

# Gabriele Evertz

## The Gray Question

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**MINUS SPACE**

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## The Gray Question

Color is a force of energy. It becomes visible when it strikes a surface. Then it can be measured and named. When it interacts with our inner mind, that is, when we supply the contrast color to the one we are seeing in the world, it evokes emotions regardless of whether we are aware of it.

Gray is a color and we react to it psychologically. The problem with grays is their spatial relationship to hues. Color behavior is predictable to a certain extent—blue recedes and red advances—but the way grays will react is less foreseeable. An intensely dark-valued gray, next to a blue for example, begs the question of location: are they on the same plane or is one color seen behind the other? Gray introduces ‘perceptual ambiguity’. One option for the painter is to value-adjust colors, but that would bring all tones seemingly to exist on the same plane. Although we call gray a “neutral”, it is not so in our visual experience. There is a contradiction between what we say and see when it comes to gray. Indeed, what color is and what it does are two separate experiences, just as near and far viewings of a painting produce different effects. How painters use color, either as an exploration of its material properties or as an agent of light provides a clue as to their intention.

*The Gray Question* represents a cyclical body of work, a sustained investigation that is concerned with the effects of black and white admixtures as they relate to and visually shift when located next to chromatic contrasts. The most recent paintings deal with gray bands that are often painted in progressive diagonals in a range

from four, to eight, and occasionally ten tones. Juxtaposed with these gray diagonals, colors are presented in a sparse and precise linear sequence, stretching from top to bottom of the canvas.

Looked at casually, the vertical colors are seen as static figures on gray ground. But when viewed at a distance and in duration, the color contours interact with their adjacent gray bands; an achromatic gray, that just moments ago seemed opaque and motionless, suddenly lights up—appearing pellucid and transparent—while its neighboring, formerly vivid color, temporarily sinks into a faded version of itself. The deliberately delineated edges, now seem optically flooded, swelling beyond their set limitations. Fleeting, the sharp divisions appear dissolved, only to resurface in the next instance. These effects move us in and out of space, from deep recesses to the flat frontal plane of the surface, possibly precluding any sense of certainty. By alternating between focusing and scanning we are attempting to “see” the painting but a complete mental image is rarely achieved.

Although considered abstract, my work deals with the fundamental experience of sight. It aims to engage the viewer in the actual process of direct observation, thus offering a heightened awareness of reality. What we experience is not an illusion but the notion of ourselves intertwined with the world through perception. Our responsiveness to the dynamic visual forces is a felt, rapturous experience of the real—thus, the visible is a living sensation where seeing, thinking, and feeling converge.

Gabriele Evertz, 2015

## Gabriele Evertz in Full Spectrum

MATTHEW DELEGET

Gabriele Evertz approaches painting as a humanist and color as a romantic. Born and raised in Berlin in the wake of World War II, she moved to New York City at age 19 and never looked back. She views her work as merging two divergent aesthetic traditions—a northern European philosophical approach to painting with an overtly pragmatic American one.

Evertz is, of course, most closely associated with the renowned art department at Hunter College in New York City, one of the leading champions of abstraction and color, not to mention painting, among art schools in the United States. Similar to her colleagues, including Robert Swain, Sanford Wurmfeld, Vincent Longo, Doug Ohlson, and others, she has an urgent concern for color and its transformative effect on the viewer. In contrast to other painters who employ a more theoretical or systemic approach to color, she believes color is “a living thing, giving us access to abstract ideas and concepts.” It is also important to note that Evertz is one of the few female voices contributing to the discourse around color, furthering the legacy of artists, such as Sonia Delaunay, Anni Albers, Helen Frankenthaler, Bridget Riley, and Edna Andrade, among others.

More than two decades ago, Evertz began a profound and sustained investigation into the depths of color. From its early history grounded in the disciplines of science and literature with innovators, such as Isaac Newton, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Michel Eugène Chevreul, to its later equation with radiant energy impacting the viewer physiologically, her inquiry into and outright affection for color phenomenology drives her studio work until today. She declares, “color to me is the most important problem...it’s a pioneering problem.”

After years of focused experimentation, Evertz arrived at a singular color system organized around twelve specific hues, plus the colors black and white. The colors of her core palette are vibrant and highly-saturated. By examining her system, it becomes totally clear that Evertz is pursuing a highly active color experience, not a passive one. She desires color to “extend into our space,” and her paintings of the 1990s and early 2000s demonstrate this idea lucidly. These works employ and stretch her twelve-part color system to its very outer limits. She used it either in its entirety—producing saturated full-spectrum paintings—or

concentrated on select aspects of it, such as the single color red, or subtle hue variations juxtaposed with complementary and split complementary colors.

To truly investigate color with any consequence, Evertz needed, of course, to give it a structure. Armed with a background in both painting as well as architecture, she is keenly adept at envisioning structural supports for her color inquiries. Over the years, she’s employed a wide array of structures, including grids and square tessellations; vertical, horizontal, and diagonal stripes; and shaped stretchers and panels, all with rapturous visual effect.

Approximately ten years ago, the parallel lines and diagonal formats of her earlier work merged into what is now her signature structure: vertical stripes that taper as they reach the top and bottom edges of the canvas. On smaller works, the tapered stripes resemble highly attenuated triangles. On larger paintings, the diagonals are all but impossible to perceive. With the stripe, she found a shape “that would not draw attention to itself, yet bring out the color language” most effectively.

