



Cascade Ian Davenport

CUSTOM GALLERY DUBAI

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Giardini Colourfall, Swatch Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale 2017.
380 cm x 1400 cm



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5 November 2017 – 6 January 2018

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Installing Swatch Pavilion,
Venice Biennale 2017



Ian Davenport – looking for a steal

I have known Ian Davenport's work since he was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1991 and I am still awed by the combination of dexterity and timing of his paintings. Each one records the duration of its making and extends the event, becoming autonomous. In this sense, they trace the performance of painting and are paintings in themselves.

On an afternoon in the studio, our conversation flowed between the work currently being made and planned, the processes of studio practice, sources, inspiration, references, the excitement of collaboration and how this leads to new platforms for showing work, commissions and architectural interventions in public, social spaces. Ian speaks freely and generously articulating his practice with a natural and infectious candour. I have tried to preserve the informality of the discussion, while indicating some of the widely ranging topics that surfaced and provide pointers for thinking about his work.

Davenport has a roving eye and is constantly on the lookout for the way in which something unusual visually strikes him; a surprising juxtaposition of colour and shape, or combination of surface and materiality. For instance, on a walk on the Isle of Sheppey with his wife, the artist Sue Arrowsmith, he came across an enormous field of yellow rapeseed; 'you have never seen so much yellow in all your life!' Again, the woods near Churchill's family home, Chartwell, Kent, have expanses of bluebells with extraordinarily vivid colour saturation (pp. 34–35). This identifying of nuanced variations of colour led to a new series of paintings for the exhibition. Turning to motifs from nature is a new departure. Always on the lookout for colour, he has previously borrowed from historical masterpieces to observe overlooked colour values, or indeed those that appear to be taken for granted, within a narrative art historical trajectory. He describes this process as 'looking for a steal'.

This manner of looking, borrowing and reclaiming as one's own is to some extent intrinsic to artistic practice, Camille Pissarro, for example called it 'poaching on someone else's territory.'² Barry Flanagan invoking Stravinsky by way of explanation said, 'if an idea's any good; don't bother being influenced, steal it!'³ Davenport, like other artists, appropriates. He invigorates and transforms these external sources by way of making paintings that are ostensibly of stripes, lines, bands and pools. This is an economical and effective solution. It appears simple and on one level it is, the strategy of repeated motif provides a vehicle for unfolding contemplation. Perhaps one could think of this abstraction as entering a visually induced Nirvana. These paintings are driven by a response to something beautiful, even the sublime instant of sheer exhilaration. I will come back to this.

New platforms mean new audiences and these happily coexist with the gallery and museum exhibition space. *Wide Acres of Time*, 2017 is Davenport's smallest work. It is a limited edition of watches commissioned by Swatch. The project challenged him to develop a suitable way of making paintings that would fit with the circularity of the clock face. The watch is one component of the commission; in contrast the other is architectural and public facing, a large-scale installation for the Swatch Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017 (pp. 2–3).

To make the watch, Davenport set up a series of experiments with a template, cutting a small hole in the middle where the hands would join. The hole functioned to create a vortex where the paint pooled.

Lifting the paint covered template above the floor, gravity takes over, determining the flow and swirl of colour. The trick is knowing when to stop. Often speed combined with the confidence to respond immediately is the essence of success. It is an intensive period of careful preparation in order for a few dexterous seconds to achieve a piece of magic. The title *Wide Acres of Time* comes from a verse of lyrics by his brother Philip Davenport which accompanies the watch in a specially designed box (fig. 3).

On a reconnaissance trip to see the site of the Pavilion, Davenport spent time considering how people walk around the Giardini; how the Pavilion functions to draw people together and because it is visible from a distance its presence is somehow inferred throughout the park. This observation informs the way in which he devised the painting's composition. Measuring up the space he noticed its rounded steps. These suggest it used to be a bandstand. The structural parameters of repetition, rhythm, movement and the durational aspect of sound, as well as a lyricism infuse his paintings.

An artist whose practice parallels Davenport's is Sol LeWitt, who is widely acknowledged as one of the key proponents of Minimalism and of Conceptual Art. LeWitt's work has clear conceptual parameters and balances colour, order, chance and repetition. LeWitt made site-specific wall work and was instrumental in devising economically effective solutions for siting art in the public domain. He worked closely with museums, galleries and with architects or planners in public facing situations. LeWitt issued instructions for the drawings which he and his assistants carried out. The instructions appear precise but are open to interpretation, for instance those for Vancouver project, 1970 (fig. 1). The connections between LeWitt and Davenport are deeper than the systematic use of bands of colour and high colour saturation density. These include pragmatic and conceptual realisations by working with a range of architects, contractors, studio assistants, as well as the use of instruction, interpretation, repetition, system, order and chance.

Davenport explains how LeWitt's work sets precedents for how his practice is evolving when you are working with architecture. 'I am trying to execute my paintings in a more painterly way than he did, but the way he used powdered pigments and rubbed them in is appealing. I love the materiality and that prediction of the materiality of a pencil – the way it breaks on an uneven wall.'

