

## A VERTICAL ORIENTATION

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For some time, Sanford Wurmfeld has created mesmerizing color paintings infused with the power to transport the viewer into an array of contemplative and meditative states. Colors have an undeniable visceral impact; they induce feeling upon perceptual contact. Wurmfeld, however, defines this experience as indiscernible. Instead, his approach to choosing colors for a work of art stems from the colors' individual and collective potential to solve a proposed problem. His aim is to push the limits in the ways one sees and feels color; and his need is to constantly challenge preconceived notions of color, forcing the viewer to, quite literally, experience color differently. The emotional impact of his art is personal, and not prescribed by him, however his path to creating works is methodical, precise, studied, tested, and organized. Each decision stems from the search for an answer to a question or a discovery beyond conceived possibilities. Yet, on two occasions, Wurmfeld made an emotional decision that controlled the visual impact of the works and allowed for his carefully chosen and applied colors to push the potentials of visual experience. In these instances he designed vertically oriented paintings because, to him, it made "emotional sense." These two occasions occurred first in 1991 with the series, For CJW, and again in 2002 with the series, For MSW.

For an artist, the orientation of a painted canvas, including size and shape, is an integral part of the artwork itself, as that orientation and tangible presence will forever dictate its means of interaction. Wurmfeld has explored size and shape in his canvases throughout his career; however, he has mostly kept to squares—which are neither vertical nor horizontal—and horizontally oriented rectangles. Although the initial instinct to make two series vertical was emotionally driven, the vertical orientations increased the impact of the paintings' internal perceptual affects and presented a particular type of physical relationship with the viewer.

At the end of 1989, Wurmfeld experienced the

passing of his father and after being unable to work for a long period, he eventually set out to complete a series he would ultimately dedicate to his father, titling them For CJW. The paintings measure 84 inches high and 42 inches wide with the complete titles of II-15 #2 (BV) For CJW; II-15 #2 (R) For CJW; II-15 #2 (G) For CJW; and II-15 #2 (YO) For CJW. This verticality and particular shape connects a viewer visually and physically to a stoic, solid slab. By this time, in 1991, Wurmfeld had been actively using his phased grid method in paintings for about four years and he utilized that same effective phased grid in these works. Each time, he first delicately penciled the grid onto the canvas and then carefully applied his mixed colors into their specified slot. The original set of paintings was numbered at only four: investigating red, blue-violet, green, and yellow-orange respectively. Later, he added a light gray and dark version to make further visual comparisons. [Figs. 1, 2, & 3] The phased grid assisted in creating continuous color progressions on each canvas as the spectrum flowed from saturated color to unsaturated color. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these works is the stark color contrast that slices the canvas in half horizontally. This division creates the illusion that the top of the canvas and the bottom of the canvas are made up of incongruous hues. The truth is that if one cut the painting in half from the contrasting central line, and moved the bottom to the top, the hues would align creating a perfect color progression.

Due to the shape and orientation of these works, this central division has an even more profound effect on the viewer. The works are meant to be interpreted on a human scale, measuring slightly taller and slightly wider than an average person, so that the viewer encounters the work almost as an equal. The viewer identifies more immediately and emotionally to an object within his or her reach because of its more natural and inherently familiar proportions. The beautifully applied colors create an almost seamless color field where

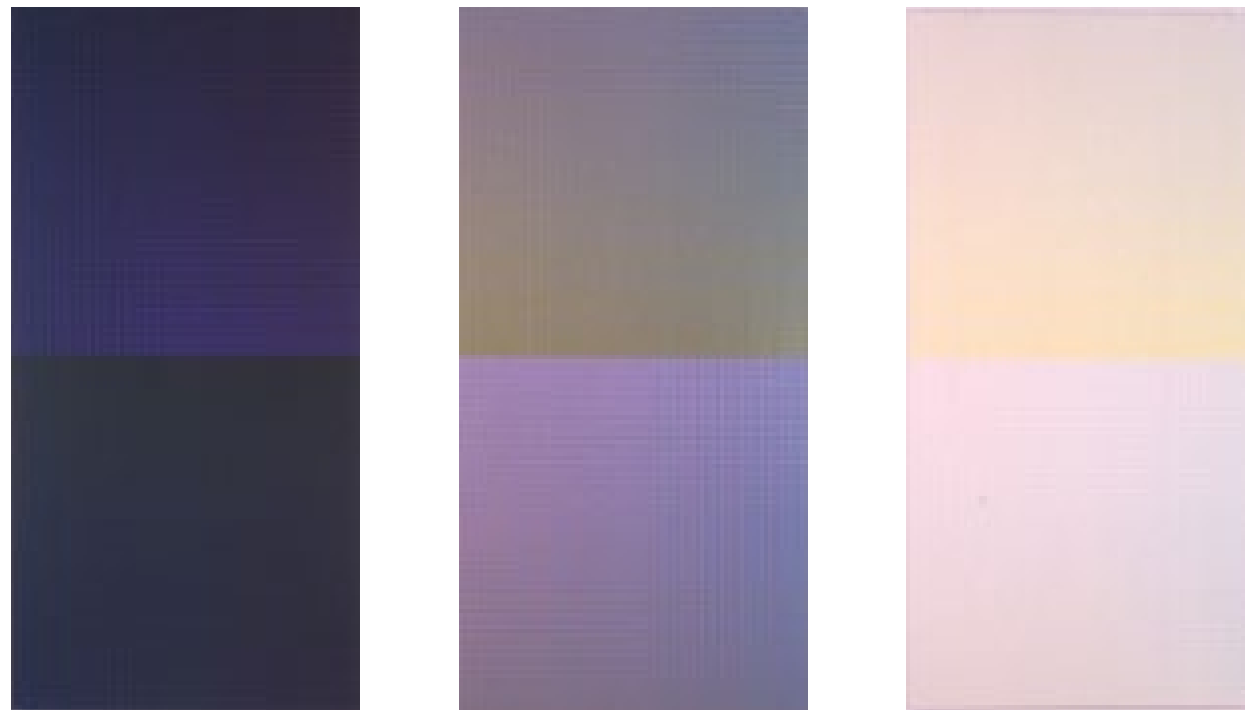


FIG. 1 II-15 #2 (Light), For CJW, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)  
FIG. 2 II-15 #2 (Dark), For CJW, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)  
FIG. 3 II-15 #2 (N), For CJW, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)