Evertz’s paintings over the past decade interweave perfectly plumb, vertical, parallel lines with groupings of tapered lines between them. By varying the thickness of the lines, their quantity, and spacing—let alone the colors assigned to them—Evertz immediately recognized the near infinite array of structural possibilities before her. Her vertical stripes can range in width from 1/8 of an inch to 1 inch. A painting may simply present a set of parallel lines of a single width, or it might possess two or more sets of lines of varying widths that are arranged into repeating patterns. The spacing between vertical lines can also vary with intervals anywhere from 2 to 4 inches. Between these vertical bands, Evertz places her tapered stripes, which appear to ricochet visually from the top to the bottom edge of the canvas and back. Sometimes she might include up to ten tapered bands between verticals intervals, which shift in width from roughly 1/8 of an inch at the top to 1 inch at the bottom and vice versa.

A number of years ago, the rigorous color patterns that repeated without pause across the surfaces of her canvases gave way to something altogether new. She freed color from fixed patterns and began to apply color intuitively. There was, of course, always a degree of intuition and surprise when making her work, given

that half of a painting's surface is covered by masking tape at any given moment. Removing the tape is always a thrilling moment for Evertz when she can finally see her work in its entirety for the first time. Her new paintings, however, were no longer predetermined in advance of making them, nor were they completely aleatory, but rather Evertz began to make color decisions in real time at the very moment of painting, a move that must have been both exhilarating and frightening for her.

The paintings that resulted are a barrage of visual information that moves color and form in and out of sequence and symmetry. Although regular in appearance, the works are asymmetrical through and through. The top, center, and bottom sections of any given painting are similar, but are not the same. Similarly, the center, left, and right sides are different as well. Evertz presents us with a color experience that is neither rigorously patterned nor chaotically disordered, but rather it occupies a third space between predictability and intuition that approaches clairvoyance. It is this quality, which Evertz describes as "perceptual ambiguity", that makes her paintings impossible to commit to memory. One remembers a work's dynamism, but not the specifics of its source.

Although not major players in her original twelve-part system early on, the colors black and white have become leading protagonists in her work in recent years. Evertz has taken a particular interest in the color gray and its myriad variations, which she feels have been historically overlooked. "We need to refresh our eyes to it," she asserts. Labeling grays as neutrals is totally inadequate to describe the experience of them. Likewise, Evertz also doesn't see complementary colors, such as blue and orange, as antagonistic in nature, but rather as "true chromatic partners." Around 2006 Evertz began utilizing gray in earnest, and she remains one of the only color painters to investigate its full potential vis-à-vis chromatic hues. She deployed gray sparingly at first, with only one or possibly two gray elements in a painting, but her thinking quickly evolved. Bookended by extreme light on one end and extreme dark on the other, namely white and black, she now commonly employs up to eight distinct grays in a single painting.

Evertz has discovered that gray's behavior is less predictable than that of chromatic hues. Red, for instance, generally advances off the surface of the canvas and into the space of the viewer, while blue traditionally recedes, creating the illusion of deep space within the picture. She questions, how does gray function and where does it sit in the picture plane? And taking one step further, how does gray function when juxtaposed with one or more additional colors?

Like all chromatic relationships, Evertz saw that gray both affects and is affected by the colors adjacent to it. Paintings organized around light gray values produce an effect similar to fog, where even pure chromatic colors appear muted or obscured by what appears like floating veils in front of them. Dark gray value paintings that approach black present profoundly deep pictorial space, something akin to the wondrous photographs of celestial bodies taken by the Hubble telescope. Paintings engaging the full multitude of grays from light to dark evince the sensation of architectural space, reminiscent of the spare Post-Reformation church interiors depicted by Seventeenth Century Dutch painter Pieter Jansz. Saenredam.

