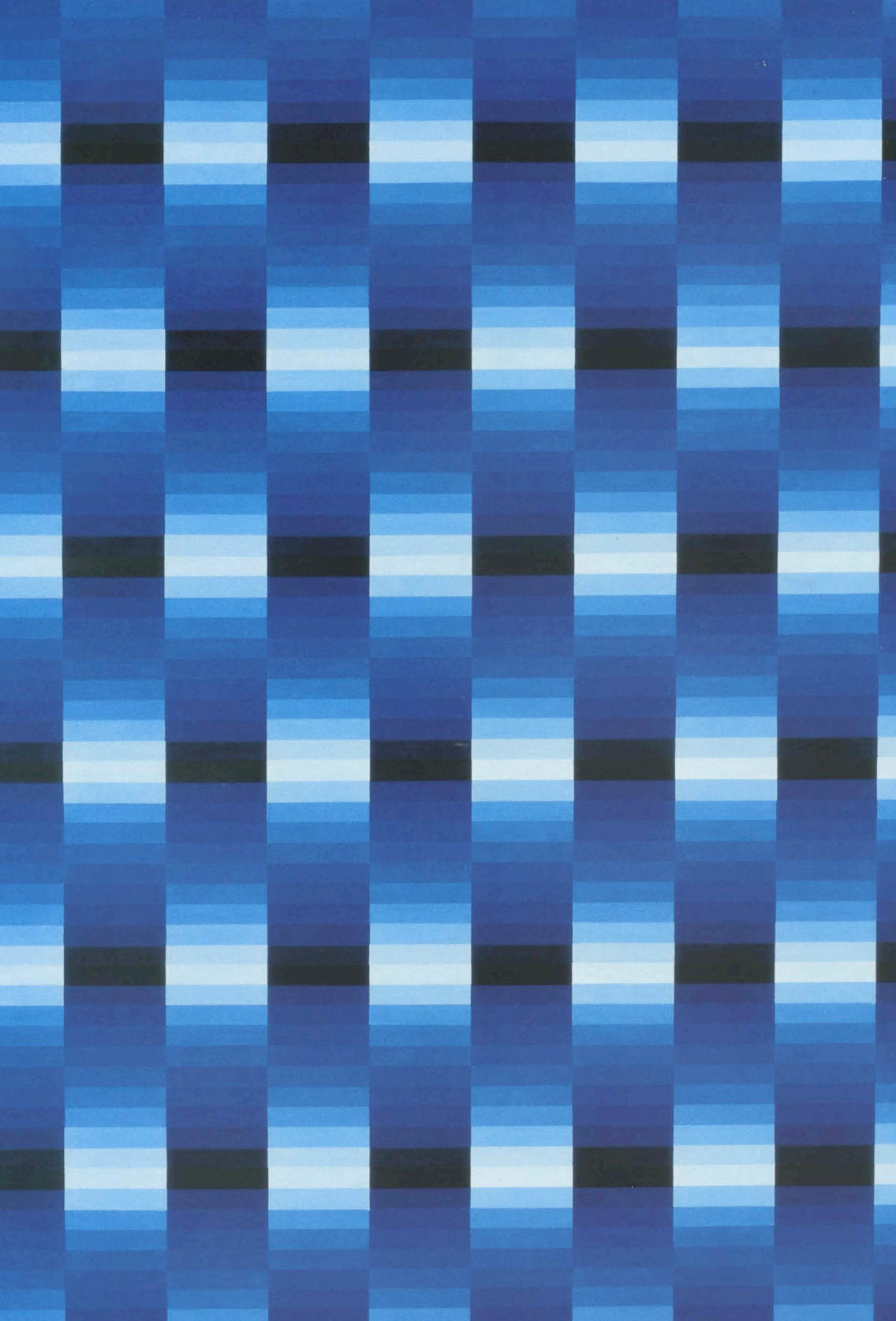




Nick Gammon

OCEANS AND OTHER PAINTINGS

21ST JANUARY – 27TH FEBRUARY 1999

Stephen Lacey Gallery

One Crawford Passage

Ray Street

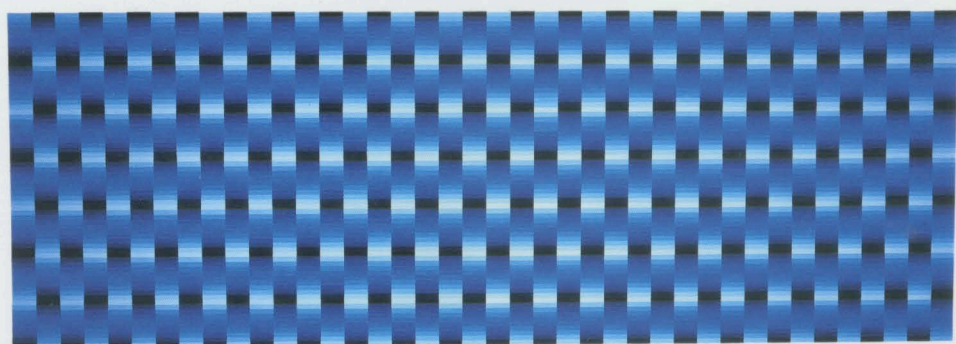
London EC1R 3DP

Telephone: 0171 837 5507 Fax: 0171 837 5549

OCEAN NO.1 1995-97

Oil and wax on canvas

164 x 470 cm





Photography: Barbara Niggel Radloff

When I look at a painting in a gallery, I don't ask myself what is it? I know what it is ...it's a painting. I don't check the picture surface for its solidity, I know it's solid. But I would respond to its fluency, to its 'presence', its dynamics, what it makes me feel ...in short, I ask myself what is the picture doing.

What I'm trying to get at is the idea of an abstract painting that is not about its object-hood, that makes sense on its own terms and one which is accessible to everybody. That the visual experience of the picture is the reality and that a painting is principally a visual event. A picture that is not depictive. Moreover, that such a picture could have subject matter without needing codes or props.

Inevitably, all art is part autobiography. Standing on the beach in Pembrokeshire as a small child and staring at the flat opal sea, a hazy infinity beyond distance in my imagination, is the earliest memory of the sea I have. And now almost forty years later, as I write this, I can see the light on the water still. The sea is inescapable here. But it is also an abstraction which can't be summed up easily, it is a continuing flux that infuses my work and provokes in me a combination of exultance and tranquillity and uncertainty.

Nick Gammon
Ballydavid, December 1998

Following the drift: on the paintings of Nick Gammon.

We have a duty towards music, namely, to invent it. (Stravinsky)

Stand upon the Atlantic shore; look west into the infinity of ocean: never for a moment still, never for a moment without variegation of light, no second of its radiance by day or its flecked darkness at night the same; what is before you is beyond description, beyond words. There are things that can be said, but they cannot convey the experience; a recital of facts can give only a clue to the immensity: 'I live in the west of Ireland, the furthest west,' writes Nick Gammon in a note on his work. '1500 miles further and you hit St John's, Newfoundland, due south and the next landfall is Morocco, due north on longitude 10 degrees 30' west and you're off the end of the world. The sea surrounds me, it is ever present. I live on a kind of satellite, a splinter of rock in the Atlantic.' Living and working in such a place, with such a sense of being at such a point on the surface of the earth, seven-tenths sea, Gammon acknowledges freely the relation of his painting to the stupendous phenomenon of the ocean. The roaring alongside, unlike Elizabeth Bishop's sandpiper, he does not take for granted, nor that every so often the ground is bound to shake. 'In winter the ground shivers and groans when the swell grinds the reef in front of my house . . . The sea is inescapable here.'