the color assimilation also helps stimulate apparent luminosity; however, the central fracture and heavy contrast between saturated and unsaturated color contribute to the haunting nature of the works. Not only does the shape and orientation of the canvas convey a weighted arresting feeling as one faces the slab, but the dramatic division also breaks the viewer's gaze. The color progression is stopped in its tracks only to restart again above or below the contrast line.

This series was followed by a return to paintings within Wurmfeld's standard square and horizontal rectangles, and more than a decade would pass before he felt it appropriate to use the vertically oriented canvas again. Significantly, Wurmfeld eventually accomplished the personal goal of constructing and exhibiting a color spectrum in the round, namely his *Cyclorama 2000*. Achieving this color spectrum experience in an immersive environment came after years of color studies, experiments for the perfect approach, and much conceptual and architectural brainstorming in conjunction with his architect brother, Michael. Artistic and theoretical collaboration with his brother had been an integral part of Wurmfeld's career from the beginning. Sadly, the time period of its fabrication to the time immediately following the monumental completion of *Cyclorama 2000* was fraught with tragedy: Wurmfeld tragically lost his brother to a battle with cancer; he experienced the death of three colleagues; as well as the devastating events of the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001.

It was thus not until 2002 before he felt he could create new work and Wurmfeld began plans for a four-part series he would dedicate to Michael, with the title, *For MSW*. Although these works maintain the investigative nature of Wurmfeld's artistic approach and test new theories as all his work does, these particular pieces carry a unique presence similar to that of the pieces dedicated to his father eleven years prior. The works complete titles are II-26 +B (-V/DN=V) *For MSW*; II-26 +B (-BG/N=V) *For MSW*; II-26 +B (-RO/N=V) *For MSW*; and II-26 +B (-Y/LN=V) *For MSW*, each measuring 90 by 46  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches and completed in 2002. Their verticality and their human scale, although a little larger still, intuitively provide a sense of connectedness by establishing a physically balanced relationship between viewer and object.

Here, once more, in this series, the artist's slab-like canvases confront the viewer with a powerful presence. These works, however, in contrast to the *For CJW* pieces, do not contain a second halting arresting element. Instead, Wurmfeld engages the viewer with new visual components, answers different questions, and challenges the reception of color through more delicate, softer, and illuminating means.

The integration of borders into these works work stem from a fascination with the effects of border colors on the perception of the internal hues and was influenced by Wurmfeld's visit to a Georges Seurat exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, in 1991. Seurat famously painted the frames of some of his later Pointillist paintings to add to the visual effects of those works. Wurmfeld felt that he too could investigate perceptual possibilities of color by experimenting with borders in his paintings. The *For MSW* series was included in these investigations.

As in all of his works, this series began with tireless color studies in order to achieve the ultimate combination and collection of hues to create the appropriate color sequence. The color studies for the internal colors are in and of themselves a work of art. [Fig. 4] Wurmfeld mixed each hue to result in a targeted value and saturation, and these studies were then used to create multiple iterations of the final works but on a smaller scale. The color studies were fundamental to the success of the later full-scale paintings because mixing and identifying the correct colors is an intuitive practice and requires testing and correction. One might compare that process and its importance to singing the correct notes in a song; every song has a progression of notes and singing the wrong note throws off the tune. Similarly, if a block of color is not quite right in a progression of hues, it is visually distracting and disturbs the harmony of the work.

This series, *For MSW*, is a combination of light, mid-range, and dark paintings. The first is made up of colors moving toward yellow—the light version; the second and third are made up of colors moving toward blue-green and red-orange—the midrange versions; and the fourth is made up colors moving toward violet—the dark version. Each painting communicates a soft brilliance hovering on the surface of the canvas, the visual effect of transparency and apparent luminosity. Wurmfeld exploits

specific color combinations to achieve this appearance and accomplish the constant alterations and assimilation between close-toned colors. Still, the most magical aspect to these works is the dazzling presence the borders add to the comprehensive understanding of each piece. Wurmfeld had used borders previously both as contrasting and assimilation elements in his paintings. In the *For MSW* series he includes a border that cascades gently from the top of the canvas to the bottom, contrasting with the body colors at the top and assimilating with the body colors at the bottom. The results of this approach are mesmerizing. The works become like a waterfall of colors, gently rushing out towards the viewer at the top and melting quietly away at the bottom. Here, too, the vertical orientation emphasizes and enhances the visual downward push and total experience, the culmination of which is a calming blend of colors, from light to dark, shimmering on the surface and flow-

ing like water.

Canvas orientation and color selection can break down into systematic and objective decisions. The choices Wurmfeld makes in all of his works are precise and thought out. Still, even he states that, "there should be soul in every painting, no matter what you do." This fact is undeniably true for his two vertical series. The emotional decision to make these works vertical ultimately drove their success by providing the perfect frame within which the colors address Wurmfeld's proposed problem. The shape and orientation are critical to the paintings' specific physical connection to the viewer, to their halting impact, and to their illuminating effects. Whether severed in the center or pouring color from the top to the bottom, the viewer is effortlessly and perceptually engaged. Together, the verticality and the colors in these works become, as Wurmfeld has described, "more than just an elegant solution to a problem."