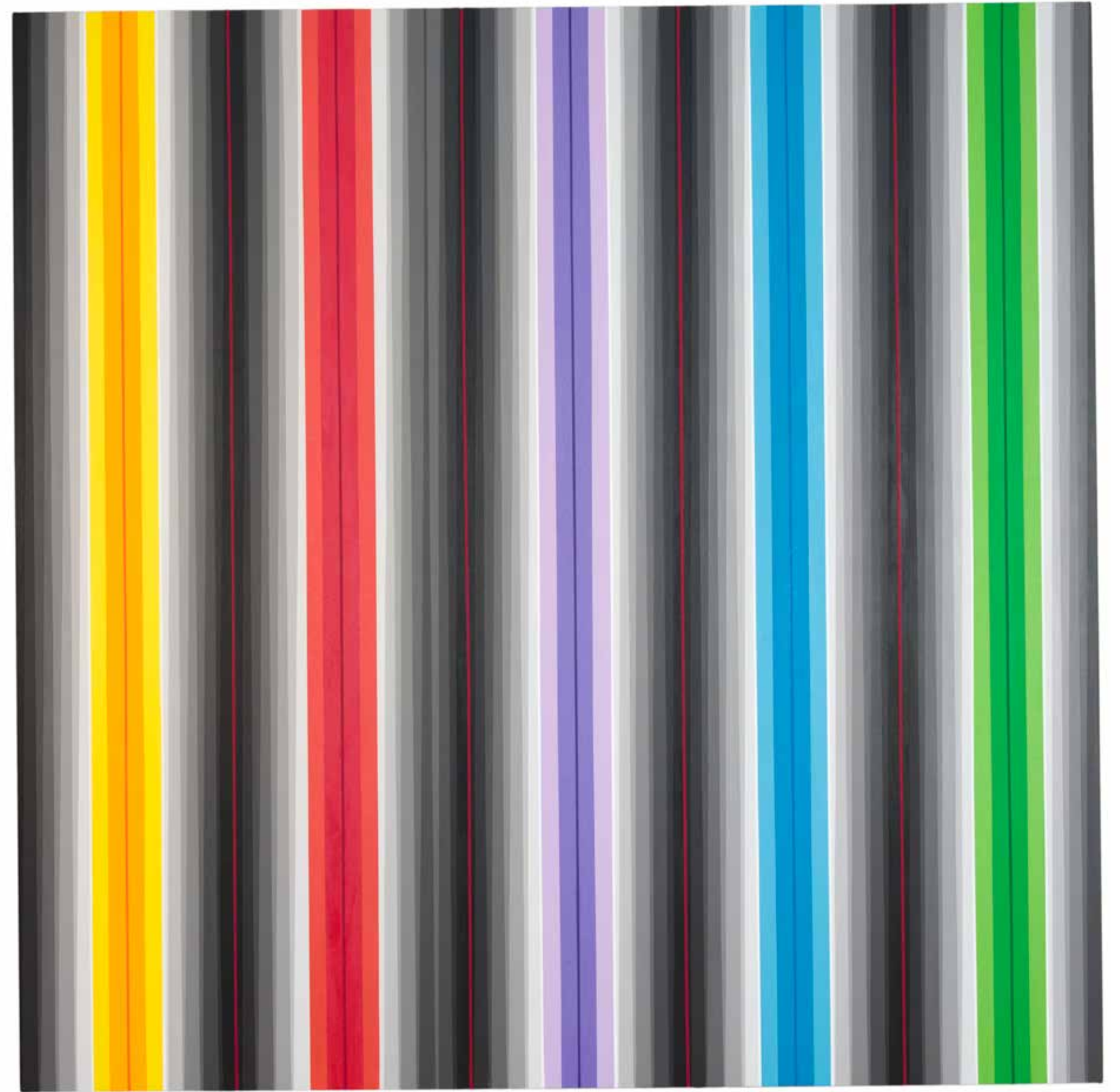
It's quite clear that Evertz sees freedom in color. Three years ago, she began to examine metallic colors, such as gold, silver, and copper for the first time in her paintings. Committed color painters possess a natural aversion to easy visual shortcuts, such as employing fluorescent, metallic, or iridescent pigments in their work. They labor rather to achieve the same visual acrobatics through the use of standard, traditional pigments. Cautious at first, Evertz quickly understood three key characteristics exclusive only to metallics.

First, metallic paints do not exist in the same visual space as traditional colors—not primaries, not secondaries, not grays. They occupy a parallel, indeterminate visual plane completely unto themselves. Metallics are also not a single color. They eagerly reveal highlights and shadows within even the slightest bit of texture on the canvas. Moreover, and for Evertz most importantly, metallic colors are durational and evince the fourth dimension, that is, the element of time. They're remarkably sensitive to overhead and ambient lighting, and transform from pale and reflective at the top of a canvas to dark and somber at the bottom. A single, thin gold stripe, for instance, can present up to three distinct facets of itself in a work.

And as a viewer approaches and circumambulates one of Evertz's new metallic paintings, craning their neck from side to side, a wonderful thing occurs. The metallics shift from light to dark and back to light again. Although permanently fixed on the surface, metallics become animated and respond directly to the viewer's shifting perspective. The viewer thereby becomes the catalyst in an ever-shifting color experience and is continually reminded they are in a perpetual state of active looking. One of Evertz's core beliefs is that color and the viewer are inseparable. "Without the viewer," she states, "the painting doesn't exist." In this case, the viewer quite literally brings the painting to life, and seeing, thinking, and feeling become one with the work. **M.D.**

