

Cornelia Thomsen

stripe paintings



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Erik Thomsen LLC

Introduction

Cornelia Thomsen: Stripe Paintings

Cornelia Thomsen paints *color curtains that become stripes*—or *stripes that become color curtains*. Disregarding the stripes for a moment, the pattern of such frame-filling curtains has the effect of accentuating the curtain's flatness through the opacity of veiling, but also suggests an imagined window view on the world behind it. Both effects are rooted in the history of painting.

Let's start with the window. A window confronts its users, in terms of disposition, similar to the way a painting does—not only because both are physically mounted on a wall, but also because the window has become a familiar if risky metaphor, indeed a model, for introducing the illusion of spatial depth since the early Renaissance. The notion of a painting as a window is »risky« because accompanying the potential for a view through the window is the decision for enormous spatial depth. And introducing the illusion of spatial depth has been an achievement of central perspective painting since the early Renaissance.

It is interesting and certainly no accident that, by contrast, the depiction of curtains in paintings became more a concern in the late Renaissance and in the Baroque periods. On the one hand a curtain, provided it is not fully open, obstructs the view into the distance. On the other hand, however, a curtain can also frame and effectively stage this view—and so a curtain primarily appears in works in which the illusionistic achievements of painting are not only meant to be savored but also to be made a theme of. This use of the curtain is what we admire about Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1513-14), where the dark-green curtain on either side of the Madonna serves a mediatory function at the edges of the painting and denotes the »aesthetic boundary« (Ernst Michalski); that is, the demarcation between the image's space (in

this case the heavenly realm consisting of clouds and angels), and the real space of the viewer. And as Michalski noted, the Pope's pointing gesture at the left side of the painting can at the very least be seen as transgressing this aesthetic boundary. However, while the playful approach to the curtain remains discrete and modest in Raphael's painting, in Rembrandt's *Holy Family* in Kassel (1646) it becomes a bravura performance, a full-blown feat. In Rembrandt's work the curtain is painted in a *trompe l'oeil* manner of such virtuosity that it appears to have been hung *in front of* the painting—thereby playfully referencing the dubious praise in antiquity of painting's ability to deceive the eye.

While the paradigm of the curtain makes its exit in the beginning of the modern era (though René Magritte still used it as an ambiguous instrument pointing at the discourses on painting), stripes become an issue in painting not before the start of the modern era, indeed only with modernism. There had always been stripes in clothing and ornament, of course, but the flattened, characteristically repetitive juxtaposition of parallel, perfectly straight lines or bands, which we generally interpret as stripes, was never a guiding principle in Romantic German and Danish landscape painting (though in hindsight we think we can easily see it there). We are certainly familiar with the notion that every continuous horizontal line contains the suggestion of a distant landscape, the place where sky meets sea or plain. We are also familiar with the reversal of this: that some landscape paintings (and even some real landscapes) recede from their intended (or real) spatial depth into a picture plane and thus into a structure of horizontal stripes of color in a largely overarching staggered arrangement. One could even see stripes as one of the catalysts that helped pave the way from landscape portrayals to abstraction, from

illusionistic depth to a picture plane given over entirely to the mere presence and self-presentation of color—even to the reification of the pure picture-object. This is why the stripes, bands, or even just the horizontal pictorial divisions found in Agnes Martin, Antonio Calderara, or Blinky Palermo are always inscribed with an almost melancholic tone; an art dedicated to landscape-like pure flatness formed a wistful harmony.