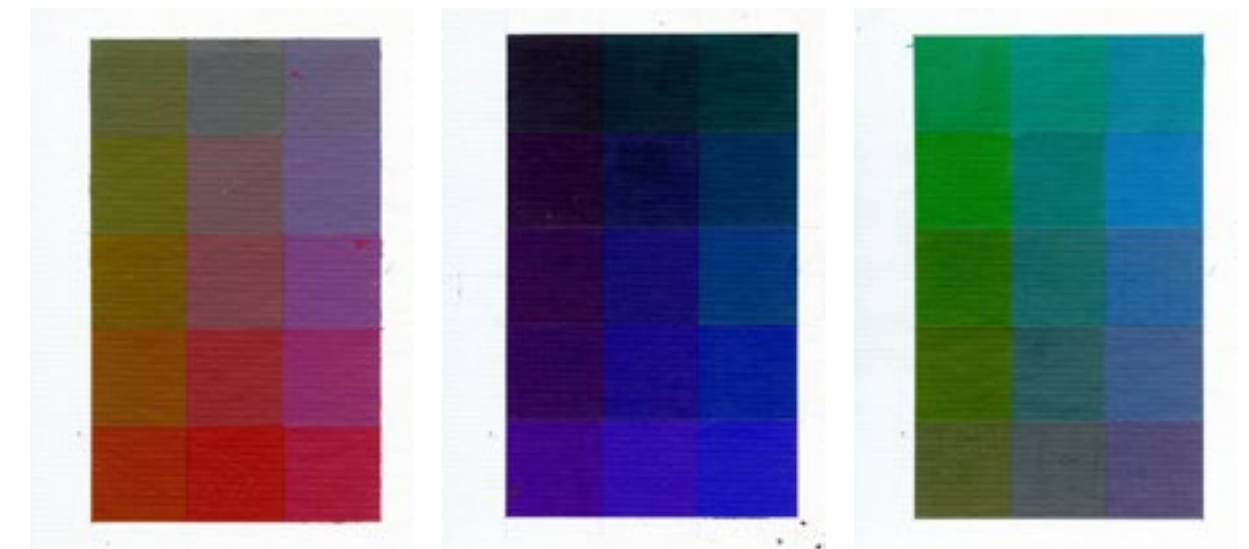


FIG. 4 Sanford Wurmfeld, color studies, *For MSW* series, 2002. Acrylic on canvas board, 12 x 16 in. (30.5 x 40.6 cm) each.

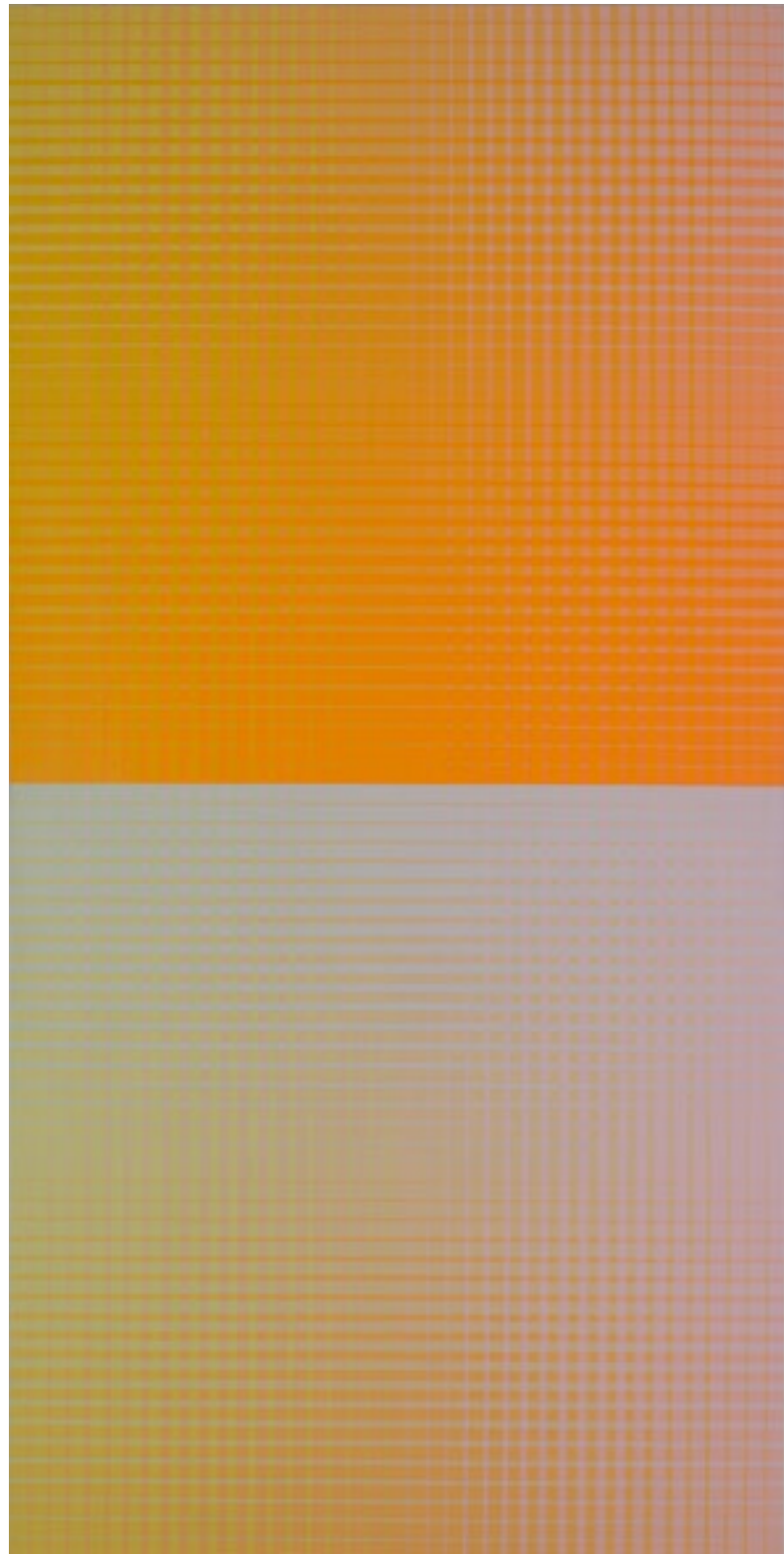


PLATE 42 II-15 #2 (YO-LN) For CJW, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)

