Eric Butcher

Material Witness

Essay by Roy Exley

Photographs by Peter Abrahams

Interview with Jagjit Chuhan

Eric Butcher Material Witness

Contents

Introduction

If one turns one's back on the City and travels eastwards through the East End of London; from the glitzy warehouses of Shoreditch, the wholesale import/export enterprises of Commercial Road, down past the Isle of Dogs and its glittering temples to commerce - a journey punctuated by Hawksmoor masterpieces nestling improbably amongst rundown tower blocks - beyond City Airport the landscape gradually changes, seems to atrophy into an endless post-industrial suburban sprawl. Just at the point when a nervous realisation begins to emerge that at any moment one could simply fall off the edge of the earth, one reaches Dagenham; so far east that it is no longer technically, or even spiritually, in London but in Essex. It is here, among the sullied warehouses, car bodywork repairers and food processing plants, that Benson-Sedgwick Engineering can be found, a high-end bespoke metal fabricators.

I started working with Benson-Sedgwick 10 years ago when I approached them with an idea I had to make a series of curved aluminium structures to act as painting supports. They were very helpful with some of the technical considerations and interested in what I was trying to do and thus began a fruitful relationship. My visits to Benson-Sedgwick became an increasingly significant aspect of my working practice as I engaged with and reflected upon the various activities in evidence and from discussions with polishers, welders and machinists, the people who cut, rolled and folded my aluminium structures. On the simplest level there is something bizarrely exciting and suggestive about seeing materials in unusually large quantities, the way they are cut, stacked and stored, the pragmatic and artless movements and methodologies employed. My work has been strongly affected by these simple experiences.

This volume is a record of the work produced during an 18-month period, during 2008-09 as Artist in Residence at Benson-Sedgwick Engineering. However, in practice this residency constituted simply a more formalised period of a relationship and process that had already been going on for some years.

I am grateful to several people for their help and encouragement during this project. At Benson-Sedgwick Barry Goillau has been particularly supportive, along with John Benson, Foreman Dave Staples and metal polishing guru Andy Hedges. I would also especially like to thank Jagjit Chuhan at CAIR for her limitless patience and support from the outset. One of the many pleasures this project has afforded me was the opportunity to work with Roy Exley for the first time, and I benefited greatly from his insights. Lastly thanks to Craig McPhedran whose assistance on-site at Benson-Sedgwick was invaluable, and my long-suffering studio assistant Jon Barrett.

Eric Butcher 2010

Eric Butcher & the Aluminium Works

Roy Exley

"Art does not seek to describe but to enact". Charles Olson. [1]

There is something extremely seductive about the mint-bright surfaces of freshly fabricated metal, there is a decidedly haptic attraction about them, and we feel a certain compulsion to touch them. The pristine finish of freshly milled aluminium is no exception. The miniature corrugations, stripes and irregularities that narrate the story and express the nature of the production processes also dictate the nature of that touch; fingers are guided, gliding along the corrugations, the smoothness of feel, an illusion – like driving along the ruts in a road rather than trying to traverse them, only on a much smaller, finely tuned sensual scale.

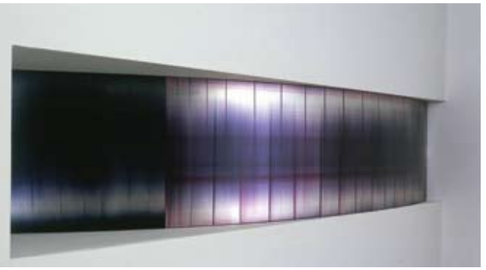
For a long time, the surfaces of these metals have fascinated Eric Butcher, not just for their innate sensuous qualities, but also for what they say about their genesis and how their nature contrasts strongly with the places of that genesis, the grime, the brutal grandeur of the machines, the clangour and seeming chaos that are an integral part of their production. Butcher's paintings express the interface between his passion for colour and his attraction to these freshly milled metals; the tactile intricacies of surface texture and the miscible subtleties of coloured pigments.

Like the process painter Jason Martin, Butcher is exploring the interrelationships between sculpture and painting and all those interstices that lie in between them. There is a certain deliberation about the way Butcher has approached this project, but within that deliberation, and the clean, hard-edged precision that his works manifest, the play of chance is an important component in the creative process that he follows. The operative surfaces of metal-milling machines are prone to wear and distress and the physical signs of that distress are expressed upon the materials that are milled or extruded through

them, and these become the signatures of those machines, written in idiosyncratic and variable patterns of stripes, grooves and ridges along the length of the metals that emerge from them – just as a gun and it's fired bullet can be forensically matched by the examination of the striations down the length of the spent bullet. These fresh sections of metal can also be bruised and scuffed as they are moved around the factory during their production. As Butcher moves his oil and resin-based pigments across the surfaces of these metals, the consistency and therefore the density of these pigments is fashioned by those linear idiosyncrasies of the metal's surfaces, as if the stripes of colour are the written signatures of those surfaces. In a process-based way, Butcher's execution of these works surfs along the aleatory edge of that variable interface between the dictate of the materials and his pre-meditated intentionality. In the work of Jason Martin, Bernard Frize or Gerhard Richter, the surfaces upon which they lay their pigments are uniform but the uneven surfaces or edges of the tools, squeegees, etc., that they use impose themselves upon the finished work. In an interview with Alan Woods, Jason Martin expressed his view that "The language of painting is the investigation of the material presence of the surface". [2] In Eric Butcher's work, the tools and the surfaces of the metal both express their own idiosyncrasies in the finished work – all his tools develop accretions of paint on their edges from previous painting sessions and each time he carefully chooses the right tool, with its own individual signature of accretions, to suit a particular surface or colour with which he is working.

