

MUSIC TO DRIVE TO ||| WILLY BO RICHARDSON

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VOICING THE INTERIOR
The work of Willy Bo Richardson

Willy Bo Richardson’s work looks inward. His abstract paintings are about experiences, some of them abstract and others abstracted through memory. The space he investigates is without boundaries. It is timeless. Here, any distinction between the past and the present has long vanished. The world he aims to capture is ethereal and possibly beyond reach. This is the reason why his quest is ongoing.

Richardson once shared with me a dream he had years ago that had a tremendous impact on his future ambitions as a painter. In this landscape of the imagination, where reality and fantasy are blurred, he found himself in 1997 Bastrop, Texas, in his early twenties. He simultaneously worked and attended school. However, for several days at a time—and here the dream diverts from reality—he watched himself getting lost in a pine forest, painting and writing poetry. “In this creative part of the dream I saw myself moving through timeless space,” he said. “Traveling at incredible speed,

there was only bliss and fearlessness—the result of an unfettered mind.” In his paintings, Richardson has aimed to capture this ideal of place of self ever since.

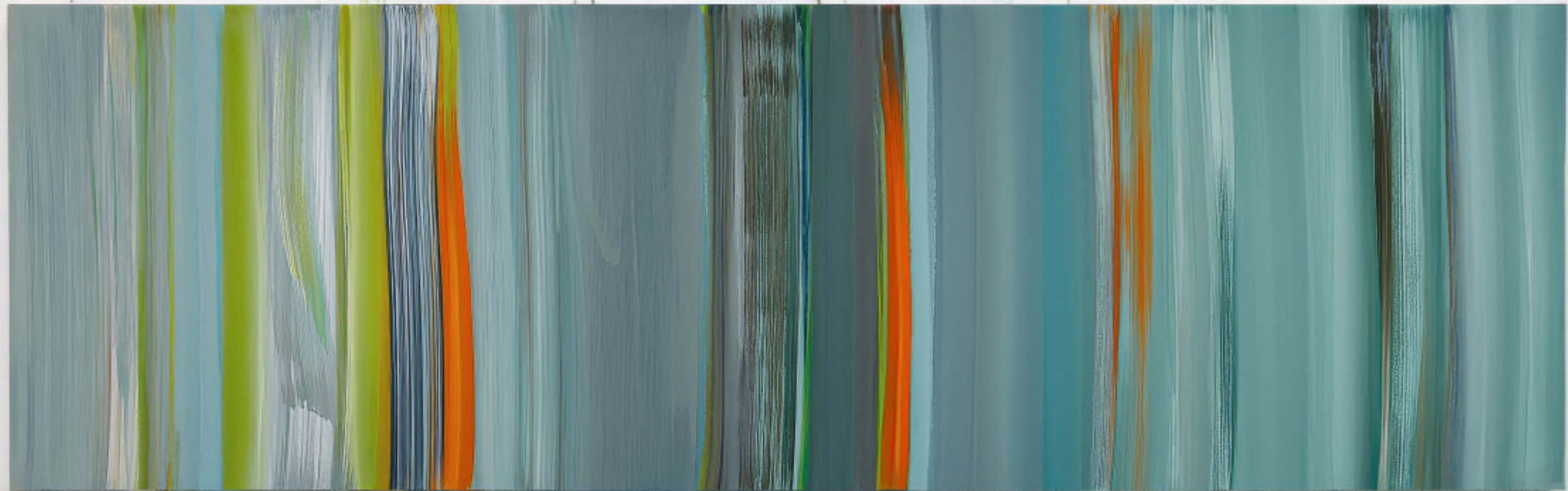
But what language, what visual manifestation, could describe something this abstract? In Richardson’s case, the artist has found his meditation in a continuous rhythm. Since his last year in graduate school at Pratt Institute in New York, he has filled his canvases with layers of vertical strokes. “I used the vertical strokes because they had a neutral behavior—

they allowed me to look at the colors and proportions without thinking of the pictorial space or abstractions of objects.” Not only has he continued to pursue this path, but his commitment remains unwavering. His process is his ritual.

Richardson’s language is universal. While the freedom of his gesture leads back to Abstract Expressionist ideals, his overall aesthetic significantly draws from the decorative fluency found in Primitive Art, while his brushwork echoes the clarity found in Chinese ink drawings. “My work is not about the specific,” Richardson says. “Metaphorically, I like my paintings to capture the energy found in waves of water after a stone has been thrown, gaining momentum as the effect spreads outward.” As Josef Albers said, “Art is not an object, but an experience.”