Rather he is like the singer in Wallace Stevens' *The Idea of Order at Key West*, the artist whose orderings are audible and human, who is the maker of the song he sings: 'The ever hooded, tragic-gestured sea/Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.' For the music of *Ocean no. 1* and of *Ocean no. 2*, is indeed an ordered music, its intervals, in hue and tone, and in its formal patterning, constant and repeated; it is an incantation of colour, as insistent in its rhythms and intonations as a piece by Philip Glass, perhaps, or by Arvo Pärt, it is a song of celebration. That kind of formal order (and this applies to all Gammon's work) can be traced partly to his interest in systems, in the generation of form and effect by constraints that determine the artistic outcome, though he cannot predict it. Unlike systems artists proper, however, Gammon is not concerned with the discovery of a mathematical, or geometric, truth, with the revelation of a beautiful and timeless idea in a visible form, of something *behind* the things we observe in the sensible world to be endlessly diverse and variegated. I might say, he is after quite the opposite, and paradoxically achieves it through the use of formal devices that are derived from systematic procedures. And in this he works, of course, like a composer. As Stravinsky observed, we may love the sounds (and sights) of nature: they 'may suggest music to us, but they are not yet themselves music . . . They are promises of music; it takes a human being to keep them . . . tonal elements become music only by virtue of their being organised. . .'

Gammon knows that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a pictorial language (writing, for example, works by means of abstract symbolic reference to natural language) any more than there exists a musical language: there are, as he puts it, in an idiosyncratic list, 'only conventions, rules, tricks and methods, devices and precedences, manners and etiquette, that we use in the hope that someone will follow the drift.' As a painter he has devised his own rules in order to make works that will keep the promises of nature, that will bring into concrete form the phenomenal elements that wait to be organised into artistic realisation: 'if it was only the dark voice of the sea/That rose . . ./If it was only the outer voice of sky/And cloud . . ./However clear, it would have been deep air/The heaving

speech of air, a summer sound . . . / *And sound alone.*' (my italics) It would remain, that is to say, the 'constant cry . . . / Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.' Gammon's *Ocean* paintings 'sing', as Stevens' poem has it, 'beyond the genius of the sea.'

The paintings are actually made up of thousands of small blue rectangles (in the case of *Ocean No. 1* there are 2,800; in *No. 2* there are 2,560) that range through a regular sequence of ten tones from dark indigo to ultramarine and copper blue to a near-white, and is then reversed. In *Ocean No. 1* this sequence, of horizontal-format rectangles, runs from top to bottom in forty vertical columns parallel from left to right (or vice-versa) across a canvas field nearly sixteen feet wide; in *Ocean No. 2* the rectangles are vertical in format, and they are configured across four vertical canvases seven foot by three foot. In both, the mix of wax with the oil medium gives the surface of the painting a reflective sheen that increases the shimmer created by the repetition of the individual tonal elements in sequence. Approach closely and it becomes clear that slight and unavoidable variations in surface facture also play a part in the visual complexity of the work. As Gammon points out, the powerful optical effect is not illusionistic, or *trompe l'oeil*, it is, in fact, a consequence of a visual fact. It is not unlike that dazzle occasioned by sunlight shimmer on disturbed water, or that impossibility of maintaining focus on any one of a succession of incoming coastal waves: the eye is actually tricked by the conflicting demands on the retina of successive waves, of light or colour or moving matter, into switching between one and the other, and is never allowed to find more than a momentary fixed focus. In the paintings the effect itself is of a constant rippling up and down (*No. 1*) or from side to side (*No. 2*), and of an unceasing undulation, like that of the sea's rhythmic sway and swell, but rhythmically ordered by an optical regularity disturbed only by those slight textural irregularities remarked above.

Gammon quotes John Milner on Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* series of 1914–15, as indicating the essential shift in those works towards objective abstraction: 'As the eye seeks to sum up the composition and resolve it into the image of an object, its attention is drawn instead to the many small points of conjunction. This creates rhythm literally in the field of vision; it is no longer symbolic imagery but actual visual experience.' Of course we may read this as descriptive of our experience of Gammon's own painting: he emphasises that the work exists to activate the space around it, to provide what he calls 'a specific aesthetic charge within that space'; that is something in painting that is achieved primarily by *the image* i.e. the 'actual visual experience', and in the *Ocean* paintings specifically by 'rhythm in the field of vision'. (I say, *primarily*, because we cannot avoid the fact that paintings are *objects* whose placement in a space is crucial to their effects upon the spectator, especially when they are objects as imposing as these paintings.) For, of course, Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* series presents us with images, just as do Gammon's paintings (in the Mondrians there are, indeed, recognisable elements of what Milner calls 'symbolic imagery') and that 'actual visual experience' is experience of the image. The question arises, at the heart of any critical approach to Gammon's work: what are these images of?