In recent work each piece is like an excerpt from a grand vision, a component from a wider work in progress. Butcher's paintings nevertheless each display their own unique individuality. Imagine a staircase in which each step, each tread and riser has its own unique sculptural integrity, and that might be a good analogy of the way in which Butcher's works, as integral components, combine to create a greater work. This serial evolution of an idea might be seen as a collection of pristine but nevertheless transitional sketches, an extended aleatory game where the signs of chance, a prime player, have been obscured by the deftness and precision of technique. The viewer might be reminded of Sol LeWitt's games with lines or Peter Halley's with his conduits. In tune with the pluralism that is currently abroad in the contemporary art world, Butcher takes a modernist aesthetic and puts it to the sword of chance, thus undermining the authority of a modernist vision that has come to be seen as too prescriptive, pedantic and formulaic. So his work can be perceived on several different levels. Superficially they are aesthetically beautiful objects, but that is just a foil for works that are in fact more to do with process than product; a foil that the viewer needs to penetrate to perceive their true essence, an essence that is expressed through that serendipitous meeting of artistic process with manufacturing process; an indeterminate synergy of two modes of fabrication that are normally inextricably separated by an impermeable divide, those of heavy industry and fine art. His works can also be experienced as a crossing point between two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional sculpture while at the same time being a sophisticated re-cycling exercise.

In his 1920 manifesto Purism, Le Corbusier described painting as a kind of architecture and conversely, architecture as a kind of painting, and he wrote that, "painting is a question of architecture" [3] and in this same vein, Butcher achieves a cross-fertilisation between the two genres, painting and sculpture. The individual pieces of his work, like mini-sculptural units, express a cohesive synergy within his greater project. The mien of his works might be likened to the 'hard-edged abstraction' and 'colour-field' painting of the American painters Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis and Brice Marden in the '60's and '70's, the precision of whose 'post-painterly abstraction' seemed to grow out of 'Pop' and 'Op' Art, or to Ellsworth Kelly who began to question the shape and nature of the armatures for his paintings. The interesting thing is that Butcher's paintings, like Kelly's, address not pictorial space – which is the basis of many paintings – but architectural space in that they are paintings as objects that occupy space in a definitive



way, rather than defining space through the pictorial. This is demonstrated particularly by some of Butcher's larger works, such as 'ref. 189 / 204 / 065 / 255', executed on lengths of rolled aluminium sheet, which are in themselves architectural in that they interact with and modify the interior spaces within which they are displayed. Not only do they create spatial transformations but also influence the perceptual interpretations of those spaces by the viewers or occupants who experience them.

Most artworks express a gesture of sharing, a sharing of insights that an artist has experienced 'on his way to the office', so to speak, that he or she has experienced during the preparatory and exploratory work that is an integral part of all creativity. This sharing is not simply altruistic but it is didactic in the sense of hopefully opening the viewer's eyes to something new, to something missed or overlooked amid the exigencies and distractions of the daily grind. In Butcher's case this might be experienced as the opening of our eyes to the fact that much that seems contingent and utilitarian around us might well be opened up and transformed through our enlightened perceptual processes into something incontrovertibly more aesthetic. Our orientation towards Victorian engineering might provide a good illustration for this phenomenon. In a more contemporary context, using monolithic industrial sheets of mild steel for his sculptural behemoths, Richard Serra has irreversibly changed our expectations of what that particular material is all about, not only is it utilitarian, but it also has aesthetic potential, but furthermore it is awesome in scale and dangerous, introducing phenomena of the sublime into the world of sculpture. Other artists such as Donald Judd, Walter de Maria, Carl Andre and more recently Liam Gillick, have used pre-fabricated elements in their sculptural work. Although their roots might lie in the world of minimalism, Butcher's painted sculptures transcend the remit of that particular genre by virtue of the fact that they engage with the element of chance; they are not declarative, they are exploratory. The speculative aspects of his work bring it closer to the realm of process painting, as he navigates the routeways that the spontaneity of chance lays down, where each fresh surface is not blank, but is an unwritten text around which a narrative is waiting to be written, through which the importance of the creative act exceeds that of the final product. It is an accepted truism that no work of art is complete until it has been interpreted in his or her own particular way by the viewer. The 'Reception Theory' posits that the viewing (or the reading) process is essentially a process of completion, and that process is reliant not just on the physicality of the artwork but also upon its contextuality, which includes, amongst other things, the history of its making.

There is an essential paradox embedded within Eric Butcher's works. Although visually they are imbued with an aura of slick hi-tech minimalism, as if created in some hermetic digitally controlled environment, with all the cold impersonality such procedures might imply, they are in fact created through the use of hand-held tools for the application of pigment onto inert mineral surfaces, a procedure whose evolution can be traced right back to Neolithic times. His works are just as much the inscriptions of cultural moments in time and space as were the 'primitive' drawings and paintings created by Stone-Age men on the walls of the caves at Lascaux – votive acts performed to bring success to their hunting exploits. Each are mementoes of creative acts carried out as an expression of our connectivity to our environment, and a need to transform that environment, not only for the sake of contingency but also for the sake of a symbiotic harmony with it and an ongoing synergy between our inner desires and our instinct for survival whether that be mortal, cultural or spiritual. Digital imagery with the fixed and formulaic nature of its electronic palettes and armatures is as cold and alien to our innate desire for freedom in our creative expression as is the inertia of inter-stellar space. So, what seem, initially, to be products of the space-age have their roots in the ancient, haptically honed skills of the painter, skills that require meditative detachment from the rigours of life for their successful realisation, so that the adjective, hermetic, used above somewhat

ref. 189

ref. 204

ref. 065

pejoratively, does have a relevant place in the consideration of Butcher's work but in a totally contrasting context. It has been argued that those Neolithic artists were actually shamans working with the (spiritual) world of the subconscious in an attempt to influence the outcomes of everyday life. It might equally be argued that the intense concentration required for the creative act is a form of meditative state that creates a bridge between the conscious and the subconscious, tapping into the immense wealth of images and ideas to be found there.

In parallel, almost, with Ad Reinhardt's proclamation in 1967 that he was painting the very last painting, in effect declaring that painting was dead, the minimalist sculptor, Donald Judd claimed that "the century's development of colour could continue no further on a flat surface … Colour to continue had to occur in space". Judd, of course, famously painted the pre-fabricated repetitive units of his sculptures in bright commercial paints so, as with Ellsworth Kelly's customised canvases, paint became flattened while at the same time colour was geometricised. While Butcher's sculptural excerpts are also geometrical in nature, their painted surfaces are anything but flat, the light reflected back through the paint from their underlying metal surfaces create iridescent patterns of variable intensity, according to the thickness and density of the paint, so that the light and paint combine to create an optical illusion that in effect gives an exaggerated sense of depth from within which the colour can radiate out. So whereas Judd had the insight that the future of colour was more to do with its form than previously, he expressed this in his own work as a somewhat prosaic industrial concept that was perfectly in keeping with the tenets of minimalism. So, post-painterly, post-minimal, might be good ways in which to describe Butcher's work, if one is intent upon pigeonholing, that is, but like a lot of art being produced currently, his work resists pigeonholing. Many of his pieces began life as off-cuts, discarded by-products of the manufacturing process, and in effect these 'found' sections of aluminium extrusions become 'objets trouves' which he customises and personalises, re-inventing them and giving them a new life.

