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THE BRIGHT SIDE

Riots of colour, a Turner Prize nomination, critical backlash and a crowd of famous and creative friends – the Young British Artist Ian Davenport talks to **Sheryl Garratt** about the ups and downs of his 25-year career. Photographs by **Gautier Deblonde**



an Davenport's studio in Peckham, south-east London, is a former factory that has been converted into an impressively airy, light-filled white space. Yet the first thing you notice when you walk in is the colour: big, bold, psychedelic stripes of gloss pouring down huge paintings, puddling into distorted shapes, so bright that they are almost vibrating. Seen from a distance or in photographs these paintings look pretty, decorative. Close up they are like paused films, their movement frozen in time, as if you could press the play button and the paint would continue to trickle.

To be honest, I get a bit nervous about this kind of art because it is not about anything and is hard

to pin down with words. But I like the way it makes me feel when I am around it, and Davenport later reassures me that you do not have to be fluent in intellectual art-speak to enjoy his work, using the words 'juicy' and 'seductive' to describe his more recent experiments with colour.

'I think it can be overthought and overcomplicated, and take a lot of the energy out of stuff,' he says. 'Sometimes people get too worried that they're missing the point, thinking there should be some sophisticated thing behind all art. But just your response to the colour can be enough.'

Davenport, 47, turns out to be endearingly nervous about our meeting too, constantly checking

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Right Ian Davenport working at his studio in Peckham, London.

Left *Colourcade (Purple and Green)*, 2014

that I will edit his verbal tics ('um', 'like' and 'y'know' – all of which he uses only as often as the rest of us) and wondering whether he sounds clever enough (he does, but he is also very funny and refreshingly down to earth). A book looking back on his first 25 years of work is about to be published, so he opens up a paint-splattered laptop to talk me through some of its pages.

Over the years, he explains, he has applied paint using everyday items – from a nail to a watering can – and invented eccentric devices that can tip a large volume of paint down a canvas or flip a work over to make interesting drip textures (a technique he thought of while making pancakes). Colours and shapes have been inspired by everything from *The Simpsons* to classic paintings to a ribbon curtain he noticed hanging in the door of a kebab shop. He realised after creating one series that it was in the same colours as the corrugated iron outside his studio, and another set was inspired by the shape of the Rotherhithe Tunnel, which he drove through daily when his studio was in east London.

If his work is about anything it is about paint itself: how it puddles, pours and drips; the textures, shapes and even accidents that happen along the way; and of course its colours. In his introduction to the book, Davenport's friend and fellow Young British Artist Damien Hirst talks about entering Davenport's studio at Goldsmiths College in 1987, watching him paint a picture of an empty paint pot and loving it without knowing why. 'Maybe because it was empty and at that time I felt that representational painting was empty; I think we all did.'

Within weeks, Hirst continues, Davenport's work had become completely abstract. 'Since then he has continually made beautiful paintings, painted confidently with exploding energy, furiously and on a grand scale, using conceptual and sculptural ideas, and with his own physical techniques to create phenomenal contemporary paintings that never cease to mystify and inspire and won't stay still.'

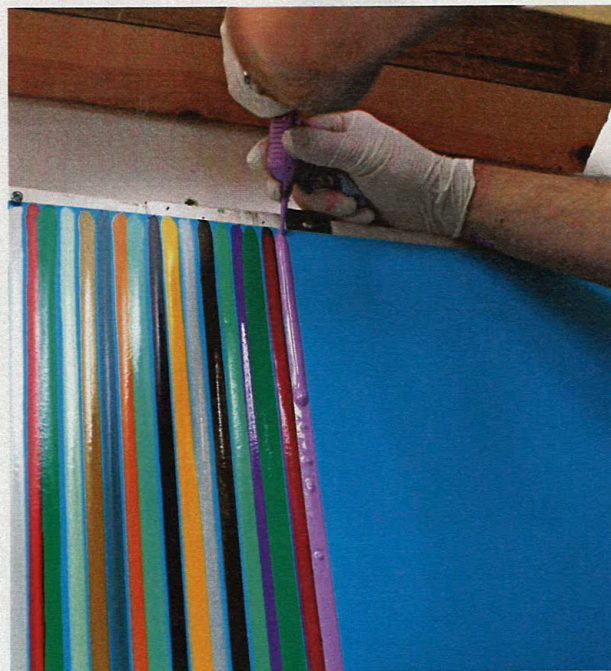
Davenport was born in Sidcup, Kent, but had a fairly itinerant childhood thanks to his father's job in engineering: his family lived in Belfast, then Northumberland, before settling just outside Manchester. He was always good at art and spent a lot of time alone, drawing and painting, so his parents were not surprised when he decided to go to art school, though they were a little worried about how he would survive financially. 'I didn't care. I was good at doing portraits and more conventional painting things, so I thought I'd make a living for myself somehow.'