The first answer is always self-referential: the images are of bands of colour, whose tonal relations are predetermined, deployed in a certain order and relation, usually symmetric, if sometimes complexly so. They create effects of light. In the case of the *Ocean* paintings, as their titles imply, these effects, created by scale and presence, and by the blue colour/tonal sequencing described above, what Gammon calls 'a multiplicity of blue', are of a kind that recalls our experience of the sea, but they do not imitate its actual turmoil or the

evanescence of its 'constant cry' in the 'meaningless plungings of water and the wind'. They are the outcome of an act of invention; they perform their duty towards art, taking blue and white light from nature and transforming it into a particular configuration of given forms. They are images, then, of an idea of order, expressions of what Stevens invokes as the 'Blessed rage for order . . . the maker's rage to order words of the sea . . .'. 'Rage' may not seem the proper term for Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* meditations, but there is a close, and particularly apt parallel: 'Observing sea, sky and stars, I sought to indicate their plastic form through a multiplicity of crossing verticals and horizontals'.

The title of the *Harmonic Constants* series derives from the term used by oceanographers for the sets of co-ordinated measurements that are used to predict tides, and refers also, of course, to the measured intervals that constrain the deployment of the triads of colour/tone up and down the paintings. Their severely vertical format relates them to the earlier *Totem* paintings, which work by means of similar, but less complicated, visual strategies, and to the more recent *Chromatic* series, whose ordering device is slightly more complicated. In each case the optical effects are achieved by a fairly loosely applied mathematical rhythm, a programme more intuitive in its origins, however, than systematic. Subtle distinctions, of saturation of hue and density of colour, ensure that as the eye plays up and down the columns it encounters differing intensities of optical pressure. The perceptual outcome is of a soft and subtle radiance that is unique to Gammon's painting, and justifies his ambition: 'I try to make my paint like light.' These paintings have great decorative charge, they bring to the spaces they enter energetic light and colour. Like the *Ocean* paintings they proclaim their *objectiveness* (their unorthodox formats emphasise this aspect of their presence) but only to intensify their expressive 'vital import', the power of the image that they carry to the eye. They seem to absorb light in order to regenerate it as intense colour, as layered atmospherics create beautiful sunsets. This is one response; there may be any number of others: these are not paintings of specific things in nature, but signs, like a score for its harmonies. 'Impressed by the vastness of Nature,' wrote Mondrian, in the sentence that followed that above, 'I was trying to express its expansion, rest and unity.' That is what art is for:

'It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing . . .

And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.'