It is only natural that creative people have a propensity for championing the particular medium or genre with or within which they normally work. With the contemporary trend towards pluralism, however, disciplinary boundaries are increasingly being crossed. As discussed above, painting as sculpture is one example, Glenn Brown, Angela de la Cruz and Neal Rock are three artists who have explored this area in their work. Also, of course, we have sculpture as architecture or the reverse. The Mexican architect Luis Barragan famously created his Torres de Satélite, an array of monumental sculptures-as-skyscrapers, at the gateway to Mexico City. Another, more contemporary, case in point is Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which is commonly perceived as architecture as sculpture and which currently houses a spectacular installation by Richard Serra, whose colossal, sinuous steel plates might equally be seen as sculpture as architecture. The Spanish Engineer/Architect Santiago Calatrava states that he conceives his architectural designs, initially, as sculptures. So the characterisation of Eric Butcher's work as engineering-as-sculpture meets painting-as- sculpture would seem to be a perfectly appropriate way of addressing the series of crossovers that run through that work.

The modernist architectural references in the paintings of Toby Paterson, the arcane perspectivally stretched modernist interiors of Ian Monroe, executed in sticky-back vinyl on aluminium or Perspex, and the aluminium and Perspex Mies van der Rohesque cameos in Liam Gillick's installations, mentioned above, are all examples of the retro-modernism that seems to be abroad in the contemporary art world at the present time. This trend also, interestingly, relates to that school of 'hard-edged abstraction', which was part of what the American critic Clement Greenberg described as 'post-painterly abstraction', from the 60's, and which he linked to an architectural sensibility. Corroborating this connection, another American critic, Hilton Kramer, referring to the work of Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, likened it to "A species of abstract painting aspiring to the

condition of architecture" [4].

Candy-striped hard-edged abstraction appeared in the work of Kenneth Noland and of Gene Davis, a member, in the 1960's, of the 'Washington Colour School' a small, short-lived group of painters who were leading proponents of the 'colour field' movement. Carlos Cruz-Diez, the Venezuelan painter, created a series of 'physiochromes' in the mid '60's, which were, in effect constructed candy-stripe reliefs, created from strips of wood and plastic, but wall-hung and presented like a painting – a cross between 'op art' and sculpture, the visual dynamics of the coloured stripes change as the viewer moves past the painting. The materiality of these pieces, in effect, brings this work closer to that of Eric Butcher than the work of the colour-field painters.

The question of the transformation of functionality must, inevitably, arise when exploring Butcher's work, he takes sections of industrially functional metal, extracts them from the process which was an integral part of their genesis and in effect, neutralizes them, transforms them from their contingent origins, into objects for contemplation. This transformation begins as soon as he makes the first application of paint, which is, of course, another industrial product. So by combining two utilitarian products he creates something which, essentially non-utilitarian, but which is now aesthetically engaging, beautiful even, something which was previously utilitarian and essentially anonymous has now become more rarefied, its identity re-invented. Butcher is continuing a tradition, of creating art objects from existing utilitarian objects or materials starting with Marcel Duchamp's 'ready-mades' and running through the work of Pablo Picasso (The Bull, 1943), Julio Gonzalez, Anthony Caro and David Smith, the latter three all using and transforming industrial materials. Although Butcher doesn't conceive his objects as sculptures, there is, clearly, a conceptual link with the work of these sculptors. Butcher's 'paintings', are, evidently, a fresh and oblique extension of what is an historically important genre.

[1] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' in *Collected Prose*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

[2] Jason Martin & Alan Woods, 'Interview', *Transcript*, Vol.3, Issue 2, Page 52.

[3] Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, *'Purism' in Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays*, ed. R.L Herbert, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1964. Pp. 67, 70.

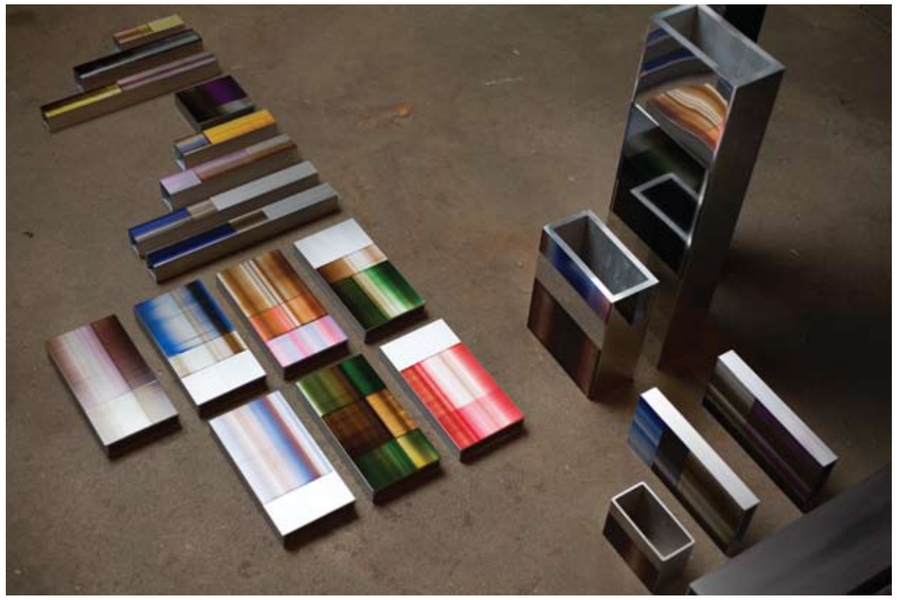
[4] Hilton Kramer, 'Primary Structures – The New Anonymity', *New York Times*, May 1 1966, page 23.

