

IAN DAVENPORT LINES UP HIS COLORFUL VISION

THE ABSTRACT PAINTER AND THE YOUNGEST ARTIST EVER TO RECEIVE A TURNER NOMINATION, DAVENPORT HAS A REPUTATION THAT HAS ONLY STEADILY GROWN IN RECENT YEARS

BY MARK PIGGOTT

an Davenport's art has grown more colorful as it has gone along. "Early in my career I worked mainly with monochrome," he says, looking at his most recent pieces, which are eye-popping riots of every hue.

We are in the Waddington Custot in London's Mayfair, a gallery filled with light and an ideal setting to show off this exhibition, titled "Colourscapes."

Davenport is a young-looking and personable 51-year-old whose accent carries little trace of a somewhat nomadic British childhood. He was born in Kent, and his engineer father moved the family to Northern Ireland, which at the time was in a state of virtual civil war. The experience has influenced some of his work, in particular concepts of order and chaos.

Though Davenport's background was anything but artistic, his mother had hoped to be an illustrator and encouraged her children to draw and paint and, crucially, appreciate art.

"In my bedroom as a kid I had a poster of 'The Harvest' by Vincent Van Gogh and it was a really important image to me," says Davenport. "Recently I went to the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam and saw it again and it was amazing. In terms of color, he was someone I was completely surprised by. I grew up in Northern Ireland, then Northumbria. Then went to Cheshire and the color there is gray, pared down and soft; when you go to Provence the light is extraordinary, so I was really surprised that the Van Gogh painting, which I thought he must have imagined, he was replicating what he saw in France."

One of Davenport's most recent pieces is "The Harvest Study (After Van Gogh)" but he is keen to point out that the work is less homage and more about how colors placed in conjunction. "The Harvest," says Davenport, "is almost constructed of horizontal bands that disappear into the sky. When you flip my painting round you get a sense of that."

Many of Davenport's artworks, including "The Harvest Study," are created by pouring lines of paint down smooth surfaces using varying colors to represent mood, movement

and concept. Recently, Davenport started to allow the lines to form wax-like puddles at the base, giving his works a three-dimensional aspect.

"When I started making paintings — even at the very beginning — I was intrigued firstly by the accuracy of the line the paint made but also by the way it extended onto the floor, by the way you could incorporate the floor section. They become sculpture paintings in a way. Maybe it was because I'd wanted to be a sculptor when I was younger but failed miserably! It felt much more natural to use paintings but in a sculptural way."

Davenport shows another of his larger works, "Cobalt Blue (after Manet)," based on Manet's "Olympia."

"I'm very interested in art history and I'm interested in color, and I like the way I can put two things I like together," says Davenport, his finger tracing a line of paint down to the floor. "Using another artists' painting gives me something to work against if you like, something to lift colors from: it forces me to become more inventive. The Manet painting is quite pared down in its color. It forces you to put more interesting combinations together and come up with different solutions. I started doing this because I felt my color choices were becoming too predictable: I was putting things together that I just knew."

Creating paintings that extend out onto the floor creates a number of practical difficulties, not least when attempting to move them from his studio to a gallery.

"I had been making a number of wall installations for exhibitions and shows but it was fraught with difficulty; the paint was so heavy and thick it would never dry in time. I did an exhibition in Rome and the paint was still drying on the floor. All the signs up saying, 'wet paint — please do not touch' and literally the first person to come in went straight up to it and stuck his finger in! He was supposedly a well-known collector so he really should have known better!"

When Davenport was asked to compose a piece for a Swatch commission in Venice he finally worked out a way of

Ian Davenport,
"Carbon Black
Splat," 2018,
acrylic on paper,
152.7 x 121.5 cm.

"I was trying to show kids how to do a wall painting but when I turned around they were squirting each other in the face. I thought, let's go with what they want and do a splatter session. It was great fun, I loved it as well. These works have something punky about them, but they're carefully balanced. I wanted to replicate that energy in the studio"

moving the paintings. "We place very thin sheets of metal placed on the floor taped together. We just cut around that and it's templated. From that template we can cut a metal plate which we laminate, then the metal can be dismantled and installed anywhere. I'm quite pleased with the technique — especially as my father was an engineer!"

Not all of Davenport's works are composed using the same technique. At the entrance to the gallery, a very different set are on display. His "Splat" pictures are the result of paint being squirted onto a vertical-hanging surface and then allowing the paint to trickle down in random patterns. One of these, "Neon Bang," resembles a set of fireworks seen through a frosted window.

"The germ of the idea came when I was doing a workshop with kids," smiles Davenport. "I was trying to show them how to do a wall painting but when I turned around they were squirting each other in the face. I thought, let's go with what they want and do a splatter session. It was great fun, I loved it as well. These works have something punky about them, but they're carefully balanced. I wanted to replicate that energy in the studio."

Davenport found success early. At Goldsmiths in the late 1980s, he was a contemporary of Sarah Lucas, Michael Landy and Damien Hirst, who has said that his spot designs were inspired by Davenport's "Splat" works. Now Davenport laughs off the idea he might have played some part in the astonishing success of his classmate, who included Davenport in the seminal 1988 show *Freeze* in London's docklands.

"I was so lucky at art college. It was a fabulous course. *Freeze* was exciting though I suppose at the time we didn't

understand how unusual it was. It's only in retrospect I can think: that was amazing. There were great tutors and these artists had attitude. We were all looking at each other: it created a network of competition."

Much of the initial furore around the Young British Artists (YBAs) centered on their supposed shock value, but Davenport stresses a great artist can only survive on outrage for so long. "To sustain a career for 20 or 30 years needs a lot more going on. You need to replicate that again and again."

Davenport's Turner nomination — the youngest artist ever to receive one — came just three years later, and since then his career and reputation have steadily grown. His work is on display at galleries across the world, including MOMA in New York, the Pompidou in Paris and Borusan in Istanbul. He has just returned from Texas, where he is overseeing a major exhibition at Dallas Contemporary. "There are eight to 10 recent paintings, plus about 10 older paintings as well one from 1988 to show context. Dallas Contemporary is enormous — one painting there is 50 feet wide and 12 feet high, yet it sits quite normally, it looks fine. I made a lot of big paintings early on, my generation was vying for attention!"

With his career going from strength to strength, Davenport no longer needs to grab the public's attention. So where does he see himself in five or ten years? He shrugs. "I like to plan the next few months but after that I don't really know. I've always followed my nose — as you get older you get more confident in that and happier with yourself and happier about making those decisions." MP