One of the large paintings which will show in Dubai, *Cobalt Blue Water*, 2017 (p. 30) is derived from a colour palette taken from Monet's *Water Lilies*, c. 1920. It is constructed similarly to *Giardini Colourfall* in two wall panels with a floor piece onto which the paint falls down and almost connects with the wall. The different planes of verticality and horizontality make it more like an installation. The Monet painting is a yardstick for Davenport and has been since his first visit to New York, when he was stunned by the encounter with it. 'When Monet was looking at the lily pond he was seeing all these colours and he just responded. It is so active that there was no need to invent. It was all there.' Monet's all enveloping illusion of undifferentiated space is echoed by Davenport's extraction of colour, rich blues with pinks highlights, as much as his use of scale and the immersive vertical-horizontal structure of the painting.

Gauguin's *Hail Mary*, 1891, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York provides the trigger for another work to be included in this exhibition, *Hail: Blue, Grey*, 2016 (p. 23). It's unusual use of ochre and unexpected colour combinations are transformed to a sensually reordered articulation of beautiful lines. These flow down the surface and on the floor. Each colour is constant, and there is give and take between how the bands spread and ebb into one another. Davenport's use of syringes for paint

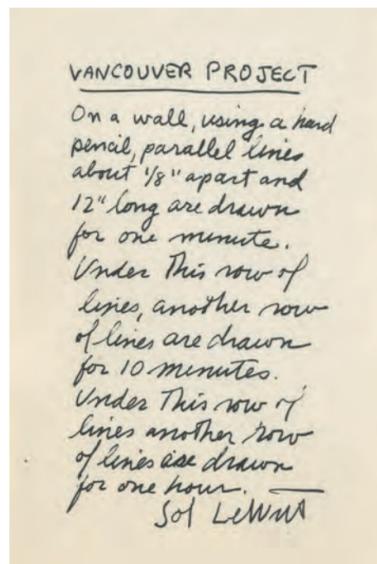


fig. 1
Sol LeWitt, instructions for Vancouver project, 1970

pours is a pragmatic solution to maintaining speed of application. Recently, Davenport has been overlapping the lines of paint. This means he can scrape the paint back and keep working into it to allow a more painterly to and fro. What happens at the bottom of the pour allows its own movement and another layer of surprise. Two portraits by Gustave Klimt are the source for *Yellow Portrait*, 2017 (p. 19) and *Magenta Portrait*, 2017 (p. 17). With a gentle touch Davenport re-unites the sitters, a mother and her daughter in this action. The original paintings have been in separate collections for years. Eugene Primavesi, 1912–13 and her daughter Mada Primavesi, 1912–13, a confident nine year old, wears a dress specially designed for the purpose. The processes of observing, and of meticulous studio organisation, is part of Davenport's research, and as he says, the best paintings have this behind them. His typical palette comprises about a hundred clear plastic cups of various colours and tones set out on a long table (p. 6). The colours are organised to follow the way in which the source painting's tonal range suggests passages of movement. The palettes take several days to set up for each painting and are like installations in their own right.

Rigorous research is balanced by being open to the unexpected. It is often studio accidents that are most effective in providing solutions. The 2017 'splatter' works on paper are derived through Davenport's utilisation of a workshop with teenagers who provided source material for the *Splat Actions* (pp. 42–43). Davenport describes how the group became animated by handling paint, throwing splodges of colour and experimenting with possibilities of creating beauty instantaneously. He wanted to give their energetic impulse a rationale and logic. Initially he attempted to replicate the patterns by drawing grids but realising this lost their energy he approached them at different points to rework the colour and dynamism. The mark-making is active and aggressive with passages of openness. These works are quite different from the methodological, rhythmical poured bands. They are explosive like fireworks. The fallout from the paint's impact as it hits the paper on the wall leaves marks and traces of angular lines these may in themselves lead to a new series of works. The look of these residual traces reminded me of the interstellar connectivity of the galaxy in a science fiction film by Andre Tarkovsky called 'Solaris'.

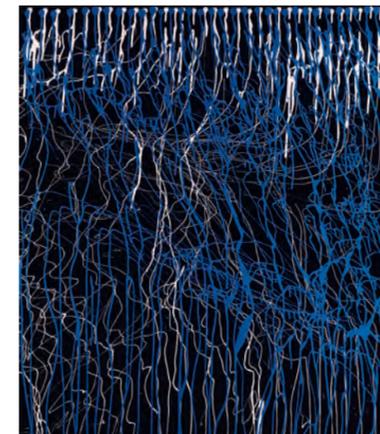


fig. 2
Painting made with an Electric Fan, 1989

The *Splat Actions* recall Davenport's *Electric Fan Paintings* made in 1989 and 1990 (fig. 2). The idea for air current painting came because Davenport was working by an open window on a very windy day and the paint started blowing around. The air current made by the fan rapidly directs lines of paint across the surface. These works are part of a tradition of automatic drawing, such as produced by the surrealist Andre Masson and during the 1960s and 70s the Conceptual Artist John Latham's 'one second drawings' were literally made in one second. Latham made the series of inkblots and splashes in part to indicate different economic as well as qualitative values for one second. Davenport was interested and challenged by the speed but as he said, although the *Fan Paintings* took four or five seconds to make 'I was trying to outdo him but I am sure I was beaten with his one second!'