Installations

D/R.350
Oil + Resin on Circular Aluminium Sheet, Glass, Stainless Steel
Dimensions Variable, Site Specific
2009

E/R.327
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
Dimensions Variable, Site-specific
2008

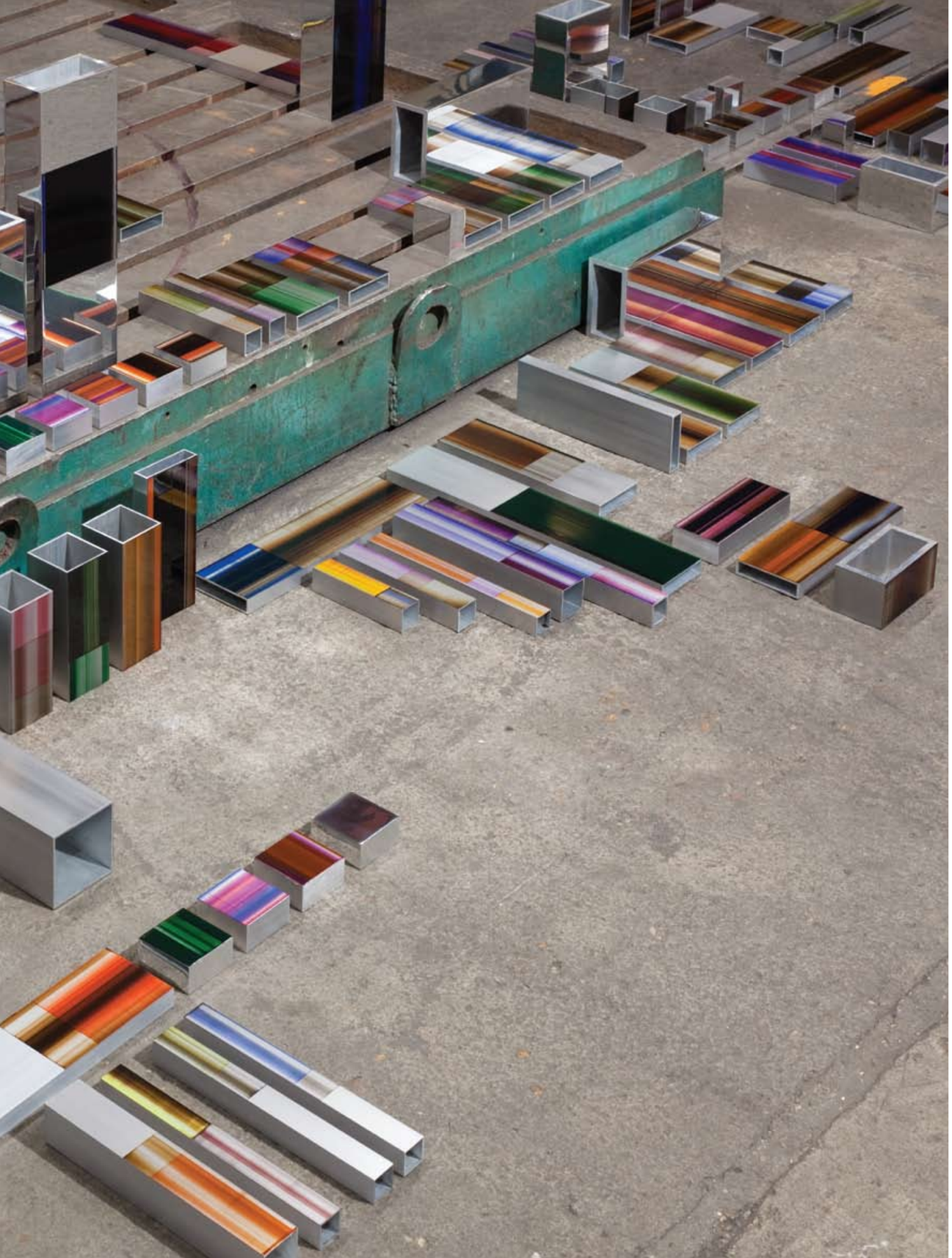
E/R.327 (detail)

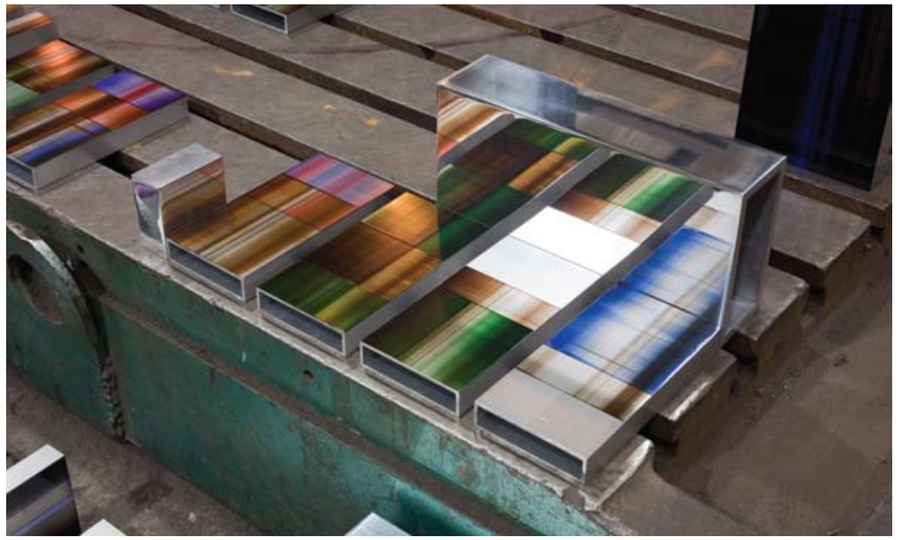


E/R.349
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
1 (301 x 20 x 5), 1 (301 x 3.8 x 3.8) cm
2008