It was a happy accident that he ended up at Goldsmiths, a contemporary of Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Gary Hume, Michael Landy and Fiona Rae, among others. 'The first time I went to see the building someone was firing eggs out of the top floor from a cannon, and I just thought, "I want to go here, it's bonkers!"' Davenport says. 'I had no idea that it was such a fashionable college, I just liked the way it was very free and you could do painting, sculpture and filmmaking. It was a great place, and we were in a really interesting year because there were lots of great people. No one was there because they thought they would become famous. People just wanted to make art.'

Within weeks Landy – who is still a close friend and an artist Davenport admires – had decided to

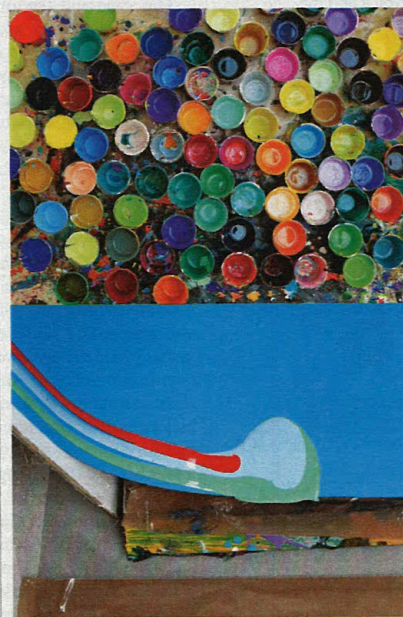
'THE FIRST TIME I WENT TO SEE GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE SOMEONE WAS FIRING EGGS OUT OF THE TOP FLOOR FROM A CANNON'

Davenport experiments with unorthodox paint-application methods. He has used a nail, a watering can and a syringe



wrap the student halls like Christo, who had made his name wrapping monuments and natural landscapes around the world. Being on a budget, Landy used lavatory paper. Then there was the 1987 hurricane, after which one student tried to drag entire fallen trees into his studio to use in his work; and the awful performance art in the canteen. 'You'd have bonkers performances going on. I remember someone doing one where it took him about an hour to crawl through a hoop, and we were just killing ourselves laughing.'

For his own part in the madness, Davenport



formed a country and western band, the Good Ol' Hometown Boys, which quickly became a college favourite. 'We'd have competitions to see who could have the biggest Stetson, and people would be walking around with 6ft hats on.' They still play occasional pub and club gigs in London, parties and weddings, though Davenport says they would be better if they really knew what they were doing. 'It's fun, and it's nice to do something creatively with a group of people.'

When I ask why his particular year turned out to be so special, he says it was perhaps because they were all inspiring each other. 'You're trying to define your own area, but you're looking over your shoulder as well, and that generation was very lucky to have so much good competition. It means everybody's got to keep on pushing themselves. I wonder whether if there had been just one or two people it would have been easy to lose that momentum.'

Damien Hirst says he probably got the idea for his spot paintings from Davenport, who in turn says it was Gary Hume who first began using household gloss paint in his work. Davenport liked the smooth surfaces Hume created with it – and also the fact that it was cheaper than the acrylic and oil paints usually used in art. When you are tipping bucketloads of the stuff down huge panels, he says, that is a big consideration. Indeed, some of his earlier paintings, which used an electric fan to push fine tendrils of paint across the canvas, were born out of necessity. 'I was really skint at the time, so I was trying to find ways that I could make a really big painting with hardly any paint on it!'

The art world was ripe for change as his generation came through, he says. 'There had been a lot of attention on sculptors such as Anish Kapoor and Richard Deacon, a lot of splashy, expressive painting. It felt like it was time for something else.'

