

Sometimes the most exciting thing an artist can do with colour is not use it. Sarah Wise reports

Mighty white

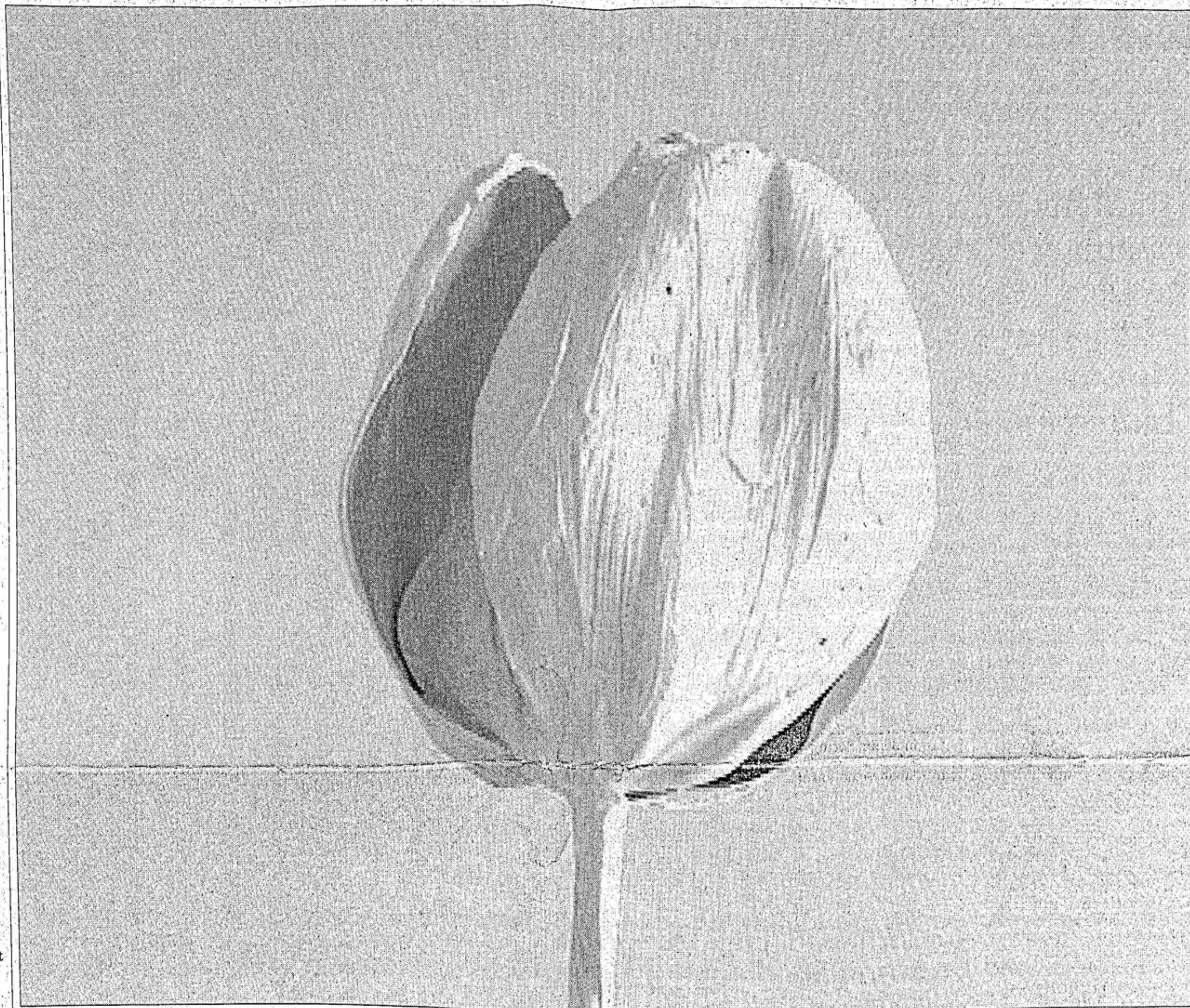
There's no doubt about it: the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, voted Britain's third-best-loved building of the 20th century, would lose something if it were purple, tangerine, black – or anything except the glorious brilliant white that it is. Built in the mid-1930s, it could have been executed in sober, sleek grey, or it could have been a glossy black-glass concoction, like the recently refurbished Daily Express building (1932) at the eastern end of Fleet Street (known to its former inmates as Black Lubyanka, after the KGB HQ in Moscow). But no, German architect Erich Mendelsohn and his Chechen colleague Serge Chermayeff chose to build it in white.

White was still the colour of hope then, despite a worldwide economic depression, the rise of Nazism in Germany and the promise of the Russian Revolution having been turned to dust by Stalinism. As Chermayeff wrote of the 1930s in his autobiography: "The future appeared bright. I found myself in the middle of another revolution, intellectually absorbing and emotionally moving: a political and cultural ferment among scientists, writers and artists."