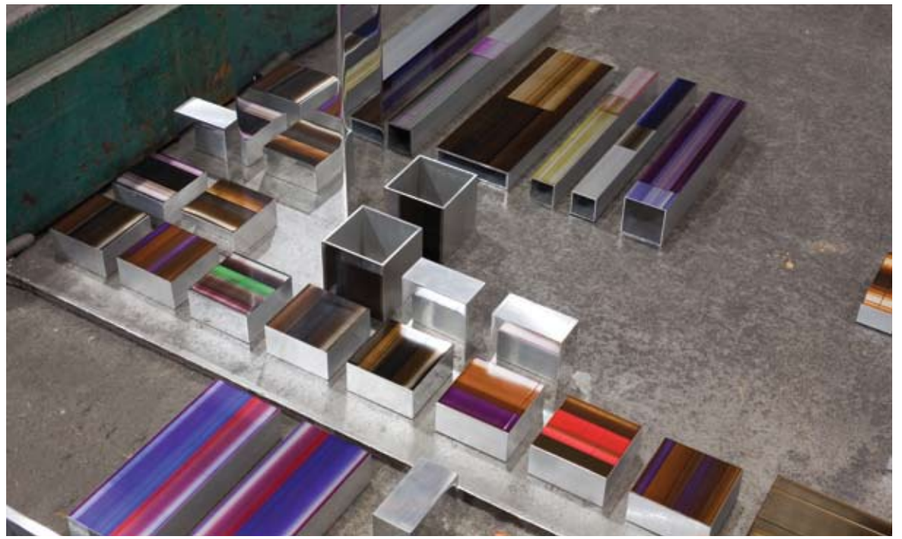
E/R.360
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
35 (10 x 10) cm, Site-specific
2008

E/R.353
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
Dimensions Variable, Site-specific
2009





E/R.353 (detail)

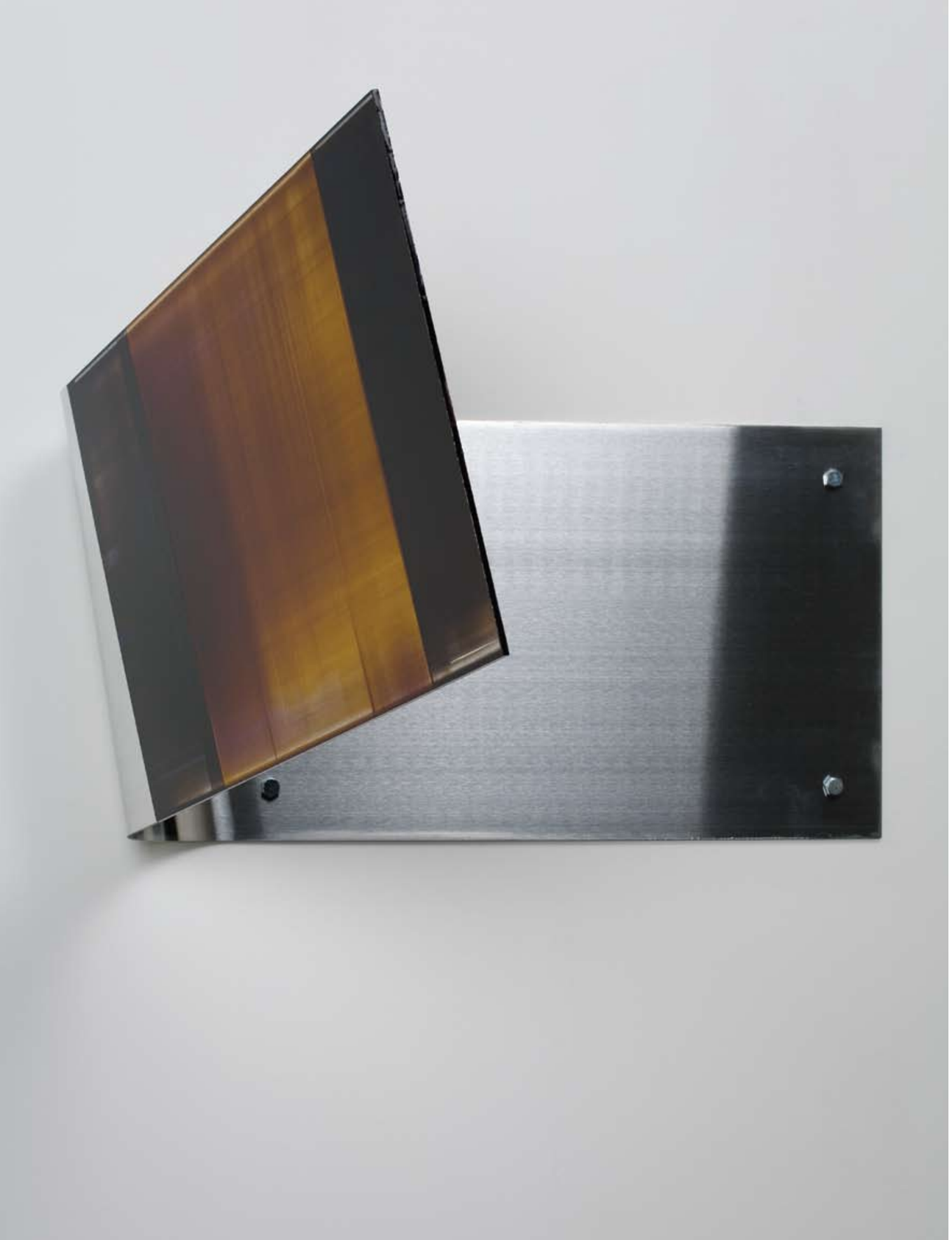


E/R.353 (detail)

P/R.351
Oil + Resin on Aluminium, Bronze + Stainless Steel
Dimensions Variable, Site-specific
2009

Rolled Sheet

R/R.290
Oil + Resin on Rolled Aluminium
40 x 165 x 93 cm
2007



R/R.290 (detail)

R/R.354
Rolled + Polished Aluminium
Truncated Cone Ø 80 - 55.5 x 40 cm, Cylindrical Section 120 x 103 x 40 cm
2005-2009