More generally, towards the end of the 1980s

there was a sense of impatience, especially among the young, as the dark years of Thatcher turned into the dreary years of Major. People got tired of standing with their noses pressed against the glass, waiting to be invited in by the establishment, and instead began to organise alternatives of their own: from acid house parties to independent fashion labels, from shops to magazines. It seemed logical for a group of Goldsmiths students to take over an industrial building in Docklands and put on their own show rather than waiting to be discovered by a gallery. Freeze show, the start of the YBA explosion, has since become seminal, like the early Sex Pistols or Stone Roses gigs in tiny venues that thousands later claim to have attended. But Davenport insists it did not feel that way at the time. He recalls sitting at the door on a day when the only visitors were a man looking for directions to Tesco and a man with a dog (he marked them down as two attendees).

There is a photograph he found while putting the book together of all of the artists at the opening, keen young students trying to look cool. 'We're all wearing sunglasses, standing behind a table of wineglasses, and it looks like some sort of Mafia wedding! We were so young and very naive, but everyone pulled together, did up this building and tried to make something of it. A lot of the early group shows that I was in were the same: "Let's just do something and not wait for the more conservative elements to catch up."'

The scale and the ambition were perhaps different, he adds. 'It's quite unusual to see people aged 22, 23 making 21ft paintings and stuff you can hardly fit into a lorry. Maybe we were picking up on what was happening in music at the time. That's the great thing about London, that street-savviness.'

Things happened quickly for Davenport after that show. He had been doing illustrations for *Sainsbury's Magazine* while at college and assumed he would earn a living in that way afterwards, working on his paintings on the side. But his degree show was bought by Waddington, the gallery that still represents him. He had his first solo show in 1990 and a year later was the youngest nominee for the Turner Prize.

It was the first year in which the prize was limited to artists under 50 and focused on new, contemporary art instead of rewarding lifetime achievement. Davenport was just 24

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and says he took the blizzard of criticism that has now become a ritual part of the event very personally. 'It's a shame I didn't have a bit more confidence in myself. I think if I had the level of criticism that was aimed at me in particular now I would be much more stropky about it.'

He is far more resilient now and says one of his best ideas was given to him by a hostile reviewer who sneered that he would be applying paint with a syringe next. 'It was actually just the tool I needed. I tried it against the wall and it made these beautiful runs of



vertical lines, and the paint excess just ran off and dripped on to the floor. Both things I thought were really interesting, and I've been working with them ever since.'

This was the technique he used in *Poured Lines*, commissioned by Southwark Council in partnership with the Tate to brighten up the dank, pigeon-infested area under the Western railway bridge near Blackfriars Road. One of the largest pieces of public art in Europe, when it was unveiled, in 2006, it brought his work to a wider audience. 'It was a game-changer for me,' he says. The piece has since become a much-loved local landmark. 'Just to be able to make something on that scale was fabulous. It suits the way I work. It's 150ft long, but frankly it could be about four times that.'

Despite his early success, he says he has only recently been able to stop worrying about money. He is about to take on another workspace nearby, which will enable him to work on larger pieces, or on more techniques and series concurrently. 'We're a bit restricted in this studio with how much we can do at one time because the paintings need to be left to dry.'

At one point a door on the far side of the studio opens and Davenport's wife, Sue Arrowsmith, whose studio is behind a partition, comes down to the kitchen area where we are sitting, good-naturedly grumpy that he has made tea without offering her one. Arrowsmith studied textiles at Goldsmiths and she and Davenport

had friends in common, but they did not get together as a couple until after they graduated. 'She seduced me,' he says cheerfully. 'Wily woman!'

As artists they could not be more different. Her work is monochrome, carefully hand-drawn or painted almost abstract images taken from nature: leaves, raindrops, grass. 'We're chalk and cheese,' he agrees. 'We just laugh about it. We come into work and both do our own thing, then we meet up for lunch and have a coffee in the afternoon. It works pretty well. This new space we've taken on is quite a bit bigger, so Sue's eyeing up my studio here as a potential place to expand into. I can see there will be paintings moving in as soon as I go around the corner.'

Davenport seems a contented man, still full of enthusiasm and ideas. 'I was very, very lucky,' he says. 'But it has also been really hard work, and you have lots of knocks on the way. Even with the gallery selling my paintings, it has been very tough. But then you just think, "Well, what else would I do with my life?" I'm doing what I want to do.'

Ian Davenport by Martin Filler and Michael Bracewell (*Thames & Hudson*, £35) is available to order for £31.50 plus £1.35 p&p from *Telegraph Books* (0844-871 1514; books.telegraph.co.uk). *Colourfall*, an exhibition of Davenport's work, runs from June 11 to July 12 at *Waddington Custot Galleries, London W1* (waddingtoncustot.com)