the greatest formal abstraction, the deep mystery of colour and also its superficial splendour.

Gathering the fruits of the environment, like a nature landscape painter, Belén Rodríguez acts more as a local collector than as the agent of a process of depiction: once the shade of colour has been obtained, she no longer needs to recreate the shape of the trees or the clouds, the grass or the rocks. They are the all-encompassing colours of nature. Each leaf in her book is the actual landscape painting. And so, despite its retinal character of collecting the variety and magic of natural shades, the *Hoja verso* operation also has something of the ready-made about it. Marcel Duchamp provocatively declared that if the Impressionists used industrially manufactured tubes of colour in their work, their paintings also had a certain ready-made component. The truth is that, working in this way, Belén Rodríguez excludes the painter's palette, the mixing of colours, until she obtains the shade of her sensation before an element of the landscape, and lets the landscape itself enter into her work, showing itself, with its non-formal elements too, such as the breeze or the humidity. These paintings, these unnumbered leaves in her book, do not show the paint as layers superimposed on the canvas, but rather as a molecular process of *dyeing* that has penetrated into the interior of the canvas, with which it forms a single body, sheets of canvas that simultaneously show the *recto* and *verso* of each one and allow us to read the surface of the landscape, the *upper side*, and also the *lower side*, its corresponding part of shadow, of subterranean depth.