R/R.301
Oil + Resin on Rolled Aluminium
40 x 152 x 71 cm
2008

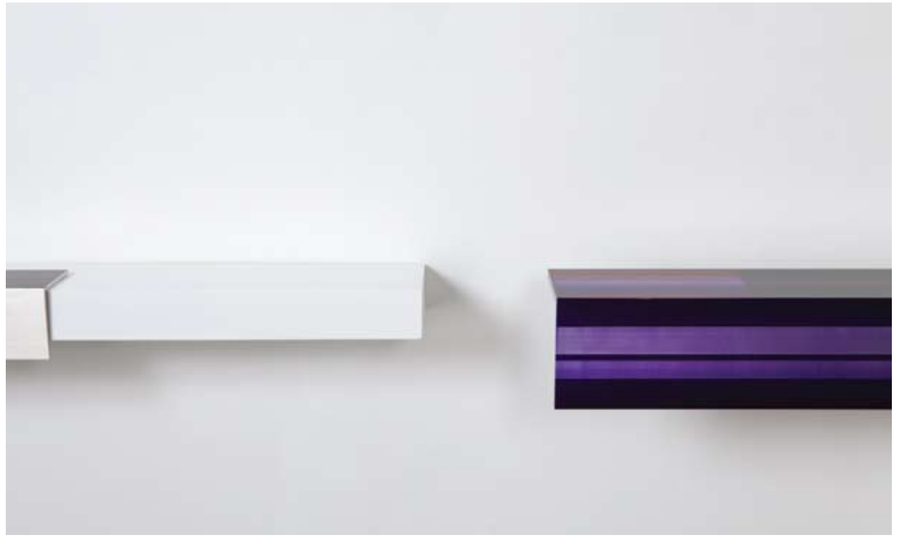
R/R.355 + R/R.356
Oil + Resin on Rolled Aluminium
150 x 40 x 63 cm, 150 x 40 x 43 cm
2009

Extruded Angle Section

L/R 342
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Angle Section
10 x 150 x 10 cm
2009

L/R 329
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Angle Section
15.3 x 200 x 15.3 cm
2009

L/R 329 (detail)

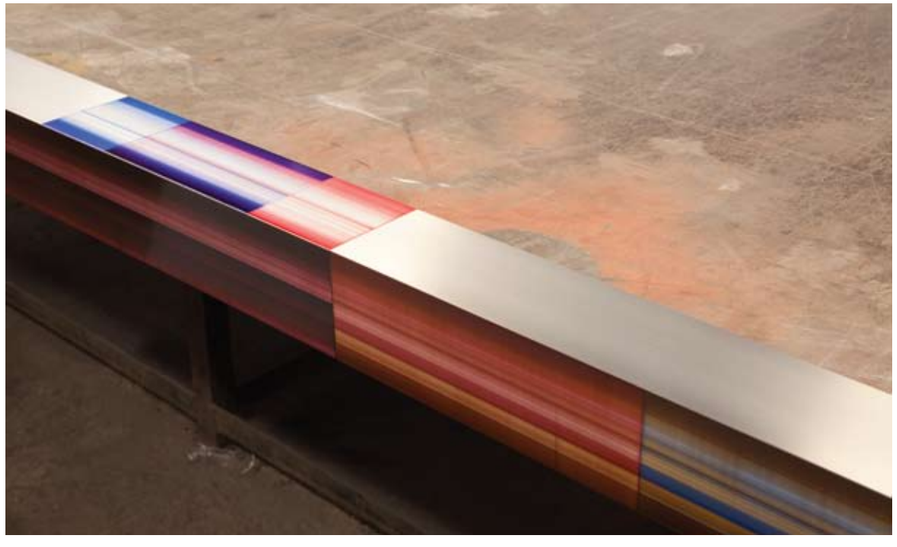


L/R 329
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Angle Section
15.3 x 200 x 15.3 cm
2009

L/R.328
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Angle Section
1 (10 x 150 x 10) + 1 (10 x 50 x 10) cm
2009

L/R.328

L/R.328 (detail)



Extrusions

E/R.325
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
15 (212 cm x Variable Section Widths/Depths)
2009

Collection of GMR International, London

E/R.325

E/R.357
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
14 (75 cm x Variable Section Widths/Depths)
2009

E/R.358

E/R.358
Oil + Resin on Extruded Aluminium Box Section
5 (212 cm x Variable Section Widths/Depths)
2009

Assemblages

A/R.361
Core Ten
150 x 150 cm
2009

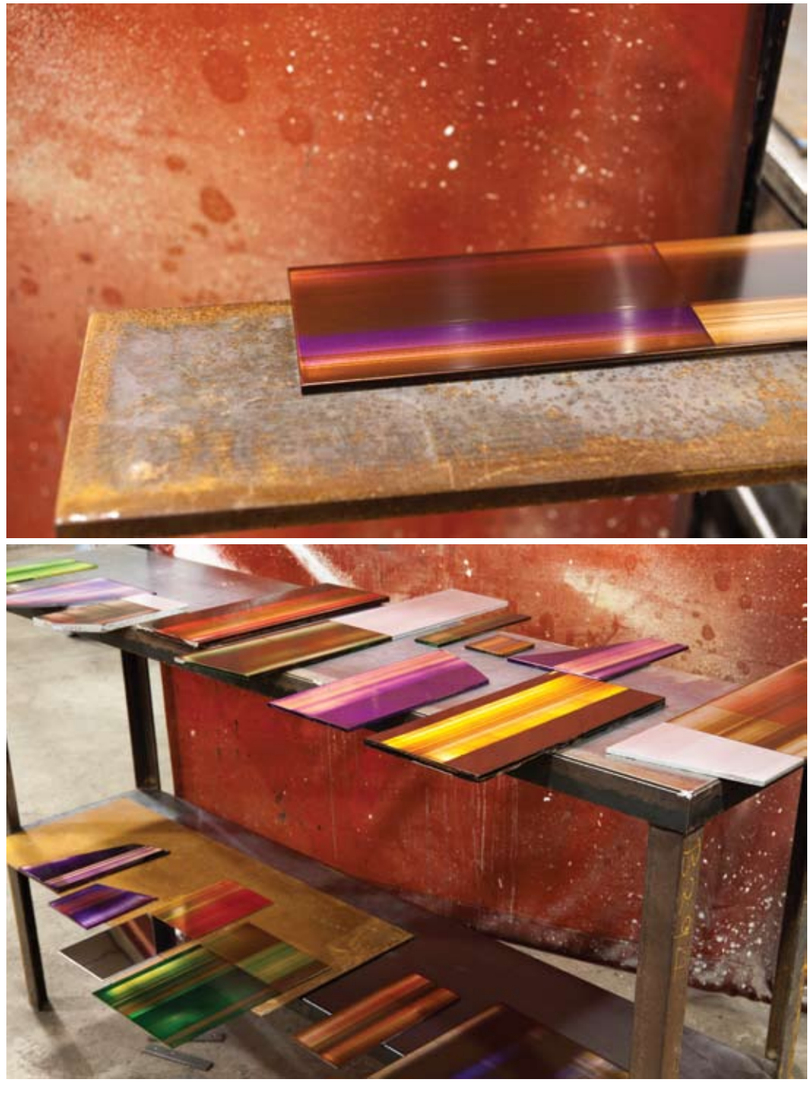
A/R.362
Aluminium Box Section, Core Ten Plate, Oil + Resin on Aluminium
Site-Specific Assemblage
2009