When Davenport was a student at Goldsmiths University, his tutor Michael Craig Martin was discussing chance and accidents with him. He spoke about a friend who worked for Andy Warhol on the *13 Most Wanted Men* series, 1964. It was only after they had screen-printed the criminals onto the canvases that they realised the images were off register. Of course Warhol loved it. Craig Martin's point was that although it might not have been done on purpose, it is the unpredictable element that makes it work.

Responding to chance and being open to the unexpected is essential to Davenport. With a large museum show planned for Dallas Contemporary in 2018 he is at a turning point of reflection and



fig. 3
Swatch designed
by Ian Davenport

experimental development. He observed: 'the recent body of paintings has been going on for 10 years or so. I want to push them into a different area, but there is something about vertical bands of colour that allows so much for exploration. For a painter, they are a dream motif. They are familiar as a visual reference and don't require a particular knowledge base. And the puddles likewise carry their own logic. This has its own advantages because immediately you can take the paintings out into a wider audience. The nice thing about contemporary life, with websites and Instagram, is that it is just a lot easier.'

The way social spaces and architectural environments can be animated by art is clearly important to Davenport. Every day many people pass *Poured Lines*, 2006 in Southwark Street, London. In 2016 the department store, Jemoli Haus, Zurich (pp. 12–13) commissioned him to design a banner to surround the building during its renovation. This project leads to considering other possible venues for large-scale interactions. For this purpose Davenport has been experimenting with a paint that can be applied to masonry and cleaned by high power water jet to use in temporary installations. It is exciting to think where these interventions may be situated.

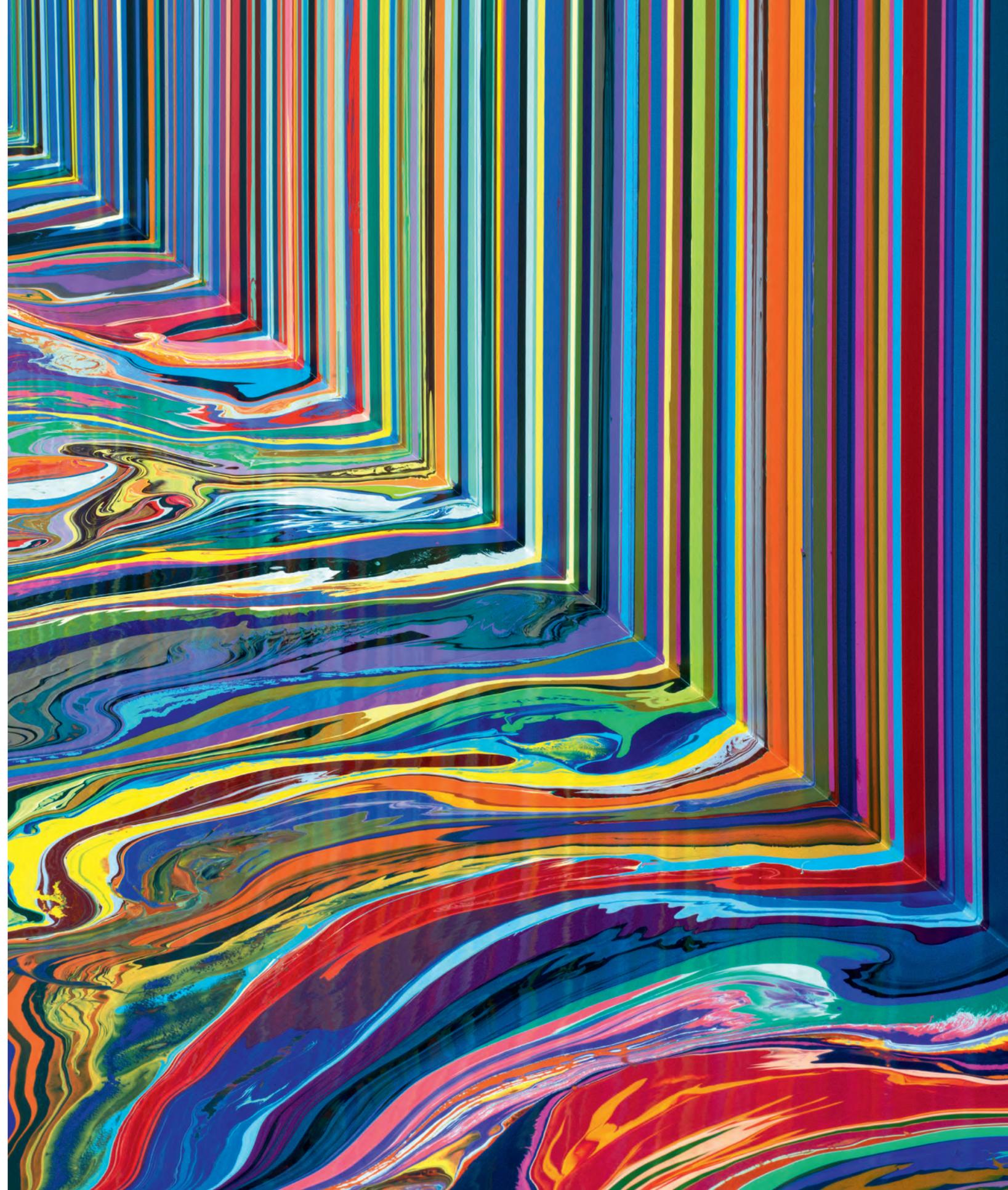
Our image driven consumer society makes the exhilaration of tapping into a sublime primordial experience harder to achieve. Davenport's paintings offer delight and contemplation and without being pushy they speak for themselves.

