

Below, Ian Davenport in his studio, with his work for Tate Liverpool's Project-Space in the background. Facing page: inside Davenport's studio



Doorways to Heaven

Nominated for the Turner Prize in 1991, Ian Davenport rapidly rose to fame. Then all went quiet. Now he's back with a show at Tate Liverpool. Neal Brown met him

Photographs Julian Anderson

Beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful. The word "beautiful" – officially banned in art writing for many years – will catch up a bit on lost time here, working hard to describe Ian Davenport's work. Using the achingly beautiful colours of the household-paint store, Davenport pours them on to tilted supports to establish a simple motif, so achieving an effect that is unequivocally sincere and... beautiful. Which is a somewhat isolated position to be in, relative to the more mainstream genital depictions, knowing retro-ironies and jolly disfigurements of his peers, and so makes his practice conspicuously different.

He's an ex-Goldsmith's student, an exhibitor at Damien Hirst's *Freeze* exhibition of 1988, and an ex-Turner Prize nominee from 1991. This last is often a synonym for "Screwed-Up Turner Loser", although in Davenport's case it's more that of "Turner Escapee" as proved by his many successful shows at Waddington's since. Whichever, it may come as a surprise – relative to this background of over-excitement and hype – that his working practice is a slow and considered one. "I'm happy to work slowly," he says, "certainly in comparison to changes early on in my career, where I rushed things too much." Which might be a bit like saying the tortoise in

The Tortoise and the Hare rushed things too much, and confirms the strong, confident momentum of Davenport's practice.

His work is based on an elegant device. This, even though simple, is difficult to execute well, and is definitely a little ridiculous to describe. Taking a colour – colour one – Davenport applies it over the whole picture support. When dry, the support is placed horizontally on the floor, and a large quantity of runny, liquid paint poured on to it – using contrasting colour number two – so as to form a very unstable, wet circle. Tilted upwards, to the vertical, gravity draws the paint down the surface of the support, the lower half of the circle's circumference becoming lost as it falls – like dropping a half-melted Cornetto down the front of your best jacket. Unlike ice cream, though, the arch-shaped blob formed by this process is allowed to dry. Then, returning to colour one, a second pouring – repeating the circle and the tilting – is made, but only just within the margins of the first. This creates a thin ribbon or band; a pronounced tidal line like that of a beach or tidal inlet, where the high-tide mark of Dulux pink no. 113452376 is all that remains after its obliteration by the incoming Dulux orange no. 456803553. If you've struggled to get this far, you might just prefer to have his paintings described as a series of duochromes, based on a repeating formula that describes a relationship of chance, order and contradiction.

"I'm interested in things that are sensual," he says, "yet also those that have nasty hardness and shiny abrasiveness." (Surprisingly, he's not talking about the art world itself.) "My works are often described as slick, which I find infuriating, as it implies they don't have any weight to them." Which is a reasonable complaint, as his

paintings weigh in on the scales with considerable conceptual gravitas. There's an intelligent dialogue present, consisting of a relationship between process, method and repetition – a dialogue between discord and unity. Examples are the interruptions to symmetry and failures of the impeccable surface sheens of the works, which are often subverted by bubbles, wrinkles and occasional wildcat blobs. Benign contradictions, these emphasize the physicality of the manufacturing process, in contrast to the static two-dimensionality of the works as paintings. This means that, in some ways, the works are just a dried evidence of their kinetic making.

Davenport's colours being the stronger, bolder ones of the household paints, their prosaic cheapness puts them on a collision course with notions of the rarefied in the fine arts. The artists'-colour palette is necessarily restricted by the need for resistance to fading, which is not the case with decorator's colours. Pigments for these are usually brighter and more attractive than the artists' colours, but life expectancy in normal circumstances is about seven years. So the artist wilfully relinquishes control of certain aspects of his colours, while simultaneously asserting other qualities, such as the urban and industrial ones of flatness and shininess. And, in a further contradiction, the colours, although

Davenport's motif – the band or ribbon that arises from all this colourful making – could be anything from an archway or tunnel entrance, a bath or iced lolly, through to a breast

sumptuous, are massively pinned down by their tidal line – at least until the paintings are butted up against each other, when a polychrome drama lets loose.