A/R.363
Aluminium Box Section, Core Ten Plate, Oil + Resin on Aluminium
Site-Specific Assemblage
2009

A/R.359
Aluminium Box Section, Bar Section, Core Ten Plate
Site-specific Assemblage
2009

A/R.364
Core Ten Plate, Oil + Resin on Aluminium
Site-specific Assemblage
2009

P/R.358
Oil + Resin on Aluminium, Bronze + Stainless Steel
Dimensions Variable, Site-specific
2009



Paper Works

G/R.365 (detail)

G/R.365
Ink + Embossing on Paper
108 x 79 cm
2009

G/R.369 (detail)

G/R.369
Ink + Embossing on Paper
108 x 79 cm
2009

G/R.374
Embossing on Paper
108 x 76.5 cm
2009

G/R.374 (detail)

Modus Operandi:

A Conversation with Jagjit Chuhan

JC. We have been talking about the importance of 'making'. I remembered an article by Grayson Perry who talked about how important it is for artists to use materials which resist their preconceived ideas so that the art arrives out of the bringing together of your intention and what the material actually does. As a painter I always find that the most challenging. You can never reproduce what you've got in your mind. What you've got in your mind is always amorphous anyway because it can only exist when it's made manifest as an artefact through the use of materials. The materials are the work.

EB. I often find myself advising students not to make the mistake of having a fully formed idea in their head which then just needs to be made manifest into a physical outcome. The idea needs to develop and evolve as an interaction between your intention and the material. You used the expression 'materials that resist one's intention', which is a good way of putting it. It might be tempting to think of that as a disadvantage since all one really wants is to make one's intentions manifest as simply and as easily as possible. But actually it's just that kind of wrestling with the material that produces surprising, and often productive, outcomes. One of the most fruitful ways in which my process has evolved has often been in relation and in response to problems or errors that have crept into the system. Part of the trick is to work out which are the 'errors' that suggest something potentially useful - unintended but in themselves interesting - that point forward to a development, and those that don't.

JC. In Sufism there is the idea of deliberate imperfection. In Persian carpets, for example, traditionally they would leave a stitch not quite finished.

EB. Because perfection is the preserve of God.

JC. Yes, that's their idea. But I was also thinking of this in relation to your working practices. You employ almost scientific methodologies when you work. But some of the most extraordinary discoveries of science have come from fortuitous accident. Experiments are conducted in controlled environments, in a controlled manner and everything recorded precisely. But different things happen.

EB. As artists there is always a danger of being too means-ends related in terms of your activity. You want a particular outcome, to achieve a particular kind of surface; you think you know how to do that, so you do it, and that's fine, it's part of the mix. But it's important sometimes to give yourself periods of time to play, when you allow yourself time to explore materials and processes in a less directed way. It might end up being useless in terms of an exhibitable outcome, but there might be some germ of a possibility that perhaps years later you remember and proves to be the solution to another problem. It might work in a different context.

JC. You mention the pleasure of playing. It strikes me as being rather like a child in a toyshop. You've got all these different materials, different things you can make, different configurations. It's that sense of playfulness that I think is so important. You're in almost a trace-like state where you're not consciously aware of making certain decisions. Even if you're using machinery and aluminium, which is not like clay where you can change its shape quickly, it's just a time thing. You can be as playful with those things.

EB. Absolutely, and one of the great things about this project is that, in the past I would have to design a shape, and either make a maquette or drawing or write a list of instructions for the fabricators. There's a time lag there and quite a big one. But the beauty is that now that time lag has become highly compressed; because I'm there at the fabricators I can do something and make decisions as I'm going along. There's something very engaging about being able to manipulate difficult materials so quickly, through the use of heavy-duty machinery.

JC. And yet the intriguing thing is that one of your principle sources of materials were off-cuts, and you mentioned how some of them have

been laying there in the same place for decades maybe.

EB. Yes, it's the most extraordinary place. It's the sort of place I'm surprised still exists, a throw back to the days of heavy manufacture, gloriously masculine and phenomenally dirty. I pick up off-cuts from the floor, having fallen behind or underneath various machines and it is apparent that they have simply lain where they fell, in some cases for decades. Layer upon layer of dirt and grime offer a palimpsest of industrial activity of different sorts.

JC. Yes, leaving a trace. You find that in cities. Travelling by train you find all sorts of bits of debris that have been lying by the side of the tracks, or someone has written some graffiti and God-knows how many years it has been there. In India I remember going to a tailors to get some clothes made and they were busy, so busy nobody had the time to sweep up, so there would be bits of cloth and so on lying there for God knows how long. So that kind of almost excavating the history of an activity that's on going is fascinating.

EB. It's the paraphernalia of an endeavour.

JC. Then you use the off-cuts in your work.

EB. Yes, a recent development has been to use off-cuts, mainly of aluminium - remnants of the industrial process - and treat them a little like ready-mades, or at least a given, rather than taking materials and bending them to my will. Of course, there's an important element of selection, but it's about allowing what I do to be determined by the nature of the thing that I'm picking up, in terms of the kind of material, the dimensions, the shape, and so on. These small sections of painted aluminium form a large and open-ended series that are then installed in relation to the nature of the space, its architecture and environmental context. That's an important aspect of this particular thread of the work. It's presented in the environment in which it originated. I'm not taking it out of the environment of manufacture and placing it in a discreet white space.

JC. So that aspect of placing them in a certain environment is quite different to what, say, Picasso might have done with his found objects or collages, when he used wallpaper or bits of newspaper or whatever and made constructions and so on. But then they weren't necessarily kept in situ.

EB. No, they became art objects and were treated like any other, a painting or whatever. I think it's important that this work is seen, certainly for the purposes of this project, in relation to its context of manufacture. So the process of transformation isn't irrevocable. Importantly, the work of art stands part way between a completely transformed object and its original raw state.