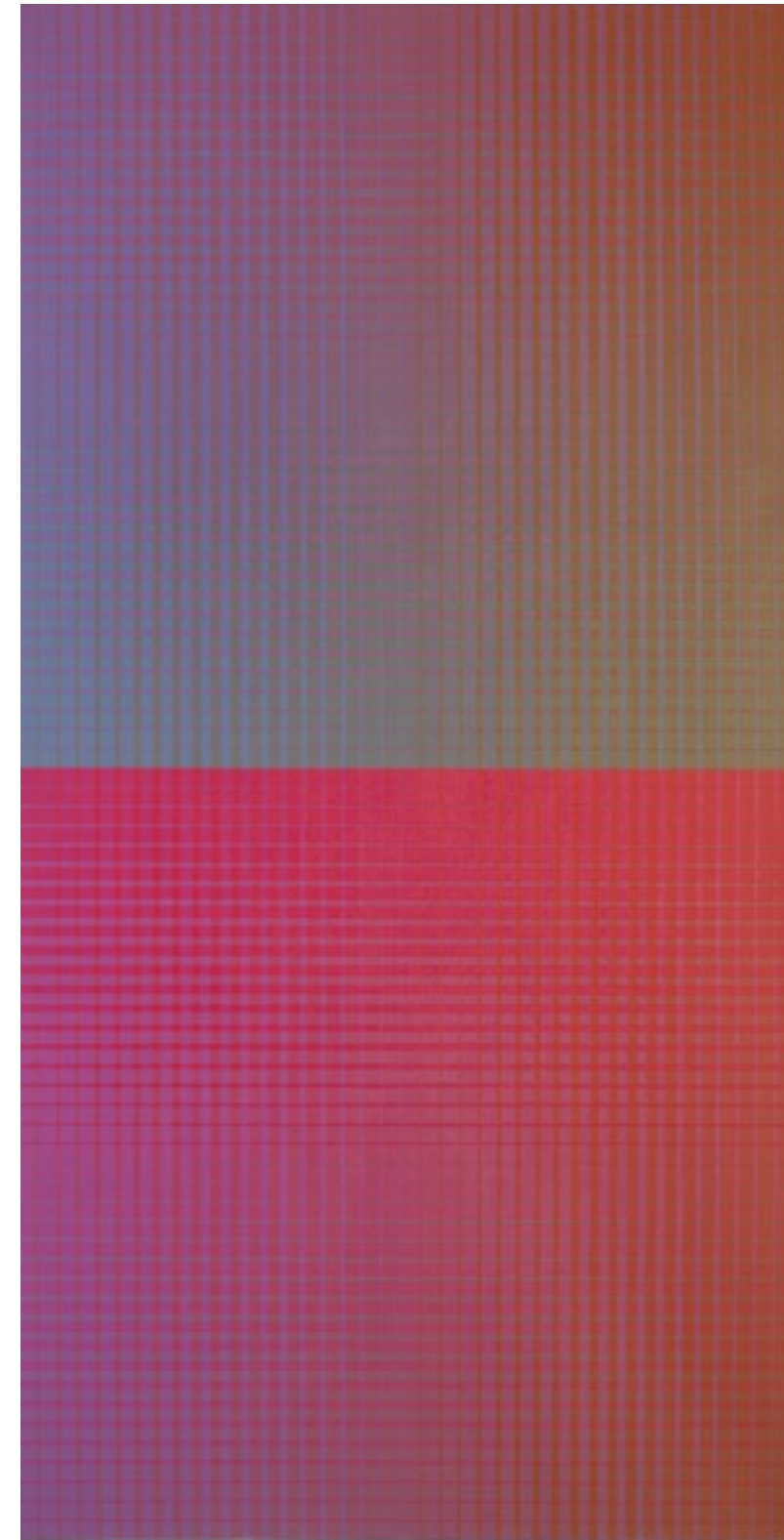


PLATE 43 II-15 #2 (R-N) For CJW, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)