It is the vertical movement of the hand that characterizes Richardson’s practice and provides the works’ only overt sense of structure. It establishes the illusion of direction and sequential calm. However, it is Richardson’s choice of palette and variations concerning the density of mark-making that define the unique appearance of each individual composition. The works are not simply mileposts that line the artist’s larger journey. Each encapsulates its own universe and its own promise of infinite possibilities.

Stephanie Buhmann
New York City





WILLY BO RICHARDSON AND MAX PROTETCH:
IN CONVERSATION

When Max Protetch opened his first gallery in the late 1960s in Washington, D.C., he was showing some of the most significant artists of the postwar era. At an early age, he became friends with art world luminaries such as Sol LeWitt and Andy Warhol, and he showed the work of Carl Andre, Robert Rauschenberg, and Dan Graham. In 1977, Jo Ann Lewis, writing for *The Washington Post*, characterized Protetch as D.C.’s “purist purveyor of the avant-garde.”

Over the course of forty years, Max Protetch Gallery was located in eight spaces in three cities and hosted nearly 500 exhibitions. In 2009 he sold his New York City gallery and moved to Santa Fe.

Willy Bo Richardson and Max Protetch met in 2012. What began as a work relationship naturally progressed into a close friendship. They went to art fairs, drove down to Albuquerque looking for car parts for their “hoopties,” and enjoyed Oyster Fridays at Max’s house.

The following conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, took place May 1, 2024, at Desert Sabbatical, the Santa Fe retreat center for art world visionaries that Protetch and his wife, Irene Hofmann, developed together.

W I L L Y — You had friendships and worked with artists who were influential on a global scale. I studied their work in school, and that’s different than knowing them personally.

M A X — *It sure is ...*

I wanted to check in with you to see where our ideas align. Something you said to me a decade ago: “If you think you really know what you’re doing, it’s time to reevaluate, to take another look.” An artist has to be okay with being lost. Being lost is a part of finding one’s way through social, political, aesthetic modalities.

It sounds like you learned your lessons well.

Thank you. I think of painting as a solitary practice.

It’s actually the loneliest place. I can’t tell you how many times in my career I’ve heard young and old artists saying that “painting is dead,” wondering if there’s anywhere else to go with it — if it’s just a commodity. Of course, they later learn this is not true and someone has found a way through with painting, to create something new and give people a new perspective on what art is and can be.

Despite the trendy declaration that painting is dead, I found myself still in awe of painting. It’s not nostalgia. I’m not stuck in a specific time period responding to dead ideas. I see painting as the absolute best technology for me to capture a moment. The moment dries as one’s experience, like an hourglass tipped on its side. What I experience in the final glaze layers is what I wish to impart. Liminal space.

When we first met, I tried to discourage you with the direction your work was taking. I was very impressed by your mind and your thoughts and your desire to really move the world. I thought it would be very difficult to do it in your situation.

I remember our conversations ... sometimes arguments. They struck a chord, and stay with me. I’m grateful. It’s been a good practice to come out on the other side. In the end, it’s about being able to push off your adventurous mind.

I later learned along the way that you have an abundant way of approaching life. The work you’re making involves you, and it speaks about who you are. There’s no reason to not follow your own path. You visit the medium in a fresh way. That’s all I have to say in terms of encouragement, because I don’t think you need any.

Thank you, Max. That means a lot to me.

When I first saw On Kawara’s “Date Paintings,” I saw an example of an artist who is working with repetition. His work is conceptual. It’s not exciting because of its novelty. What’s exciting is his diligence in repetition and perceived mundanity. So did I get that right?

We had an On Kawara show in 1972 or ’73. It was such a pleasure exposing people to that work, and I had become a believer. I think you got it right, but I don’t think there is a right or a wrong. I’ll tell you a story. I went through the same dilemma as you did. When I had my gallery in D.C., I went to New York City every weekend. I went to Castelli Gallery and I ran into Leo. I considered him my mentor.

Castelli said to me, “Hi, Max, what are you showing lately?” I replied, “Sol LeWitt.” “Ah!” he exclaimed. “So beautiful!”

I thought to myself, The old man has lost it. He doesn’t understand where art is going. I thought he misunderstood LeWitt’s value and meaning. For whatever reason, a year or two later I was having a conversation about LeWitt and I found myself talking about the beauty in the work and how it moves me. The activity of creating work in your mind. How Sol worked—he woke up in the morning and spent six hours just thinking about art. So I think you certainly share my prejudice.