Mel Gooding, London, December 1998

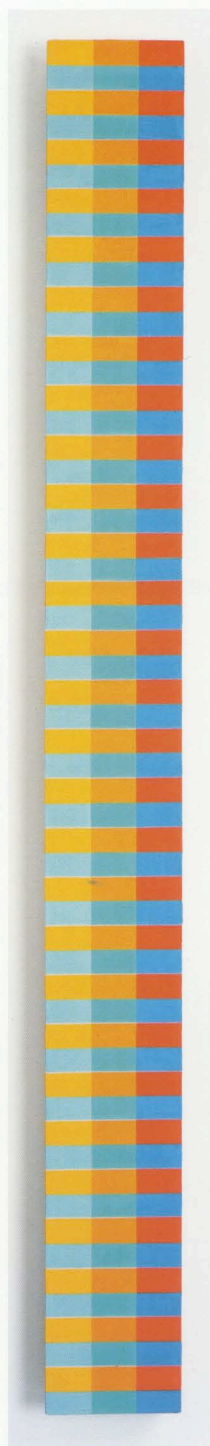
Notes and references

The epigraph is from Stravinsky's 'Poetics of Music' (Harvard 1942) chapter 3; the later quotation is from Chapter 2. All quotations from Nick Gammon are from a personal communication with the present writer. Elizabeth Bishop's *Sandpiper* begins: 'The roaring alongside he takes for granted/and that every so often the world is bound to shake.' *The Idea of Order at Key West* is from Wallace Stevens, 'Collected Poems' (Faber and Faber, London, 1955); all subsequent poetic quotations are from this great poem. John Milner is quoted from 'Mondrian' (Phaidon, London, 1992). The term 'vital import' is from Suzanne Langer's 'Problems of Art' (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1957) chapter 5: '... "vital", because it is always some mode of feeling, sense, emotion, consciousness, that is conveyed by a successful work of art; "import", because it is conveyed. Vital import is the element of *felt life* objectified in the work...'

HARMONIC CONSTANTS NO.1 1998

Oil on canvas

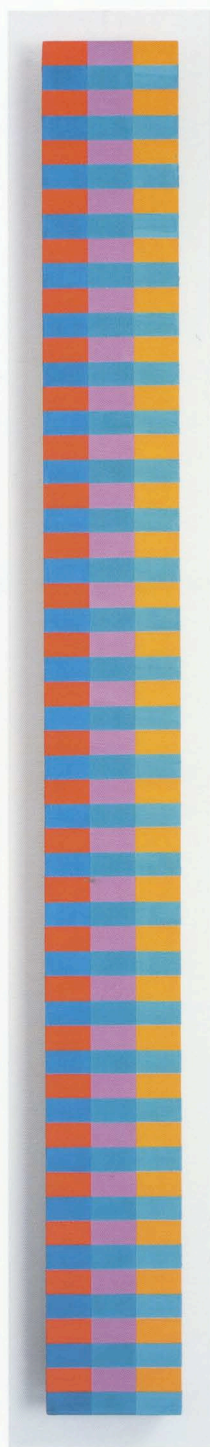
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HARMONIC CONSTANTS NO.2 1998