Jo Melvin

1
Ian Davenport in conversation with author 27 July 2017.
All subsequent citations are from the same occasion.

2
'Camille Pissarro: Letters to his son Lucien' (Ed. John Rewald)
Da Capo, New York, 1995 (p. 221).

3
'Barry Flanagan interview with Adrian Dannatt',
The Art Newspaper No. 145, March 2004.

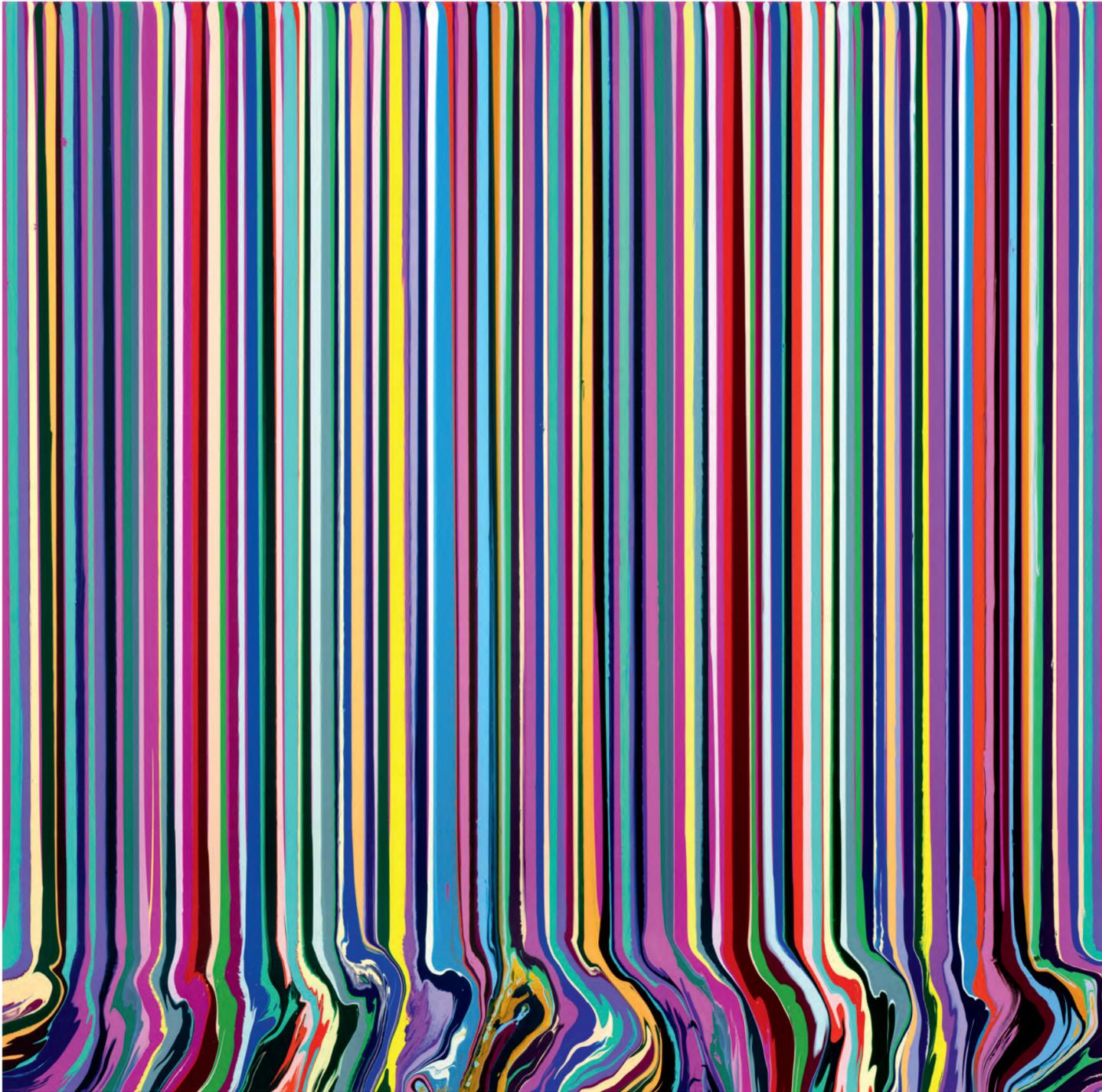


Mirrored Place (detail) 2017





Pastel Rhythmic 2017







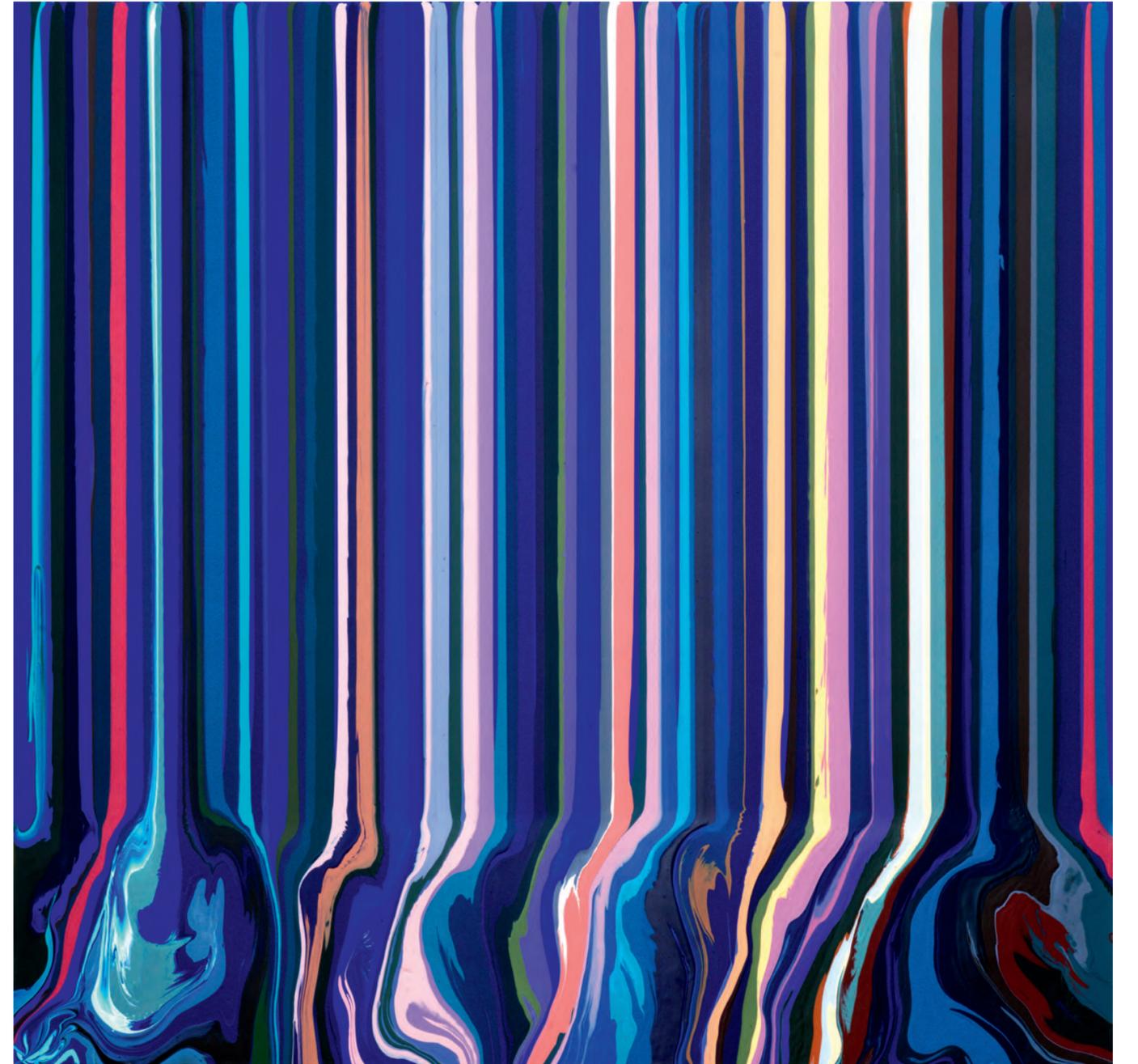
Yellow Portrait 2017

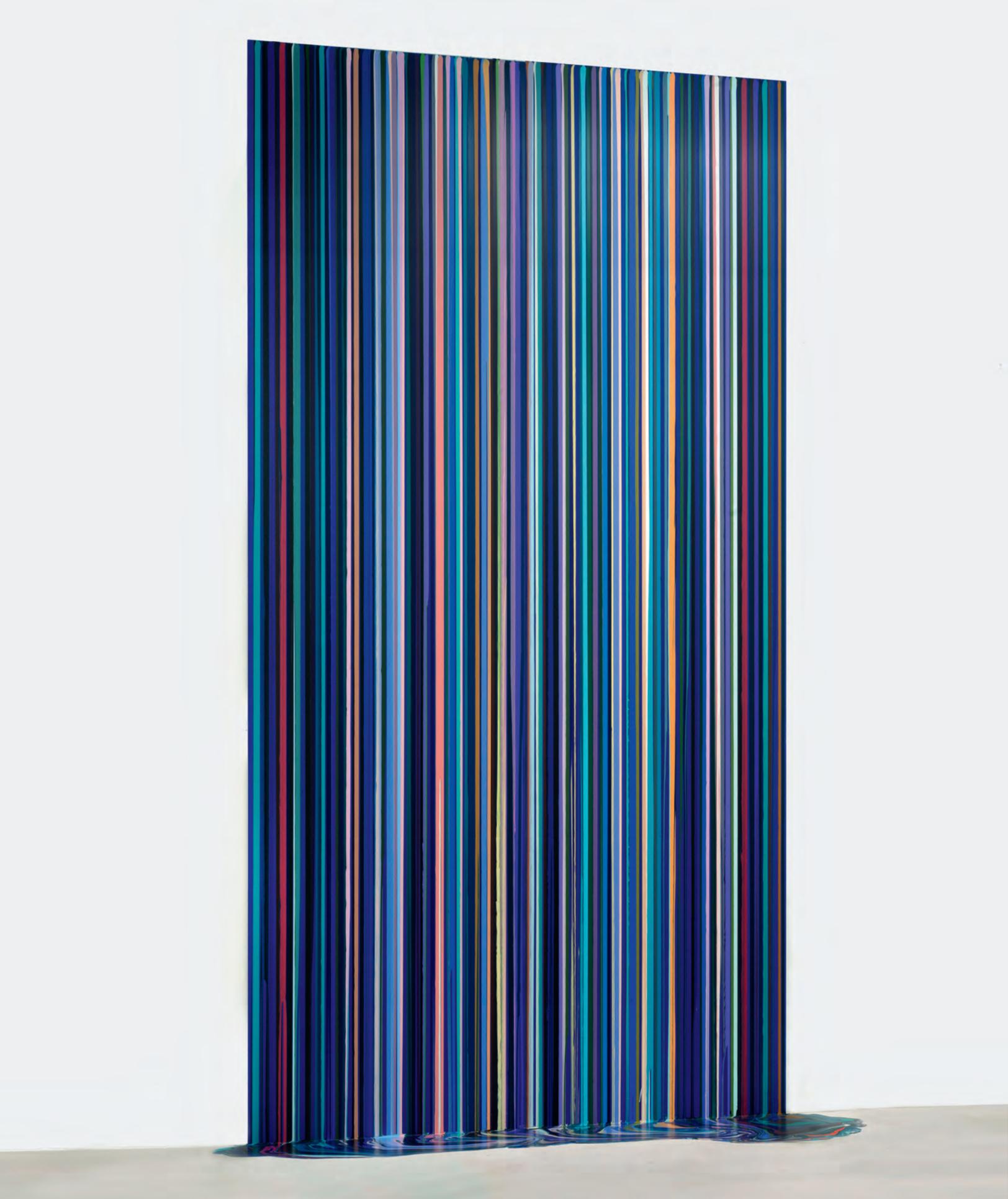


Hail: Blue, Grey 2016



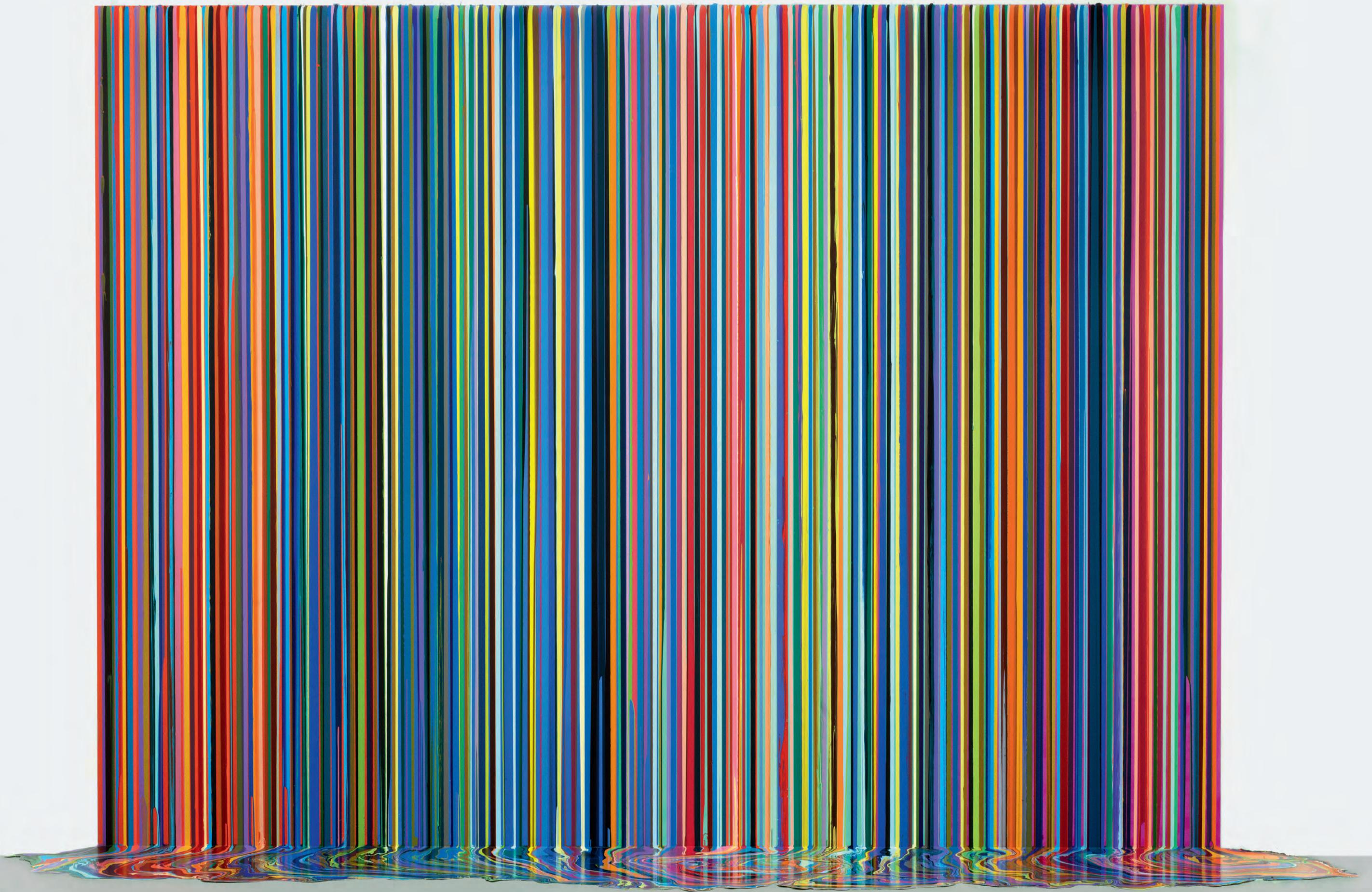






Cobalt Blue Water 2017

following pages
Mirrored Place 2017

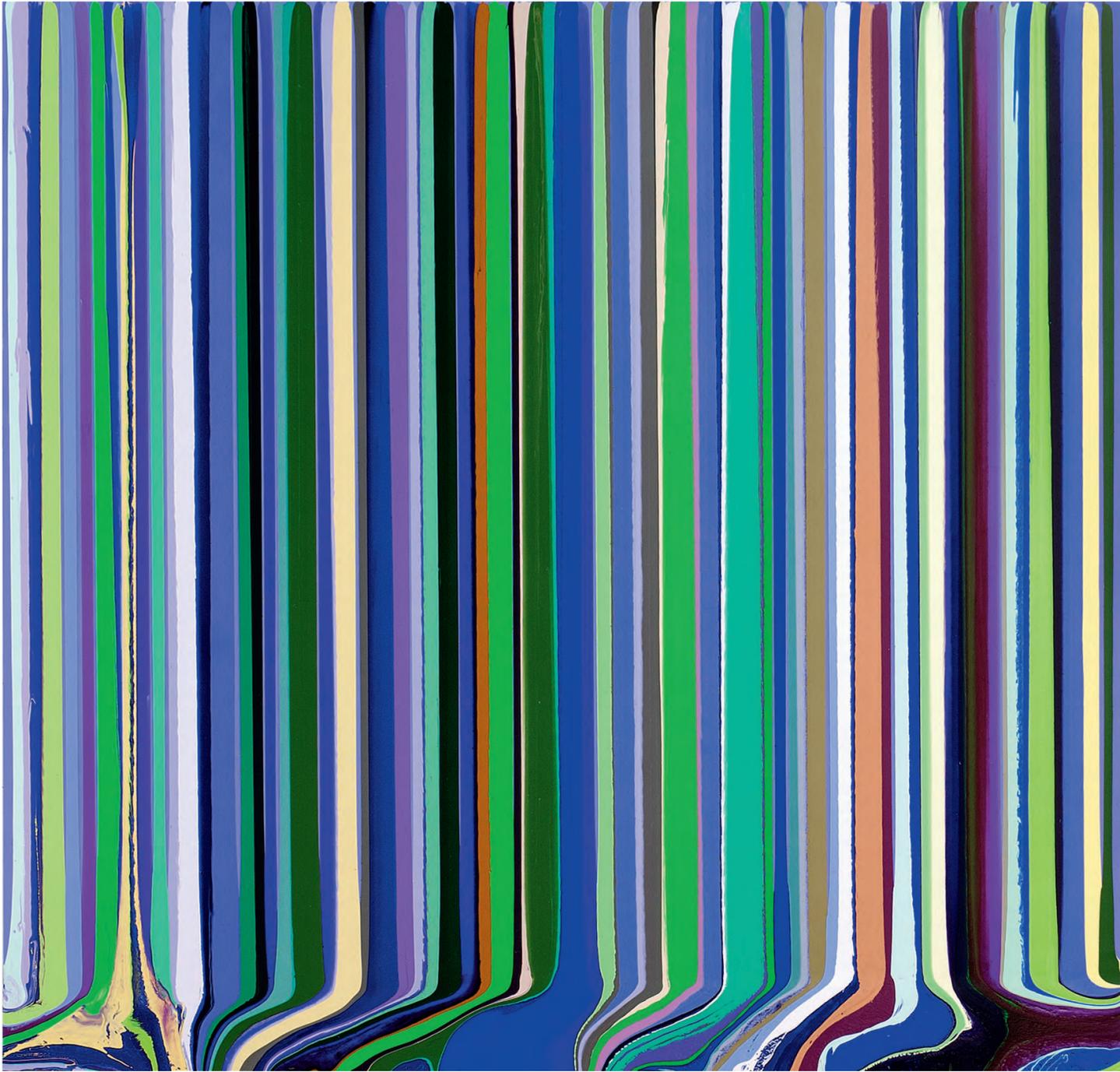




A photograph taken by Ian Davenport as a colour reference source.
The bluebell wood is near Chartwell in Kent.







Violet Chartwell 2017



Splat Attack no. 1 2017



Splat Attack no. 2 2017

List of Works

p. 14

Pastel Rhythmic 2017

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
150 × 100 cm