However, there were also the stripes of Barnett Newman, in which the precision and peculiarity of an extremely elongated, thin color situation was turned against its own logic; for Newman's »zips« rushed vertically through vast areas of monochrome color and were characterized by great expressiveness. There were also the stripes of Kenneth Noland, which did not rush through anything because they themselves were the image or constituted the image. However, they had not descended to the level of the literal, like those Frank Stella devised for his Black Paintings. On the contrary, Noland's work resulted in a tradition that made use of the painterliness of stripes, a tradition that bears fruit to this day, even in Concrete Art. Stripes allow the artist to place color in arbitrary widths and lengths and to abstain from further decisions about form. The artist must only decide on the colors, width, and application of the stripes. He is relieved of all the demanding (and, of course, wonderful) possibilities and constraints of having to arrange the colors he has set down in a useful way, that is, to compose them. In truth, the painter of stripes often derives full satisfaction from his sequence—indeed it even provides incredible and infinite opportunities for modulation. This temptation is one that Cornelia Thomsen has also succumbed to. She, too, seeks adventure in painting unswervingly parallel stripes, an unburdened adventure that for all its immense constraints is accompanied by great freedoms.

Thomsen's stripes are of varying widths, ranging from a millimeter to two centimeters. The color of the individual stripe can be smoothly homogenous or it can follow a transverse course from dark by way of light to dark, giving it a seemingly outward, or in some instances, inward cylindrical curve. In this way the entire surface of successions of stacked stripes is counteracted everywhere in the details by projecting and receding, protuberant or hollowed tiers; a modulation that lends the maritime-inspired shades of blue to white a pulsating three-dimensional spatiality, or, more precisely, a flat, relief-like corporeal spatiality. The dancing fluctuation between convex and concave is much like that seen in the channels and rolls of a High Gothic compound pier.

A flickering and streaming of colors and color sequences that overlap individual stripes, as encountered in some of Bridget Riley's work, does not interest Thomsen. She emphasizes succession, a real legibility, an absolute there-and-then-ness of the individual color. By constantly varying the width of the stripes, the application of the paint, and whatever curvature there may be, she effectively prevents a formation of supersigns that would rake in the individual element, the individual point in the painting. This effect finds correspondence in Thomsen's technique: she paints the stripes from top to bottom, one after another, horizontally—for technical reasons the canvas is tilted ninety degrees—by hand and without templates, using a metal bar that can be moved downward bit by bit.

The result is a rapport of vertical stripes, one that both overwhelms the eye—overtaxing the ability to consolidate—and conducts it. In its vertical orientation it is anything but landscape-like; instead, it approaches the pattern of a curtain. Gerhard Richter himself executed a

series of »curtain paintings« in the mid-1960s, a phase during which he was still often programmatically treading (and showing) the path from photographic realism to abstraction to pure painting. His curtains were done in gray and had far fewer swaying folds. Richter had specifically sought out the possibilities guaranteed by the tradition that a painted curtain can both conceal vast depth and evoke it nevertheless; on the one hand denying it completely, and on the other rendering the image of the dominating curtain through its meager, intrinsically flat, painted corporeal spatiality.

Thomsen is not, by any means, seeking to continue such a *paragone*. The unsettling aspect in Richter's paintings, for which one might claim Hegel's dictum »behind all the curtains, no world,« is not her concern. Rather, she is interested in combining the meandering indefinite, the projecting and receding of color (and thus of lightness and darkness), following the pattern of the curtain. This means that what presents itself *prima facie* as a cheerful modulation in vertical stripes rendered in landscape-like shades of blue is guided by an almost symphonic fullness, a polyphony. Thomsen's paintings don't let us look deeper than what the rearward curving of a curtain fold, its amplitude, allows. Because of the rigid succession of fully continuous stripes, there is nothing that makes us want to raise these »curtains.« Instead everything encourages us to linger, to look at, and to experience the colors. *Behind* them is, as Hegel was aware, no world—indeed, the world is *in* them, without gravity, not even allegorically.