We share a modernist view. The words “truth and beauty” were not allowed in graduate school in New York. Postmodernism has a fascination with deconstructing and puts a premium on discursive thought. Culturally we are enchanted by endless chatter. My paintings are meant to defy chatter. I want to be whole and make lasting relics of wholeness.

I am attracted to beauty and symmetry. These are principles we use to actively explore the world. This is a process of discovery. In my painting practice I found an efficient way to work with these principles. I am looking for order without ignoring complexities.

There are therapeutic aspects of art, and methods to reach flow states. I’m also aware that art can be a reflection of our culture.

Art is a reflection of your culture if you’re incredibly lucky. The way you see art and the way you see design may be linked to the larger world, and you may be loved for that reason. Or you’re unlucky enough to work in isolation with no following at all, still devoted to your work.

I want to respond to a larger historical conversation. There are still unresolved questions in modernism. For example, we had Abstract Expressionism, which comes from automatism—automatic painting and automatic writing, mining the unconscious.

Minimalism declared a reduction to only “artist” and “materials,” where the work strives for a pure form, without a power structure. It strives to be a phenomenological form. Nobody can tell us what it is. We see it for ourselves.

Minimalists strove for this ideology, but it wasn’t accessible. The ongoing question I have is how to make pure forms accessible. To me it seems simple: beauty!

Dave Hickey tried to bring that out again. Looking for artists who strive for beauty.

I remember that. I loved his writings.

I loved Dave. One particularly difficult character.

I never studied art. I actually didn’t read much about it either.

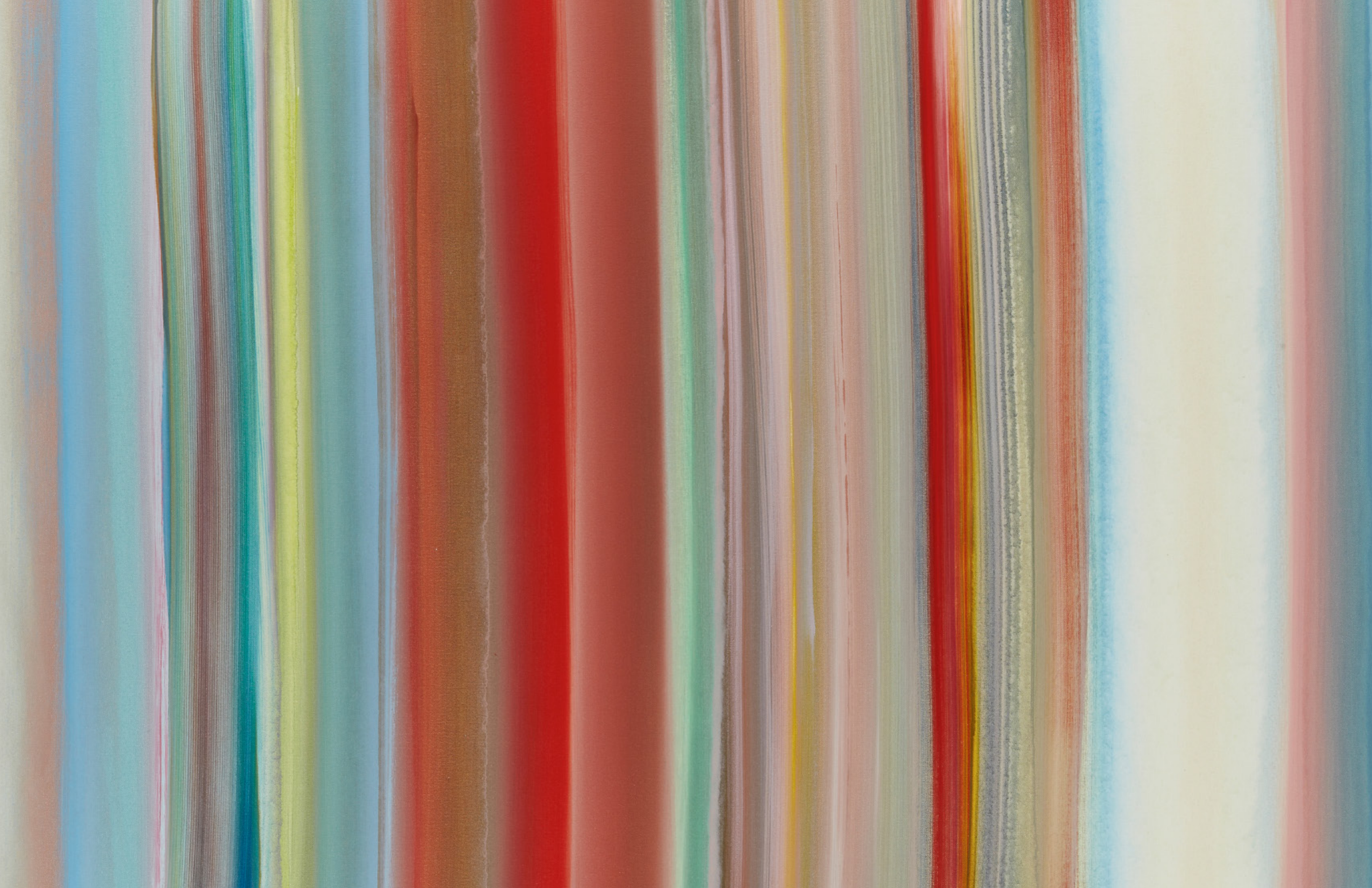
You never studied art history, but you lived and breathed art.