Now the white pavilion is hosting an art show exploring the meanings of whiteness in art, tracing a variety of responses in the 1930s and the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1936 Ben Nicholson made some critically ill-received abstract experiments in what he called "life-affirming" white: chunks of gesso fashioned into geometrical shapes and mounted on white board. One of them is here, alongside the work of Russian constructivist sculptor Naum Gabo, who in the mid-1930s created ovoid forms in white marble and Perspex, a substance invented in 1935 that delighted Gabo with its high light-transmission. Its cut edges create thin glowing white lines, which seem to hover in the air, laser-style.

The show jumps forward almost 60 years and the preoccupation with white re-emerges. There's Anish Kapoor's part-sinister, part-endearing "pregnant" white wall of 1992, and Ceal Floyer's Monochrome Till Receipt (White) of 2001, a gallery-wall just comprising a 48-item list of white purchases (sugar, flour, washing powder, dress shields, Wet Ones and so on) that she made one summer afternoon in the Whitechapel branch of Sainsbury's. The plot of AK Dolven's nine-minute film (Untitled, 1998) is a tulip being unpainted white. The cloying white emulsion is brushed away to reveal the natural bright red beneath.

One of white's qualities in architecture is that it seems to monumentalise a building instantly, a point not lost on artists Langlands and Bell, whose



Flower power... a still from AK Dolven's nine-minute film of a tulip being 'unpainted' white to reveal the colour beneath

miniaturised version of the facade of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation 1956 flat-block in Berlin has been meticulously carved. The pure whiteness of the relief (unlike the real block, which is of grey reinforced concrete) makes it somehow imposing despite its tiny size, capturing what Le Corbusier called "the icy mystery" of white.

The six-decade hiatus in the Colour White show is a revealing one. Now, as then, white for many artists is the best colour (or absence of colour, as some insist) for revealing pure form. Empty a work of colour – free it from the time and the locality implied by

shade – and you focus the eye on shape and texture. The same phenomenon is true for the other two neutrals, black and grey, but white has the greatest scope for allowing light to play across a surface, creating the slightest of shadows, suggesting volume and revealing a variety of types of white. White surfaces may have maximum light-reflection but also seem to reveal a high level of artistic self-absorption. The angst-ridden relationship between contemporary artists and their materials can be found in Jason Martin's Confession (1998): oil paint thickly spread on aluminium,

revealing, according to Martin, "records of my body moving through space, moving through time". By contrast, for many early 20th-century modernist artists and architects, one of the main appeals

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of white was that it signified the new world that was throwing off the contamination of decoration – the lie of ornamentation as Le Corbusier put it. White signalled Year Zero, the point at which bourgeois clutter, pattern and the sheer grime accumulated by time's passing were to be eradicated. The "truth" of an object or building's utility would become visible, just as it had been in ancient or primitive cultures, and white was best for revealing these pure forms.

Le Corbusier wrote, in his 1947 book *When the Cathedrals Were White*, of how seven centuries earlier "the freshly cut stone of France

was dazzling in its whiteness, as the Acropolis in Athens had been white and dazzling, as the Pyramids of Egypt had gleamed with polished granite. The new world was beginning. White, limpid, joyous, clean, clear and without hesitations. It was the great expression of liberty, of the liberated spirit." But he was overlooking the fact that when the cathedrals were white, the vast majority of the French lived as serfs, that slave labour had built the Pyramids, and that, in any case, the Acropolis had been covered by brightly painted friezes and coloured statues – centuries of ruin had rendered it white.

The manifestos of the early avant-garde are full of this kind of playful guff. (Le Corbusier, none the less, included colour in his work throughout his career, even devising a wallpaper colour chart for a London firm at one point.) For all their claims to be throwing off the burden of recent history, Le Corbusier and like-minded contemporaries were speaking as men very much of their time: over-impressed by technological and scientific innovation and extolling white as the colour of the laboratory, the bath-house, the gymnasium and the workshops of hi-tec industry.

Before fleeing Nazism, Erich Mendelsohn created his first buildings in the Weimar Republic, where naturism, sunlight therapy, fresh air, personal hygiene and group sports were the order of the day. The Times newspaper recognised the De La Warr Pavilion's health and efficiency aspect when it reported, from its 1935 opening ceremony, that its flat roof was "eminently suitable for sunbathing and physical training". The Queen Mother did the honours, swathed in fur, platform court shoes and other very English clutter.

But we know where "purity" movements and notions of social hygiene can lead. Not for nothing did Orwell envision the Ministry of Love – where Winston Smith is brainwashed – as a huge pyramid of glittering white concrete, the torture rooms painted white, with blinding overhead lighting. For other early modernists, particularly the Russian artists and theorists, white was valued for a perceived mystical property. Like the gold paint of religious icons, white seemed to hint at a world beyond.

In 1911 Vasily Kandinsky wrote: "The world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. White has this harmony silence, which works upon us negatively, like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody. It is not a dead silence, but pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of nothingness that is before birth."

Which (sort of) brings us back to Anish Kapoor and his mummy-to-be white wall. The work was executed in white, says Kapoor, since "whiteness is a condition, not a colour. A condition of the infinite in which foreground and background are not distinguished, and the difference between subject and object is confused."

It's the action of light on the white fibreglass that reveals the bump. Stand right in front of it and there is no bump, just a grey circle; move slightly to right or left and the protuberance starts to make itself known. Creepy.

Colour White is at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, until July 7. Details: 01424 787900.