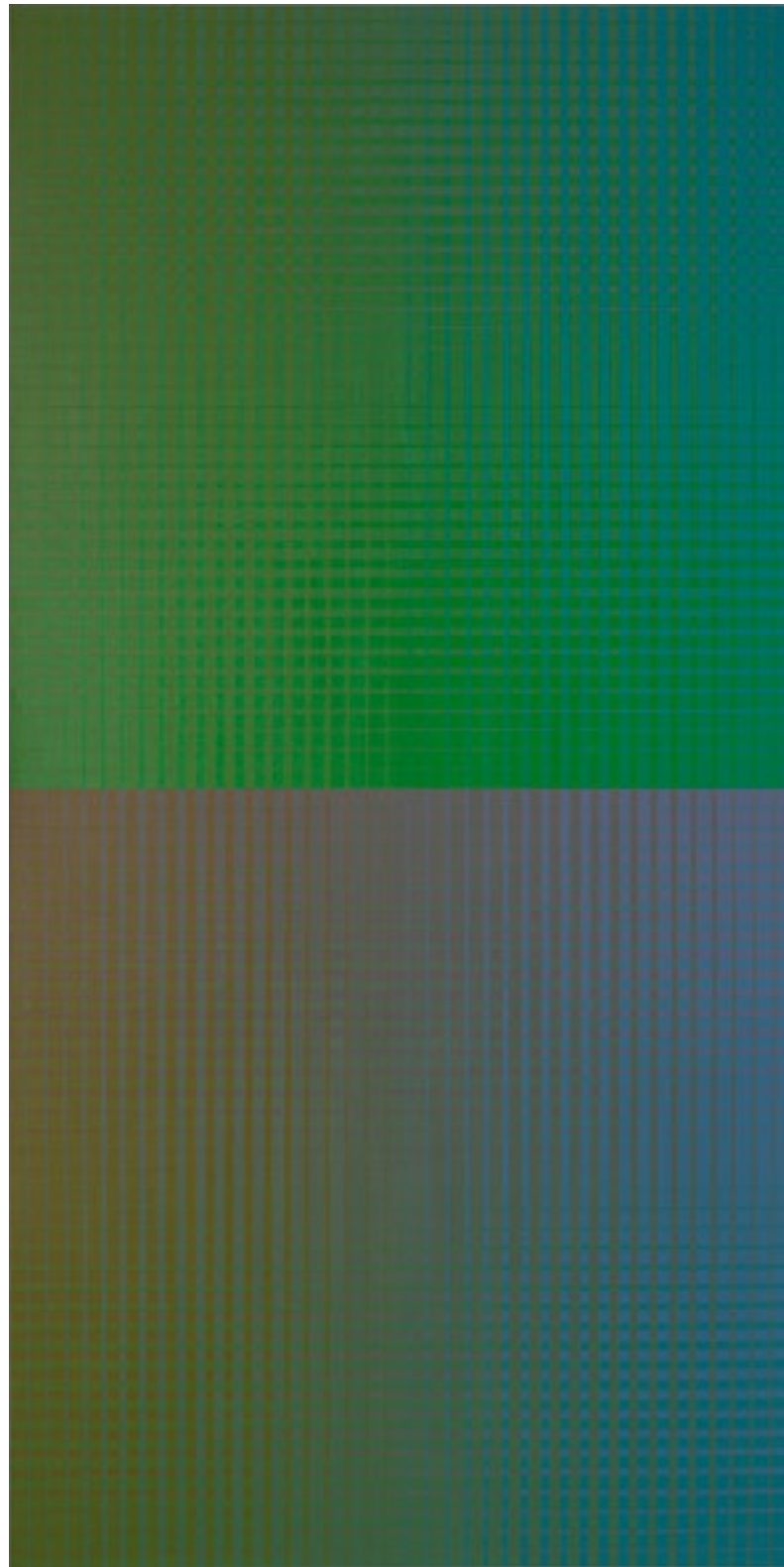


PLATE 44 II-15 #2 (G-N) For CJW, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)

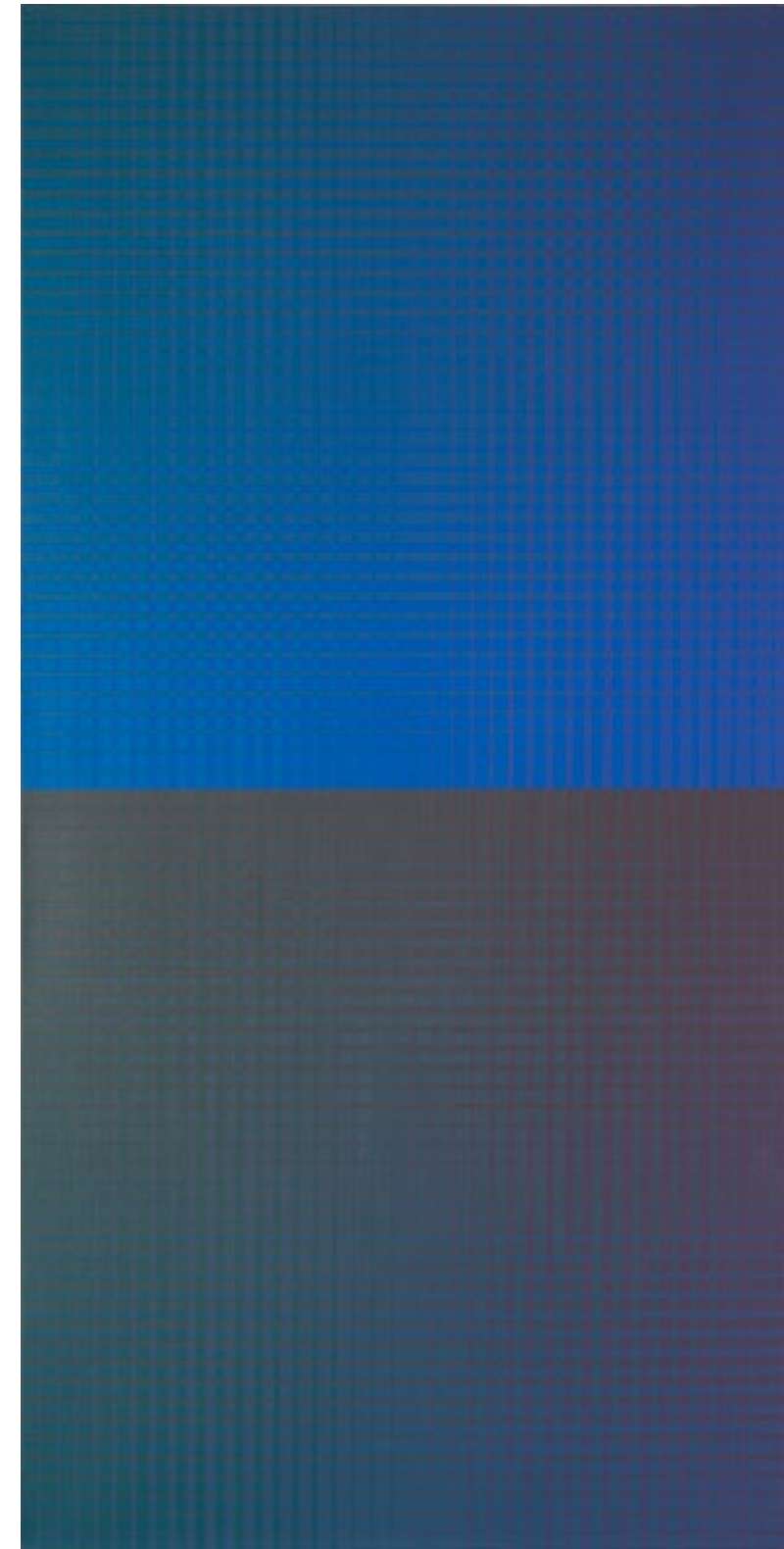


PLATE 45 II-15 #2 (BV-DN) For CJW, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 42 in. (213.4 x 106.7 cm)