**The Black Room Series, (for Sonia D.)**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2013



**The Black Room Series, Electric Fragments**

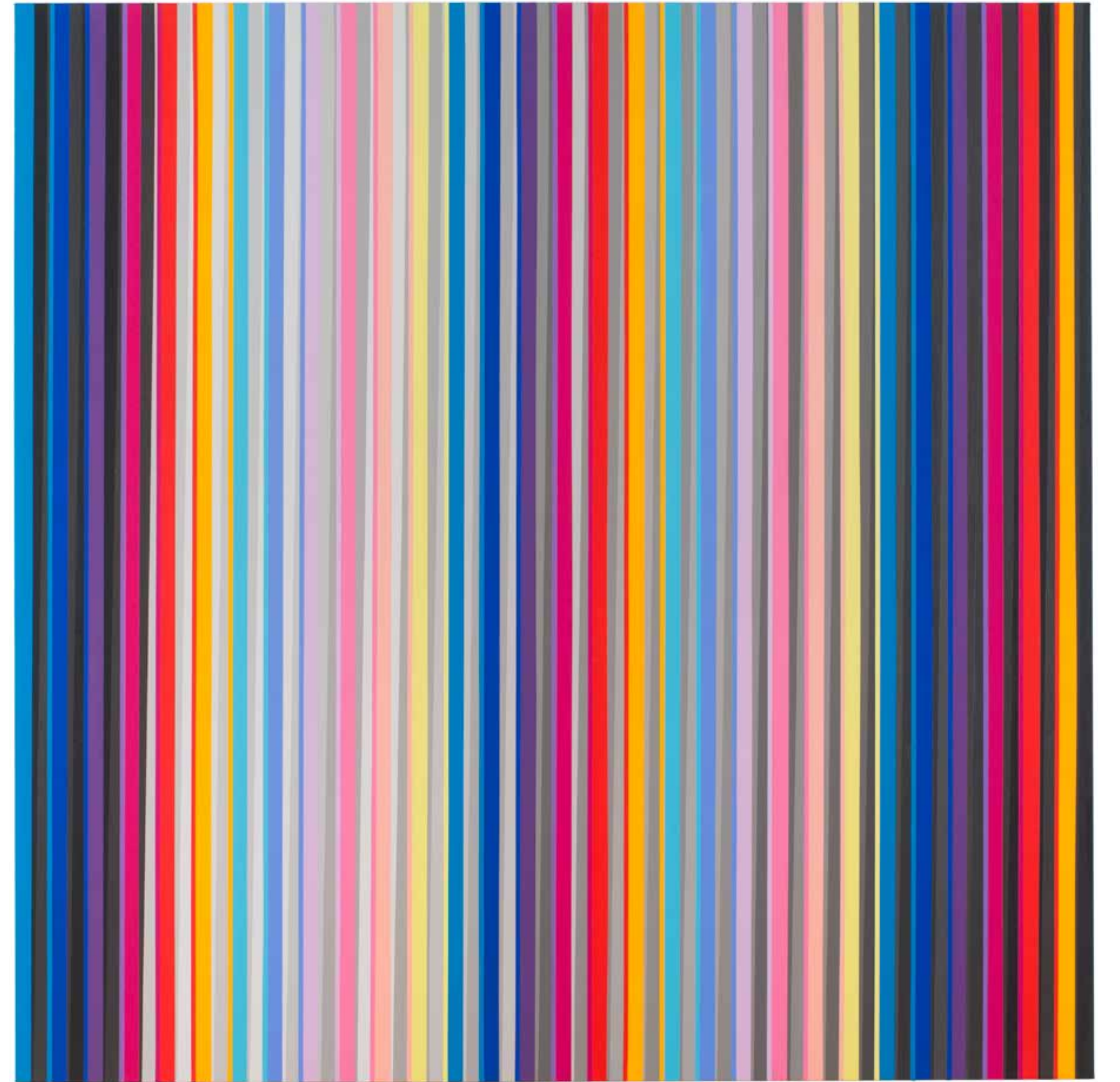
60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2013





**Intensification (Come Closer)**

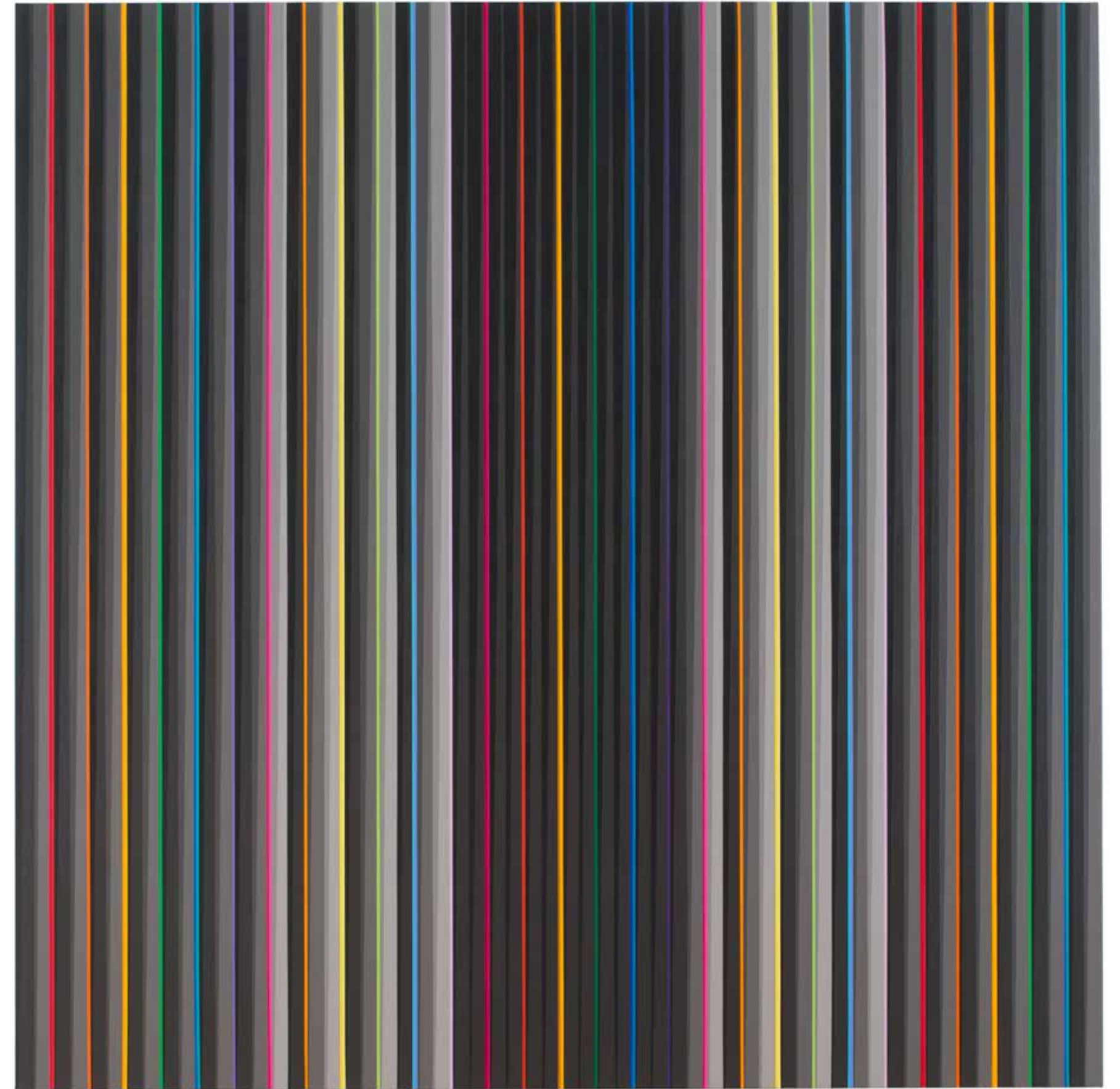
60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2014