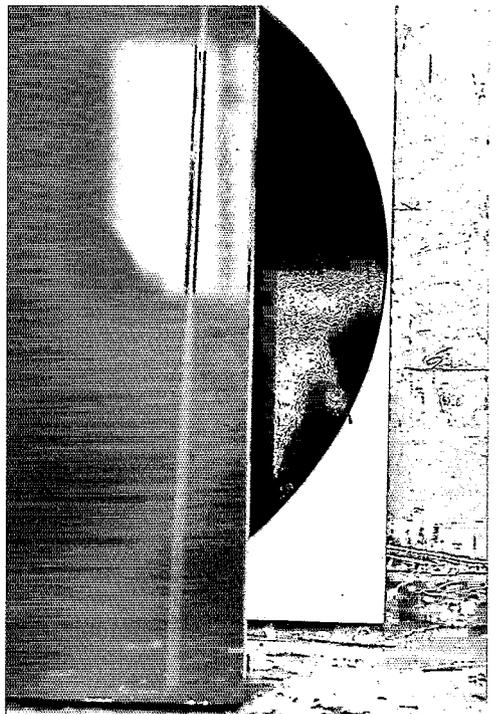
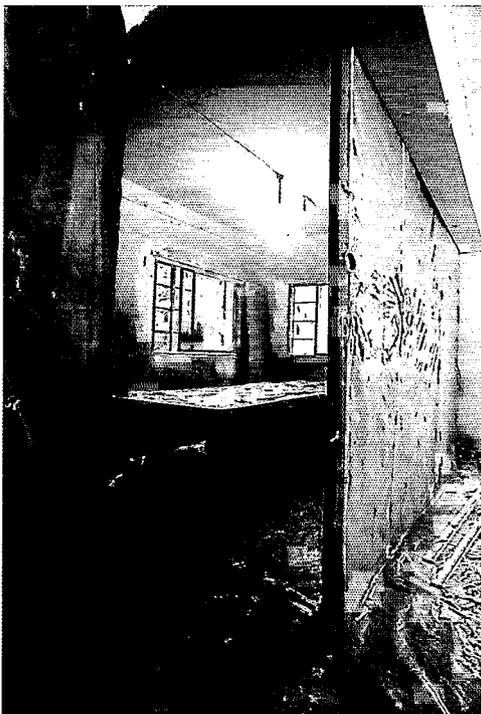
It's the tidal line that is Davenport's motif – the italicized band or ribbon that arises from all this colourful making – and defines his paintings. Catalogue essayists describe it, grandly, as a portal, but it could be anything from an archway or tunnel entrance, a bath, an iced lolly, through to a breast, or even a penis. Whatever it is – especially when the paintings are placed together as polyptychs – it is monumental, having an architectural quality as if from, or for, a church or other grand space.

Which brings us to his new project for Tate Liverpool. It's ambitious, and has required a great deal of preparatory work. An installation, it's described by Davenport as "taking elements from the last show and moving them on." Which means he has changed the painting proportions for Liverpool, so as to reconcile them with the pillars and proportions of the Tate space, researching the project using a scaled architectural model of the interior. Preparation has involved making many studies of what are lozenge-shaped, deliciously multi-coloured confections, carefully arranged and rearranged in the studio so as to establish a choreographed relationship with the architectural space.

"Although I don't think these paintings are 'just beautiful'," he says, "I am happy with 'just beauty'." Which seems a reasonable thing to say, and even sort of beautiful, in its own way. **NT**

"Project Space: Ian Davenport", Tate Gallery Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool L3 (0151 702 7400), 14 Nov-21 Jan.

Neal Brown is an artist and writer



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