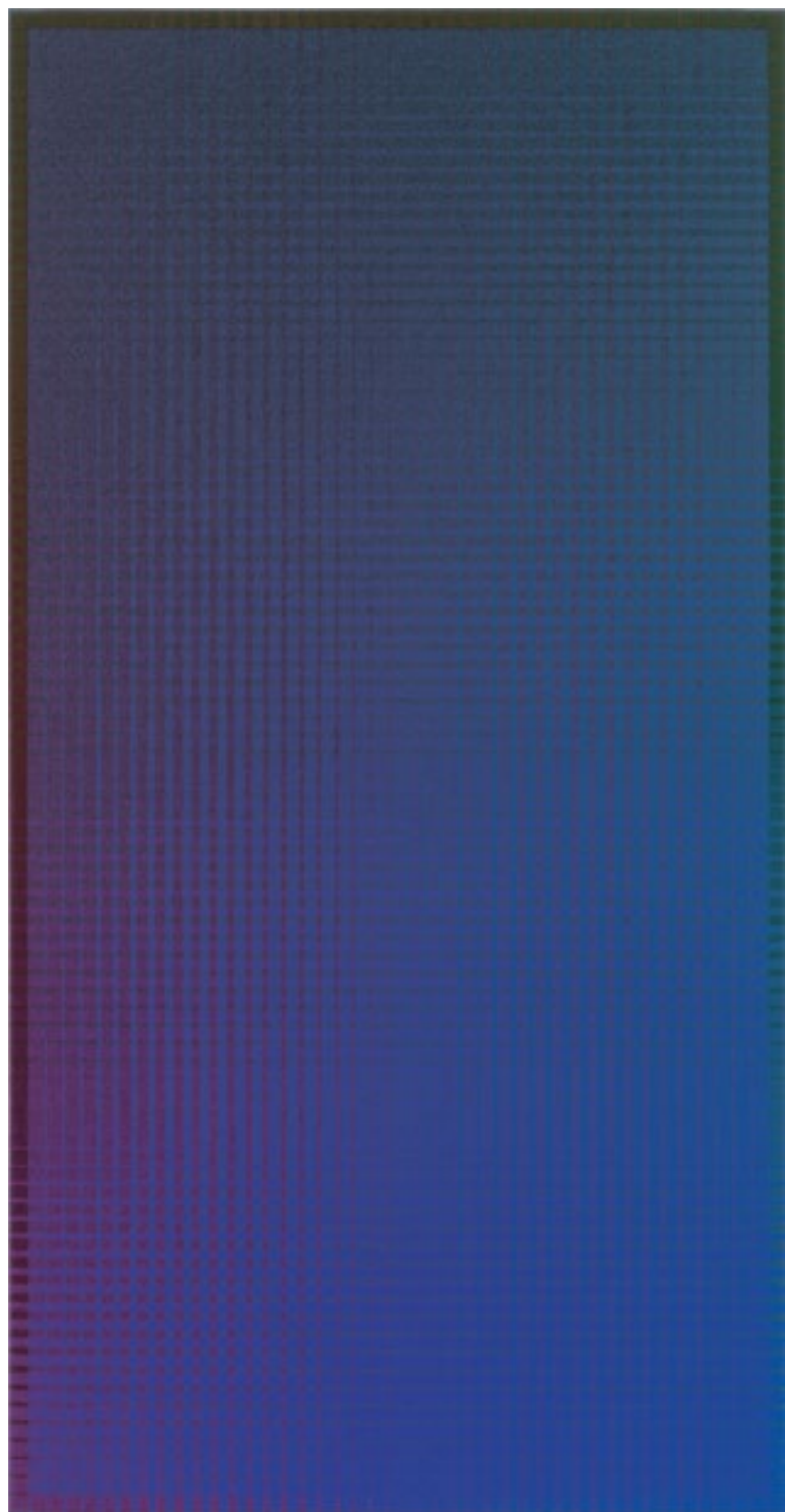


PLATE 46 II-26 +B (-V/DN=V) For MSW, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 46 1/4 in. (228.6 x 118.2 cm)