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Magenta Portrait 2017

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
200 × 200 cm

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Magenta Portrait Study (Daughter) 2017

Acrylic on aluminium mounted on aluminium panel
163 × 132.5 cm

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Yellow Portrait 2017

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
200 × 200 cm

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Hail: Blue, Grey 2016

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
200 × 200 cm

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Whitewash 2017

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
120 × 183 cm

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Cobalt Blue Water Study 2017

Acrylic on aluminium mounted on aluminium panel
101.6 × 101.6 cm

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Cobalt Blue Water 2017

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
(with floor piece)
380 × 200 cm

pp. 32–33

Mirrored Place 2017

Acrylic on stainless steel mounted on aluminium panel
(with floor piece)
300 × 400 cm

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Magenta Chartwell 2017

Acrylic on aluminium mounted on aluminium panel
101.6 × 101.6 cm

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Turquoise Chartwell 2017

Acrylic on aluminium mounted on aluminium panel
101.6 × 101.6 cm

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Violet Chartwell 2017

Acrylic on aluminium mounted on aluminium panel
101.6 × 101.6 cm

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Splat Attack no. 1 2017

Acrylic on paper
63 × 50 cm

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Splat Attack no. 2 2017

Acrylic on paper
63 × 50 cm

Biography

Ian Davenport was born in Sidcup, Kent in 1966. He received early recognition from his participation in 'Freeze', a student-curated exhibition at the Surrey Docks in London Docklands in 1988, which exhibited the work of Goldsmiths' students who would later come to be loosely known as the 'YBA's' (Young British