**Intensification (Domicile)**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2014



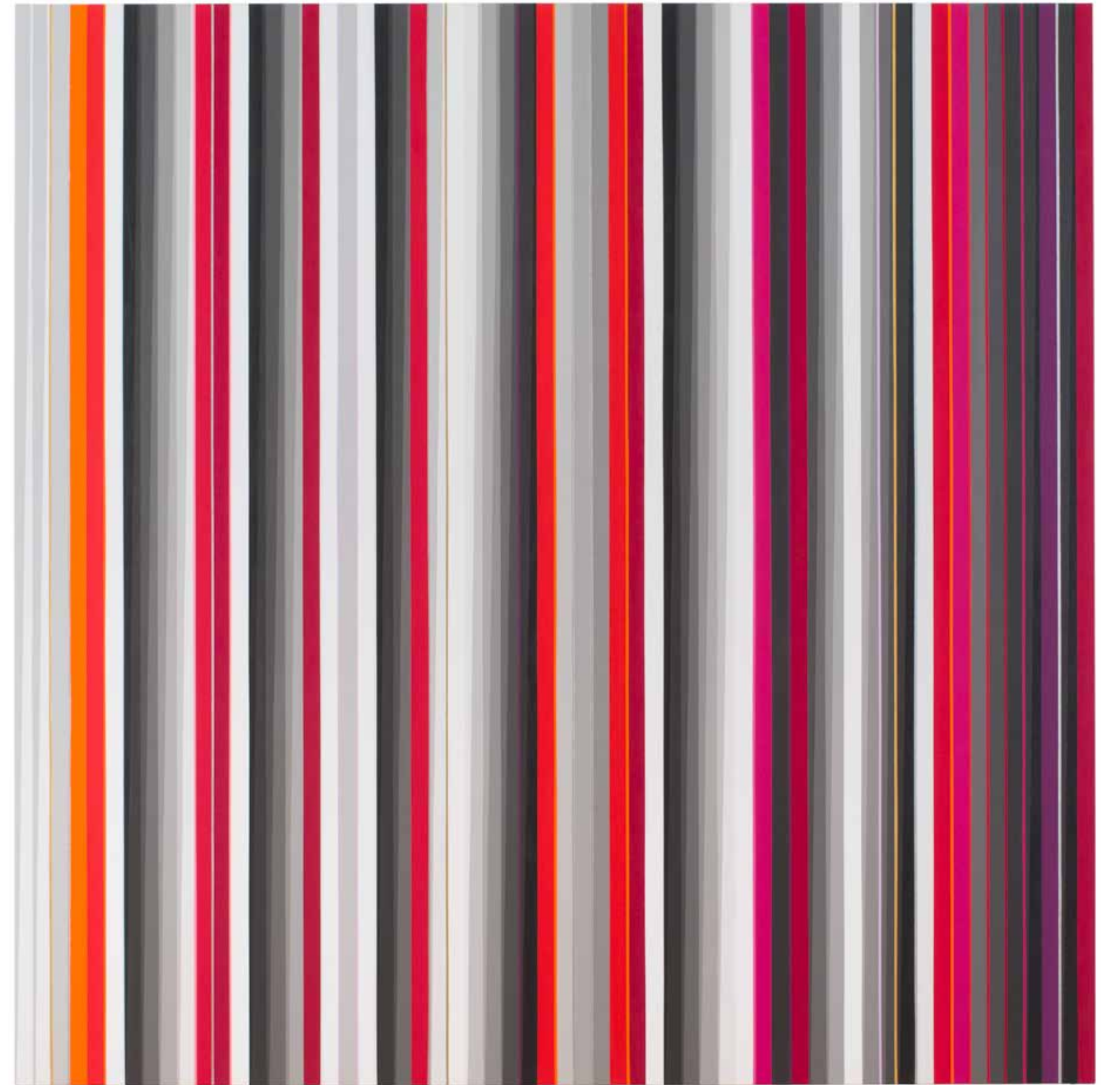
**Green-Red Passage**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015