This has been a logical development from a previous project Underground, which was a collaboration between myself, Simón Granell and Roger Ackling. We showed our work in a space that had a series of previous functions, where it was possible to read the space backwards by looking at the traces of previous activities and architectural characteristics, how the changing functions of the building had left their visible traces on it. We wanted our work to be read in that context, with the implication that looking at the work is like an act of excavation, the viewer acts like a kind of archaeologist, uncovering the methods and processes of production. So on one level we were trying to postulate an analogy between the way in which we make work, and consequently the way it should be 'read', and the kind of environment in which we were showing it.

A development from this has been the use of the painted object as part of an assemblage of different materials. One of my ongoing preoccupations has been a consideration of the painted surface as one aspect of the art object, along with its sides, or the transition between edges, their state of finish, or the back of the object and its method of fixing it to the wall, floor or what ever; these being important artistic as well as aesthetic characteristics of the piece. This new work is really just an extension of that. So it might be a very simple question of taking a piece of painted aluminium and placing it on a piece of core ten. Nothing could be simpler than that. Or it might be a more complex set of relationships between different kinds of materials. And so what you have is an extension of this consideration of the relationship of the painted surface to the characteristics of the material planes that are adjacent to it. The logical conclusion of these considerations is the art object as installation, rather than a self-sufficient object as a painting would normally be construed.

JC. Can we continue with this idea of the installation? I'm intrigued by the idea that every time you exhibit the work it is different.

EB. Yes, as I've said, their installation is determined by their context, spatial, architectural and so on. Most paintings have finite borders; they are particular objects with specific measurements (h x w x d), or they are composed of a finite number of specified units. This series is rather more amorphous. Each installation is completely different from previous ones, though there may be physical, compositional and thematic overlaps. I'm not making something which is finished in the studio and which could be put anywhere, constituted by one or a number of objects that have a determined relationship between their components.

Normally a painting has specific dimensions. It has sides, where it ends and a front and a back and so on. And within those constraints the composition resides, where the various elements - colour, form, line and so on - relate to each other in that traditional way. In a sense, I'm doing the same thing when I install my work, composition. The only difference is that I don't have that pre-determined edge. And so the edge between work of art and non-work of art, or environment, becomes blurred. The work of art is very much completed in installation. I find that really exciting, partly because even when I've got all the pieces together for a particular installation, I'm never quite sure what it's going to look like because

I'm responding to the physical properties of the space, whether it be architectural characteristics (the relationship of walls to voids, or the presence of windows and the movement of light), or the way in which the audience might be using the space. I consider the function of the space; what assumptions can be made about it and how people will be using and interacting with it and consequently how they will encounter this work through the environment. I'm increasingly thinking about these works as environments rather than 'paintings'.

EB. The work I've been doing with printing presses is really more about the 'trace', again using metal off-cuts and taking their impression, than any form of traditional printmaking. I'm not a closet printmaker. Basically it's a form of embossing by building up compositions of different impressions. I'm fascinated by the metaphorical implications of that very simple brute fact, something that was once there is no longer, as evidenced by the impression left by its presence. It speaks of absence and by implication, loss. I've been doing these in the studio by removing off cuts of metal plate and other objects from the engineering works and running them through printing presses into very thick soft etching paper.

JC. It's interesting your use of paper. It's so different from the aluminium, it's organic, soft.

EB. Yes, many years ago I used to collect papers and worked a great deal with paper, also making my own paper and using paper pulp. So it's not a completely novel material for me to be preoccupied with. But it's good to be back there again. It has such profoundly different characteristics to the robustness of the metals, which you can throw around and apply solvents to and work very heavily, or strip back to the bare metal with paint stripper. There's something very engaging about the pliable subtlety of paper and the impression of the object or plate into it.

This consideration of the impression emerged while I was experimenting with some printmaking techniques, printing flat blocks of tone off the metal plates, and quickly became far more interested, not in the print itself, but its reverse, the back of the piece of paper where the presence of the plate had been evidenced by its impression; the pressure of an object once present but no longer, coupled with the implication of the enormous pressure and apparatus required to make such a heavy impression.

The pressure of a plate that is no longer there provides a register of its presence; it is a trace, an index, like the ring of a coffee cup or footprints in the sand. It speaks of absence and, as I have mentioned, metaphorically of loss. There is something enormously suggestive and subtle about that.

I've been thinking a lot recently about the affect the death of my father has had on all of this. He died at the end of 2008 after a long illness. It has impacted upon my work and this project in a number of different ways. This idea of the trace or the index, which has always been there in the background of previous work, has been brought to the foreground in these paper works. No matter how materials-based, process-driven, mechanisation-obsessed my practice has become, the preoccupations of one's life have a tendency to assert themselves in one's work, don't they?

By a curious coincidence my father came from an engineering background, though in his case it was aircraft engineering. Perhaps that's one of the unconscious drivers behind this work. I'm not an engineer and my interest in it is quite specific and peripheral to its central concerns, but I'm surprised how in later life our interests overlapped in a way that I would never have thought possible as a younger man.

JC. So in a way the work that you're making, or at least some aspects of it, is a kind of metaphor for adjustments that you're making in relation to events in your life.

EB. I tend to prefer not to talk about all that kind of stuff. I feel more comfortable talking about the physical, practical, methodological considerations that I think one can discuss in a fairly sensible, concrete, reasonable way. I think one has to be very careful in discussing art. There are so many dangers lurking in the act of translation from a practical activity into verbal language.

JC. Yes I can empathise with that and I think many artists would as well.

EB. Verbal language is able to cope with certain things and is in fact extremely good at dealing with many categories of experience and communicating certain content, but not very good at coping with other things. And there are other things. As visual artists it's a problem that we all encounter. There's a reason why we make stuff that you see or experience, rather than being, for example, a writer and communicating in verbal language. That's because there are certain things that you can do visually that you can't do verbally and visa versa.

JC. Absolutely, and that's why people go to art galleries to actually look at the art rather than making do with an explanation, which can never be enough. No matter how much is written about art, how many TV programmes or reproductions are made, you have to see and experience the actual object.

EB. There's always this paucity of explanation. Against seeing the actual work of art, all verbal or written explanations can ever do is sort of dance around the edges of the subject.

JC. It can only give you clues.

Eric Butcher
Material Witness

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