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Artist Ian Davenport launches Colourfall, his first UK retrospective

Turner-nominated artist and YBA explains why the beauty in his colourful, dripping syringe artworks lies in their simplicity

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

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Artist Ian Davenport in his studio in Peckham. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Vivid pools of paint cover the floor, flecks of colour camouflage the white studio walls and a drum kit sits, pristine, in the corner.

The drums, says Turner-nominated artist Ian Davenport from his Peckham studio, are an essential part of the process of producing his vast canvases covered with dripping paint.

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A contemporary of the group of Goldsmith art-school students who became known as the Young British Artists (YBAs), Davenport was among those who exhibited at [Damien Hirst's](#) landmark Freeze exhibition in 1988.

In 1991 he became the youngest nominee for the [Turner prize](#) and Hirst, who recently wrote the introduction to a book of Davenport's work, still credits him for inspiring his spot paintings. Davenport's first retrospective in Britain, titled [Colourfall](#), opens Wednesday.



Colourcade: White 2014 by Ian Davenport 78 3/4 x 157 1/2 in / 200 x 400 cm acrylic on stainless steel, mounted on aluminium panels. Photograph: Waddington Custot Galleries

Rather than painting, Davenport now uses a syringe to create his glossy abstract works, carefully squirting paint into the canvas and letting it drip down in a perfectly straight line, till it merges in a chaos of colour at the bottom – a process that took him almost a decade to perfect.

Davenport said: "It's about trying to hold onto something that is quite controlled and balanced and then something which is free and uncontrolled. It is that paradox that makes these paintings so interesting in my mind.

"The movement of the paint is of real interest to me, it's about how you control the fluid but also how the liquid of the paint creates shapes itself independently. It's quite an unusual viewing experience. I'm just really into paint and materials."

He continues: "I appreciate that it is a simple concept in many ways, but that's where the beauty lies. I never expected that something so simple would open up so much, but just by sampling different colours together in different combinations, allowing them to drip and flow into one another on the canvas, it is almost like being a composer playing around with notes, it's almost inexhaustible what you can do with it."

The distinctive character and scale of Davenport's work caught the attention of Southwark council, who in 2006 commissioned him to create a piece of artwork that would reinvigorate the dank underpass beneath Western railway bridge. His 48m-long creation, named [Poured Lines](#), is one of the largest pieces of public artwork in Europe and has since become a London landmark. He is now in talks to create another mammoth piece of public art for an "unnamed government building".

Davenport's influences are as colourful and diverse as the paintings themselves. Included in the upcoming exhibition is a new work, Colourfall: Holbein, which takes unlikely inspiration from Hans Holbein's 15th-century painting The Ambassadors.

"Holbein's painting is really about red and green and black, and how the colours punctuate the space, so I've broken that down in my painting, using his unique colour palette against a dark green background. And I also think there is something rather beautiful about how the distorted skull in the Holbein is echoed in the paint lines that merge at the bottom of my work."

In another work, Puddle Painting: Blue Study (after Van Gogh), Davenport explores the "brilliant" colour palette used in Van Gogh paintings, juxtaposing similar blues and oranges through drips and lines on his canvas.

Yet in his determination to ensure his work is full of "energy and joy", Davenport drew from popular culture as well as the old Masters, with two of the new works for the Colourfall exhibition, titled Second Series, directly inspired by the colour palette of The Simpsons.

He said: "I just got a Simpsons DVD and I was just flicking through and lifting the colours from certain areas. It gives me something to react to, and stops my paintings from being too arbitrary. Some of the colours are very poppy, but the colours do wander into these darker areas which I think captures the flickering movement of the animation."

Davenport describes the upcoming exhibition as a "snapshot" of a career that has been constantly about exploring paint.

"The paintings speak for themselves and they are about having fun," he added. "So much of art has become over-intellectualised and it's not what grabbed me as an artist. I was just drawn to materials and wanted to have fun and play around with colour. It's that simple."

• Colourfall runs until 12 July. Phone: 020-7851 2200. Venue: [Waddington Custot galleries](#), London W1.