**Red + Black (Three Kings)**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015



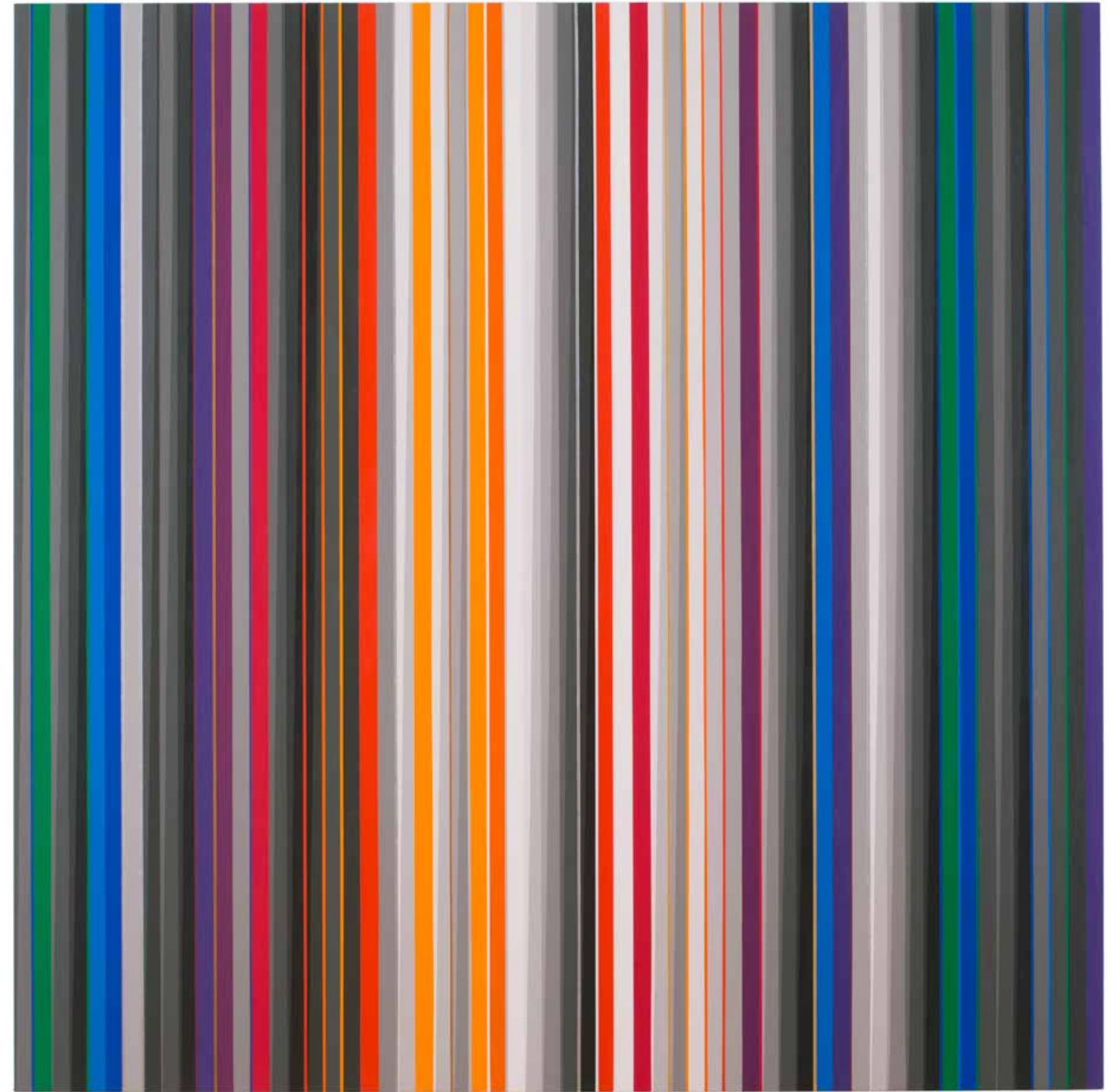
**RYBG (Agent)**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015



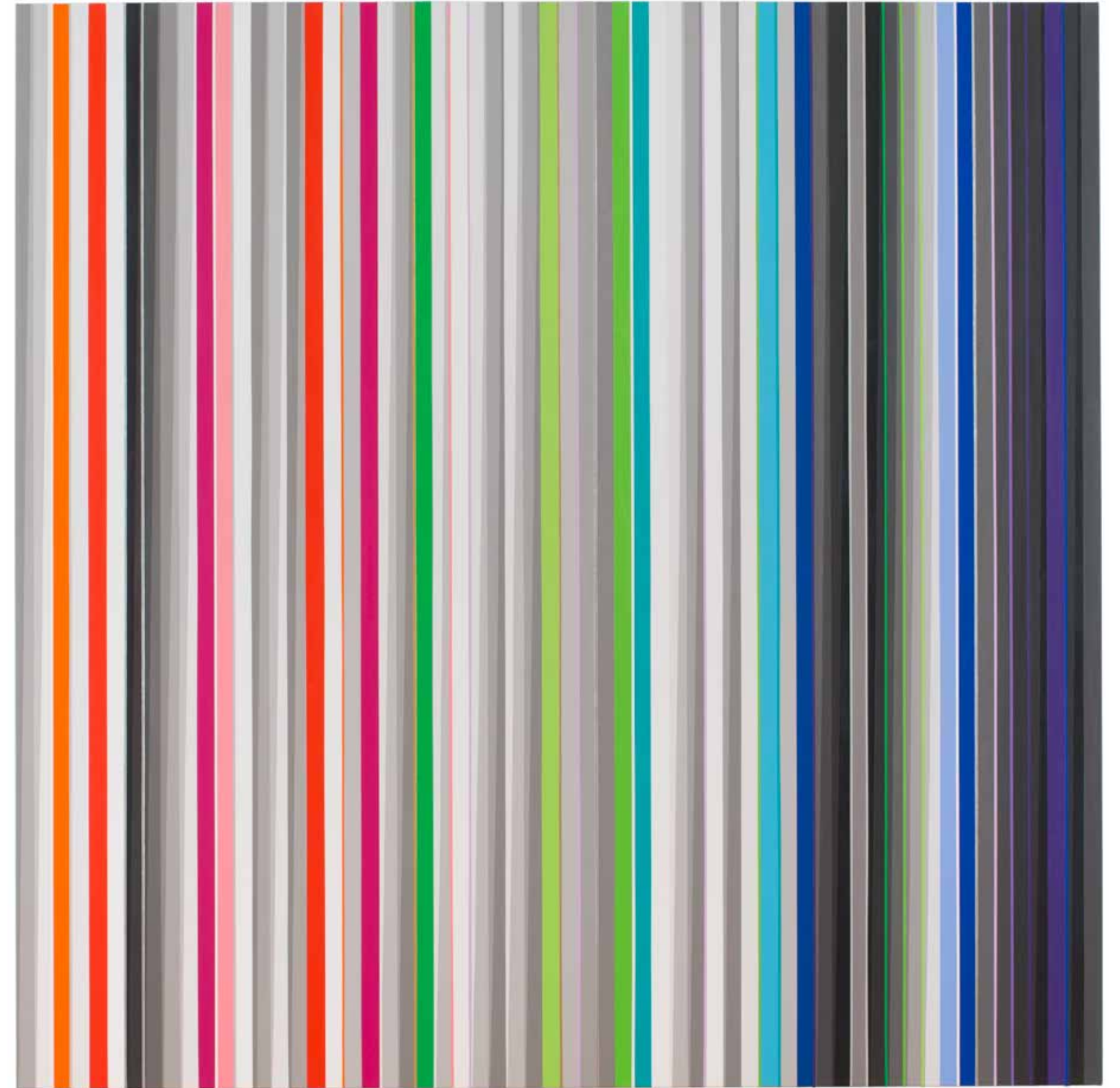
**Body Electric**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015