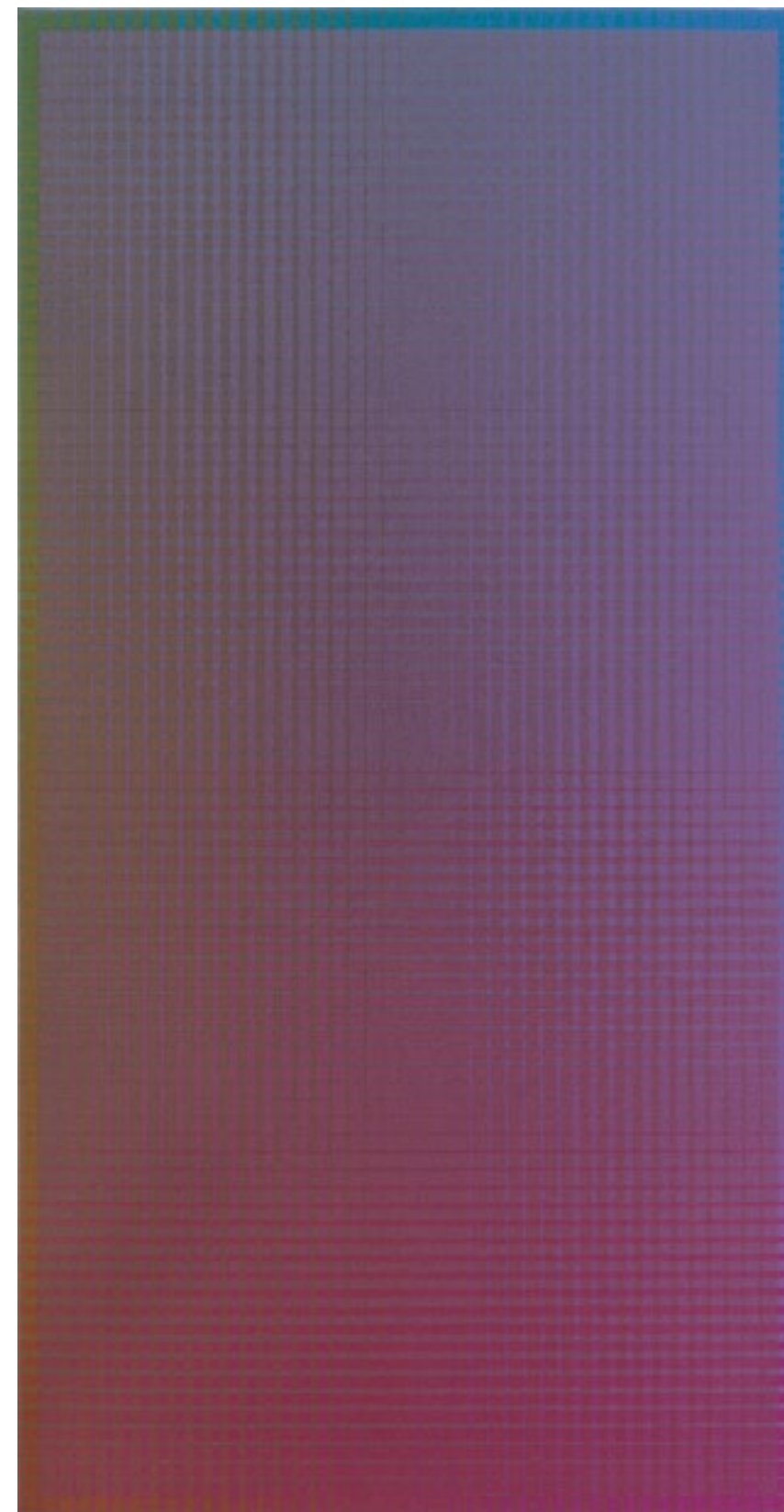


PLATE 47 II-26 +B (-RO/N=V) For MSW, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 46 1/4 in. (228.6 x 118.2 cm)