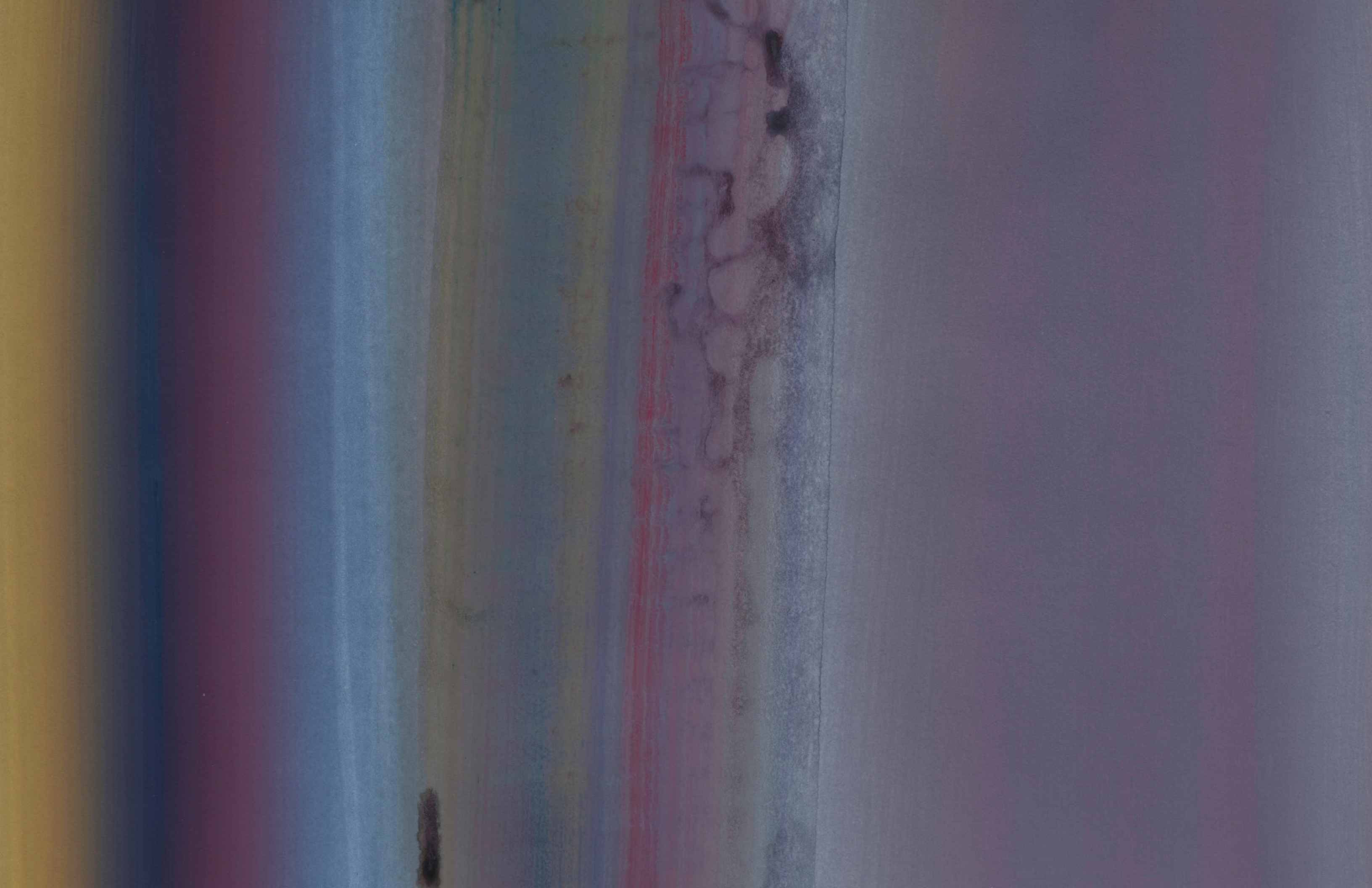
I wasn’t giving it a big label like “studied.” I went to the Met and other places that showed classical painting with David Reed a few times. The sixteenth century was his thing. Instead of talking about the things that experts talk about, he saw where the artists’ interests were similar to his interests in painting. On the surface there’s no connection, but David was always looking at the robe in the background.