Oil on canvas

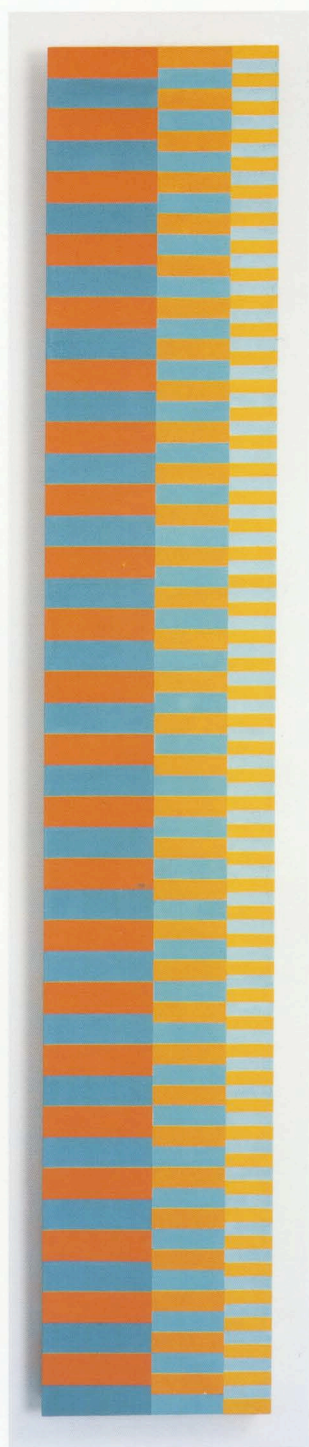
203.2 x 20.4 cm



CHROMATIC 3 NO.1 1998

Oil on canvas

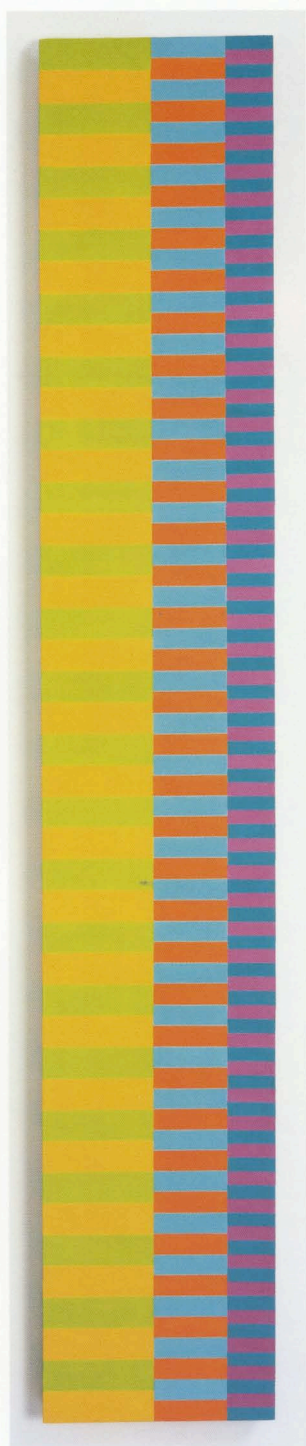
223.5 x 38.2 cm



CHROMATIC 3 NO.2 1998

Oil on canvas

223.5 x 38.2 cm



NICK GAMMON

1958	Born Pembroke
1976-77	Chelsea School of Art
1977-80	Bath Academy of Art, Corsham
1981-90	Assistant to Howard Hodgkin

ONE MAN EXHIBITIONS

1993	Berning and Daw, London
1995	Blue Gallery, London
1999	Stephen Lacey Gallery, London

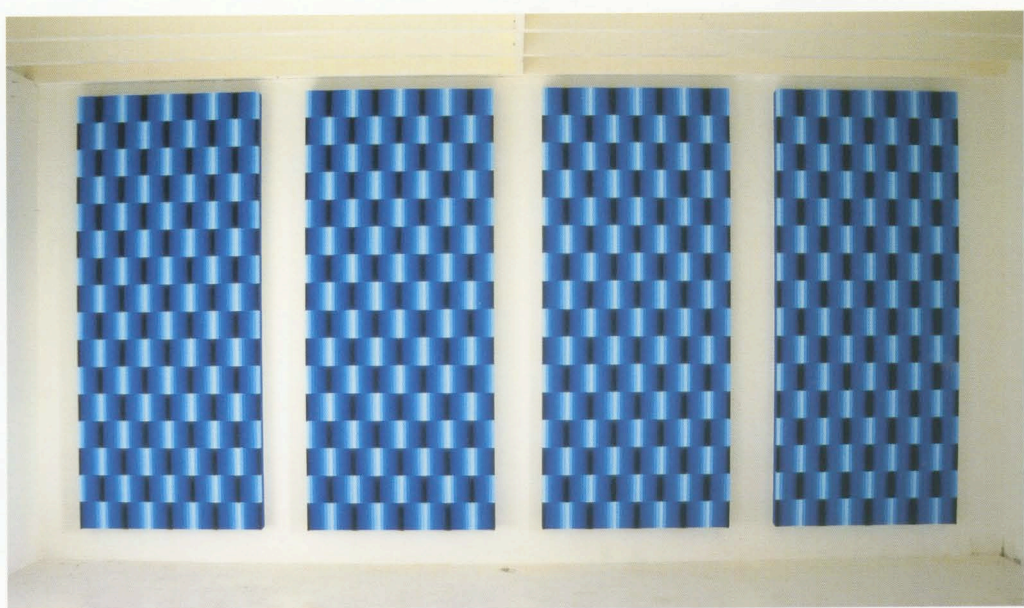
GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1992	Spitalfields Heritage Centre, London
1996	<i>Hard Edge</i> , Reed's Wharf Gallery, London
	<i>Crosscurrents</i> , Barbica Centre, London
	Barcelona Art Fair, Barcelona
1997	Reed's Wharf Gallery, London
	John Moore's Exhibition, Liverpool
1998	Artist in residence to the city of Munich, at Villa Waldberta

OCEAN NO.2 1996-98

Oil and wax on canvas

213.5 x 91.5 cm each, 4 panels



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