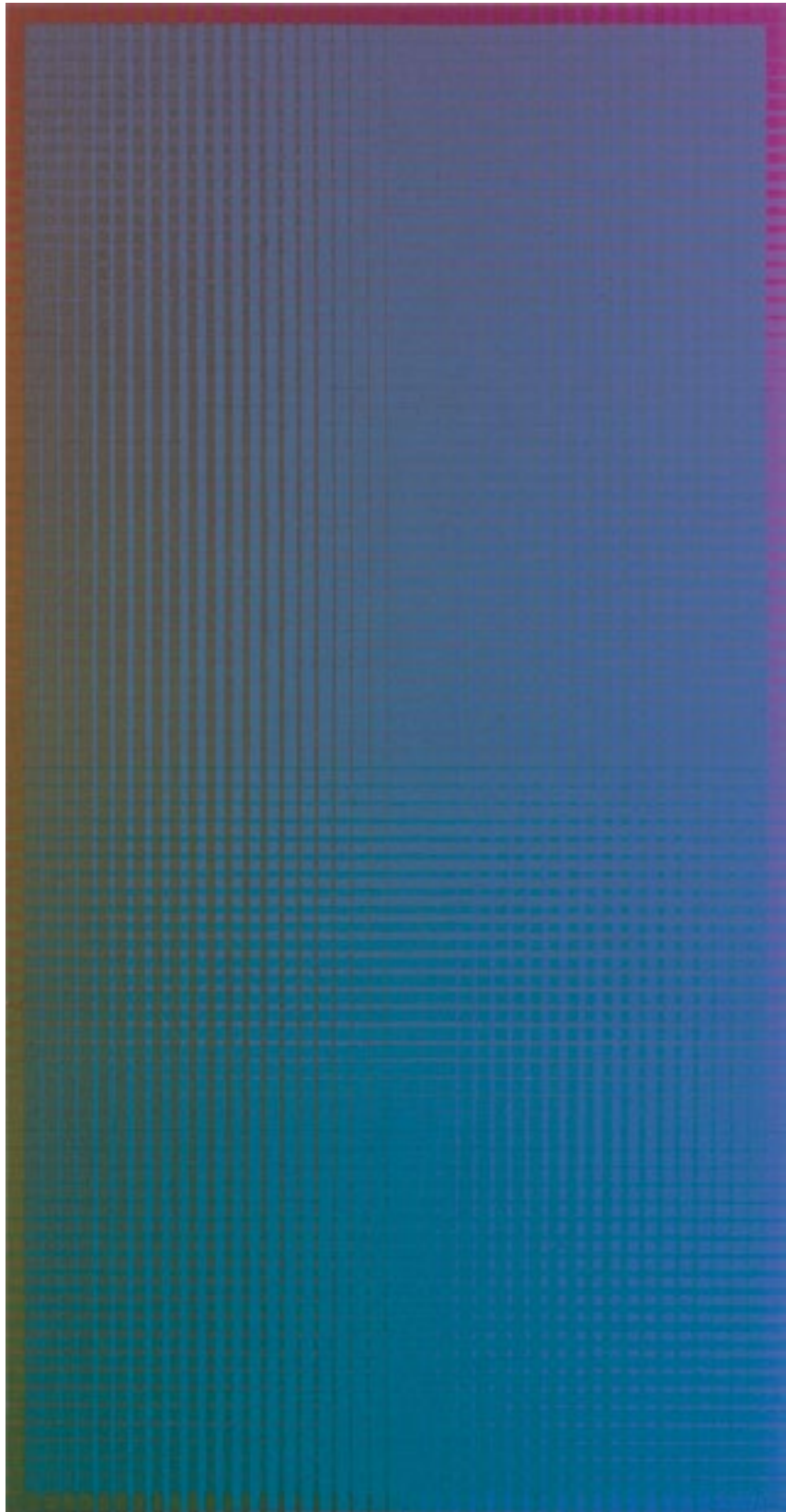


PLATE 48 II-26 +B (-BG/N=V) For MSW, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 46 1/2 in. (228.6 x 118.2 cm)

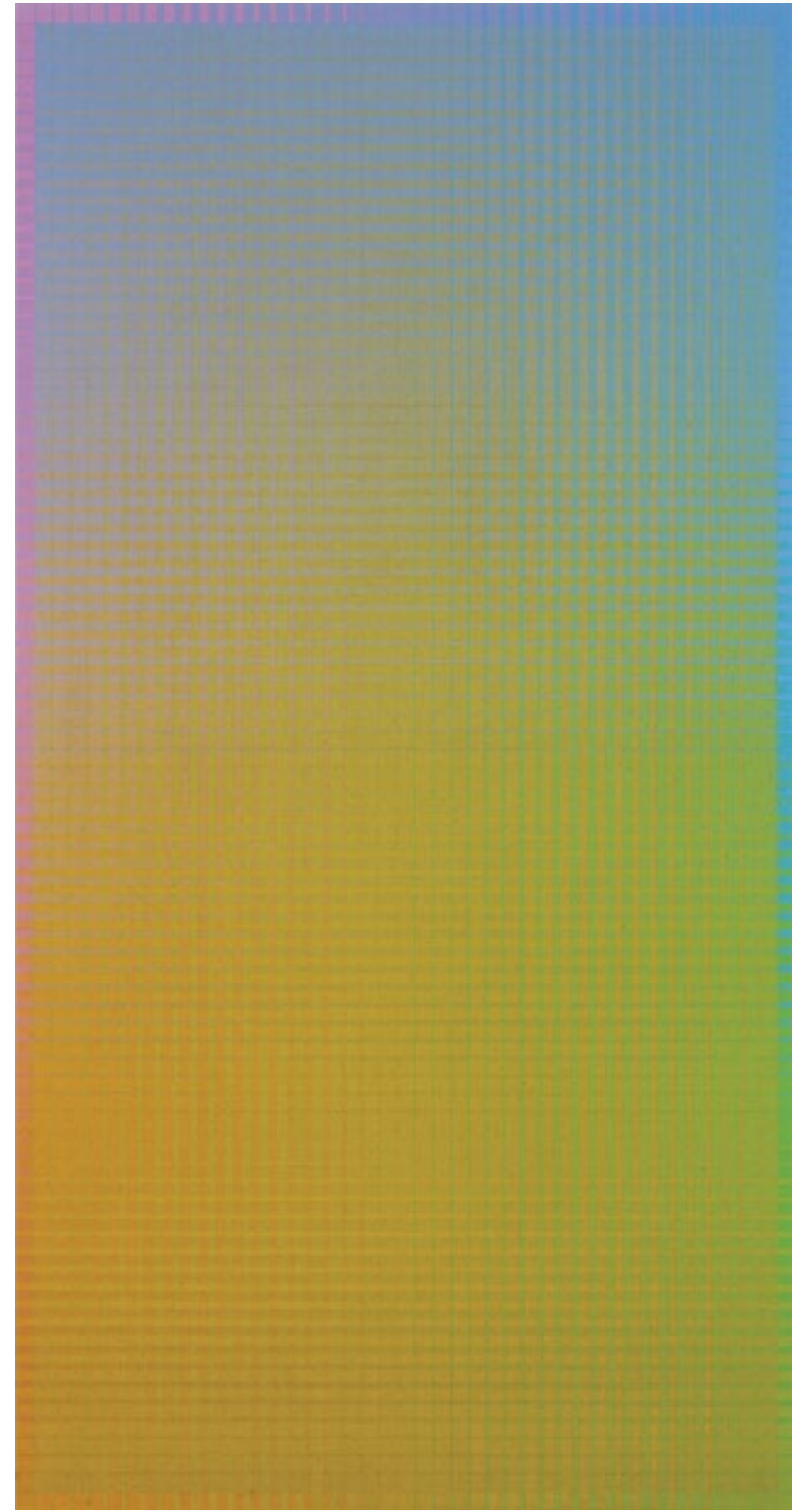


PLATE 49 II-26 +B (-Y/LN=V) For MSW, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 46 1/2 in. (228.6 x 118.2 cm)



Installation view at Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, Scotland. 2008. From left to right: II-33 #1 +B (-Blk-) (Violet center), 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 121.5 in. (106.7 x 308.6 cm). II-41 #1+B (Dark) For EWW, 2007. Acrylic on canvas. 90 x 90 in. (228.6 x 228.6 cm). II-41 #1+B (Neutral) For EWW, 2005-06. Acrylic on canvas. 90 x 90 in. (228.6 x 228.6 cm). II-41 #1+B (Light) For EWW, 2006. Acrylic on canvas. 90 x 90 in. (228.6 x 228.6 cm). II-33 #1 +B (-W-) (Yellow center), 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 121.5 in. (106.7 x 308.6 cm).