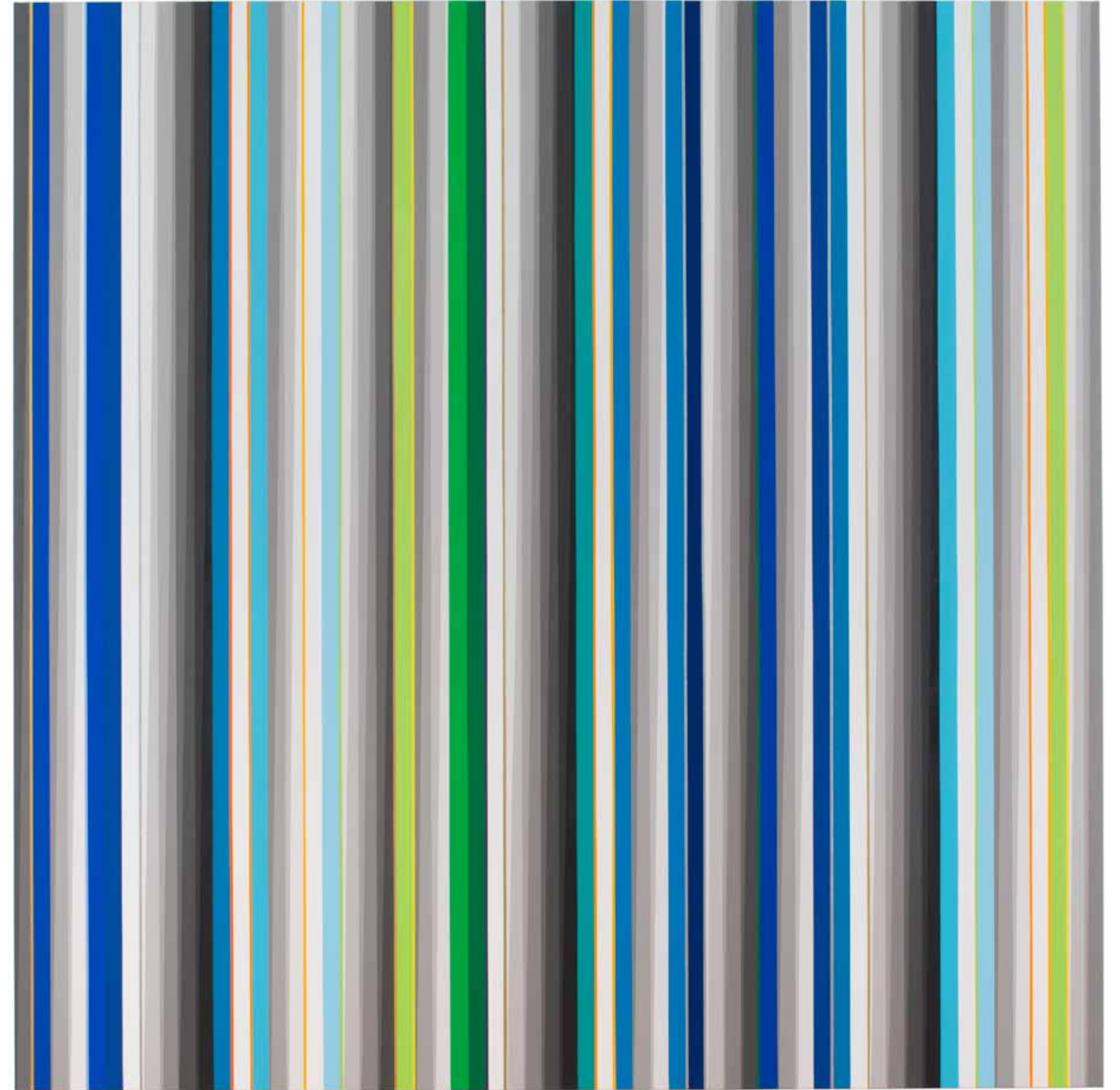
**RGB (Three Brothers)**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015