Exactly. Yes! Certain visual elements outlast their historical context. Contemporary abstract artists can still be in dialogue with paintings from earlier periods. I can see the conversation Reed has through his work.

Subject matter in sixteenth-century Italy was not a creative choice. There was a directive from the Catholic Church or a patron. Where the artists found themselves was in the process, and where it really shows is the flow of a robe.

The way it flowed, and the colors, and how light was used in some pieces ... It changed the whole feeling and motive of what Reed was thinking about. Because High Renaissance art was only seemingly done by commission, there was an escape artists were looking for. It was a narrow interest of discovery.









ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Organizing a book requires the goodwill and guidance of many. I am humbled and grateful to all those who contributed.

This book began with a conversation with Juan Kelly, an artist I deeply respect and admire. Numerous creative and professional eyes helped bring this undertaking to fruition. When I first brought the essays and text to Will Palmer, I asked, “Do we have a book?” After his skillful editing and guidance, I can say yes—we now have a book.

Everett Pelayo and Montana Currie were generous thought partners in the early shaping of the project. Irene Hofmann’s advice set a high standard for the overall vision.

I am appreciative of the time and effort that Stephanie Buhmann and Katy Crocker dedicated to their essays, and am proud to include their contributions. I am also grateful to Max Protetch for his snarky fearlessness—I never quite knew what a mentor was until I met him.

Nüart Galleries supports my ideas and projects. The gallery’s outstanding staff keeps things moving: Thank you to Kevin Oliver, Samuel Escue, Jonathan Meade, and Veronica Primerano. In addition, Connor Ong’s questions for the Nüart Editorial Artist Spotlight helped shape the introduction.

When I met with Joseph Gilbert in Los Angeles to see the first draft of the book design and layout, I was blown away. He reflects and embraces my work with thoughtfulness and care. It is an incredible honor to work with him.

I am also grateful to Eric Kroll, photographer and prolific bookmaker, who was always generous with his time and knowledge. I could call him day or night with questions about all things books.

Along the way, many friends and colleagues offered feedback, encouragement, and thoughtful advice. Our conversations helped shape both the work and this book in ways large and small. I am sincerely grateful to Steve Zeifman of Rush Creek Editions, Stan Natchez, Kate Joyce, Lara Nickel, Bob Richardson, Brooke Gamble, Jerome Ginsburg, Marin Sardy, Kim Kelly, Alex Hanna, and Bridget Bellaforte. I also thank Marcin Muchalski, who photographed the in situ images at Phillips auction house.

I dedicate this book to my family. My parents are creatives—they paved the way. My daughter, Audrey, was writing her college application essays when the introduction was taking shape. She understands that committing to a statement of intent is both make-believe and real. My wife, Kim Richardson, has always seen my work and vision in a good light (no pun intended). Kim also photographs all of my work.

Thank you.
Willy Bo Richardson

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Art direction and design by Joseph Gilbert

Edited by Will Palmer

Photography by Kim Richardson

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“Influencing Space” was compiled from interviews and writings by Connor Ong, Katy Crocker, Will Palmer, and Willy Bo Richardson. “Dad, Why Do You Paint Stripes?” originally appeared in *Pyragraph*, November 15, 2016.

Eastern Gate Publishing
3780 Academy Road, Unit C
Santa Fe, NM 87507

ISBN 979-8-234-06376-2 LCCN: 2026919088

Printed and bound in the United States of America