Artists). Only two years after graduation, Davenport had his first solo exhibition at Waddington Galleries in 1990, and in the same year, his work was included in 'The British Art Show', touring to Leeds City Art Gallery and Hayward Gallery, London. He was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1991, and in 1999, was awarded the John Moores Painting Prize. Davenport has been the subject of numerous exhibitions worldwide, with solo museum shows at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Tate Liverpool. He is the subject of a forthcoming major survey exhibition at Dallas Contemporary in September 2018. His work is held in important museum collections throughout the world, including Tate, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; FNAC Fonds National d'art contemporain, France; Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal; and Dallas Museum of Art, Texas.

In 2017, Davenport was invited to produce a pavilion for the 57th Venice Biennale for Swatch. Davenport painted the large-scale installation *Giardini Colourfall* and, to coincide with this, designed the limited edition watch *Wide Acres of Time*. He has received numerous commissions for public installations, most notably by Southwark Council to produce *Poured Lines: Southwark Street*, a 48 metre long painting which was completed in 2006 as part of the regeneration of Bankside.

A comprehensive monograph of his work was published in 2014 by Thames & Hudson, including an interview by Michael Bracewell, and newly commissioned texts by Martin Filler and Damien Hirst.

Davenport has explored different mediums through his commissions, such as a hand-painted series of porcelain plates in collaboration with Meissen, commissioned by South London Gallery in 2016. Davenport has recently been involved in special design projects for the Olympic games in London, with Fabergé and Dior. *Cascade* will be his first solo show in UAE.

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Cover: *Mirrored Place* (detail) 2017
p. 1 and p. 48: Splatters on the artist's studio wall