**Blue + Green (Tikkum Olam)**

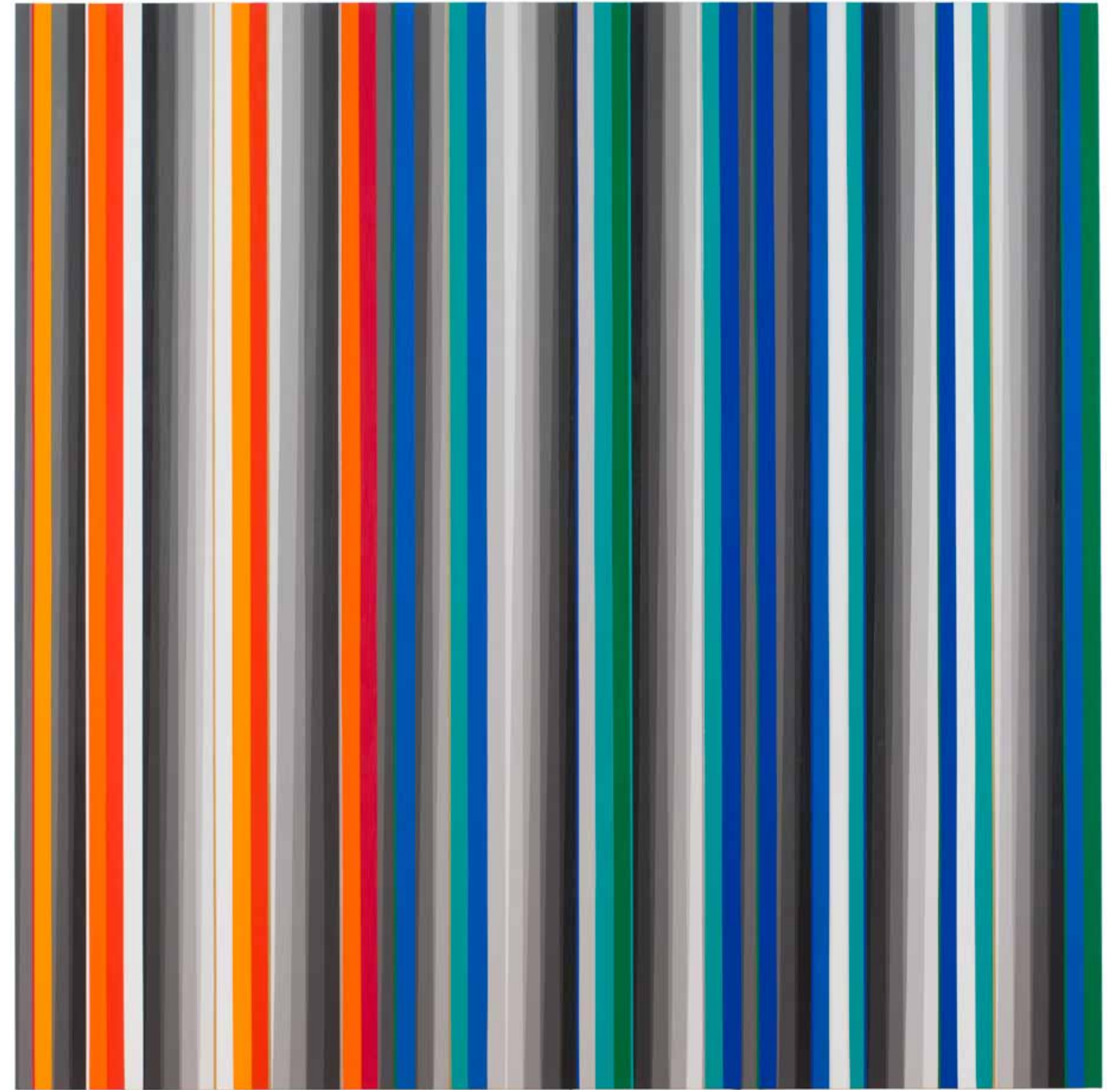
60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015





**Orange + Blue(Fermata)**

60 x 60 inches. Acrylic on canvas, 2015



## Gabriele Evertz

Gabriele Evertz was born in Berlin, Germany in 1945 where she received her early education. She has lived in New York City since 1965.

Gabriele Evertz has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions both in the United States and internationally, including in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, and New Zealand. Her recent museum exhibitions include P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center/ Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Heckscher Museum of Art, Hillwood Art Museum, Columbus Museum of Art, Ulrich Museum of Art, Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Mies van der Rohe Haus, and Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum.

Her work is included in many public collections worldwide, including the British Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Columbus Museum of Art, Harvard University Art Museums, Hunterdon Museum of Art, Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, New Jersey State Museum, Parrish Art Museum, Stiftung für konstruktive und konkrete Kunst, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wilhelm Hack Museum Whitney Museum of American Art, and recently, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Buenos Aires. Her work has been reviewed in publications, such as artcritical, Art in America, NY Arts Magazine, ARTnews, ArtSlant, The Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic, The New York Times, The Village Voice and The Wall Street Journal.

In addition to her painting practice, Evertz is a Professor of Art in the Department of Art and Art History at Hunter College, where she is one of the key practitioners in the renowned Hunter Color School. Over the past ten years, she has also curated several critically acclaimed artist retrospectives and surveys of abstract painting at Hunter College. She is the author of catalogue essays on color in abstract painting and on the artists Anthoni Milkowski and Robert Swain among others.

Evertz holds an MFA in Painting and a BA in Art History from Hunter College.

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