Dr. Christian Janecke
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»Stripes Nr. 11«
2011, Oil on canvas, 96" × 48" (244 × 122 cm)



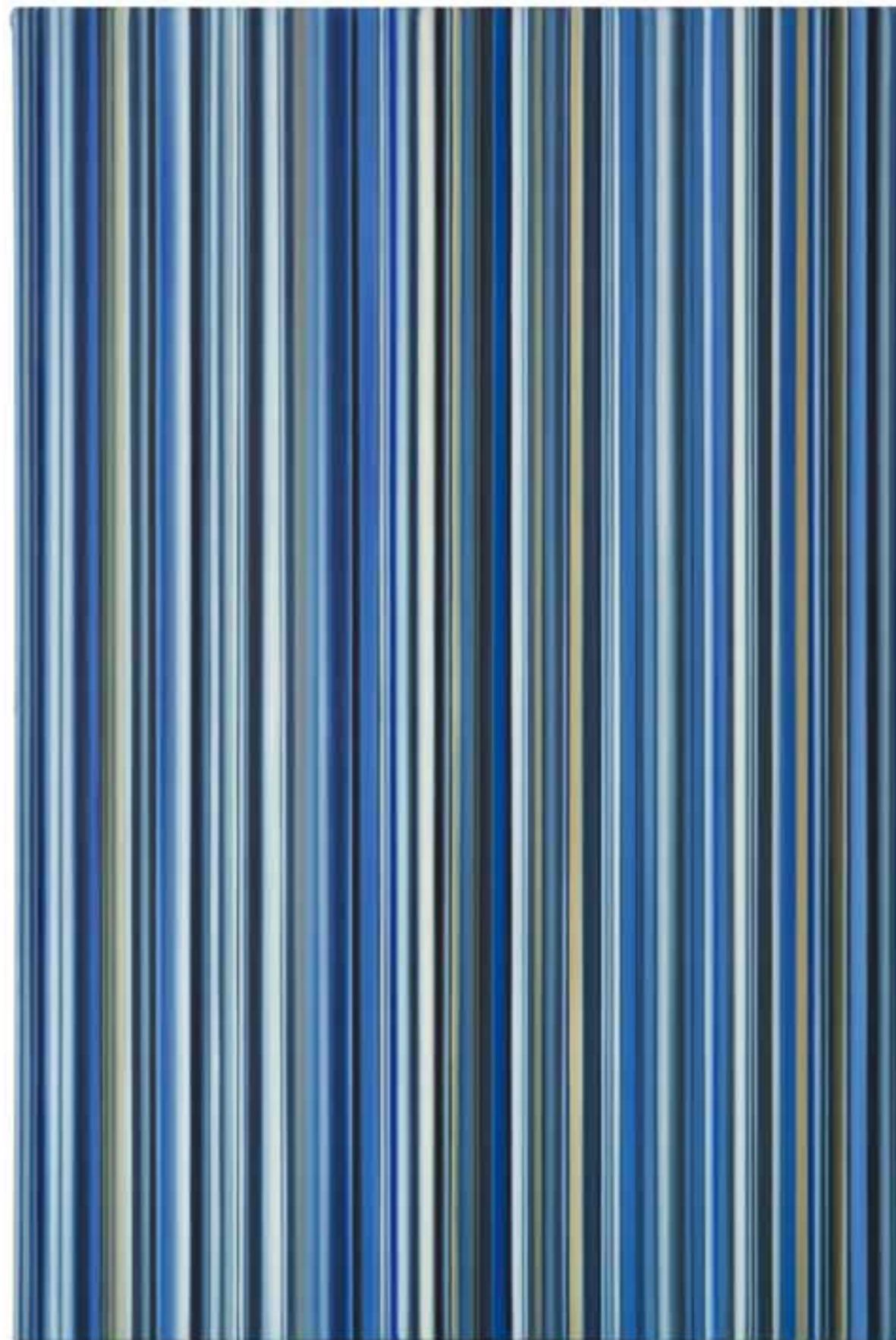
»Stripes Nr. 21«
2011, Oil on canvas, 72" x 48" (183 x 122 cm)



»Stripes Nr. 22«
2011, Oil on canvas, 72" x 48" (183 x 122 cm)



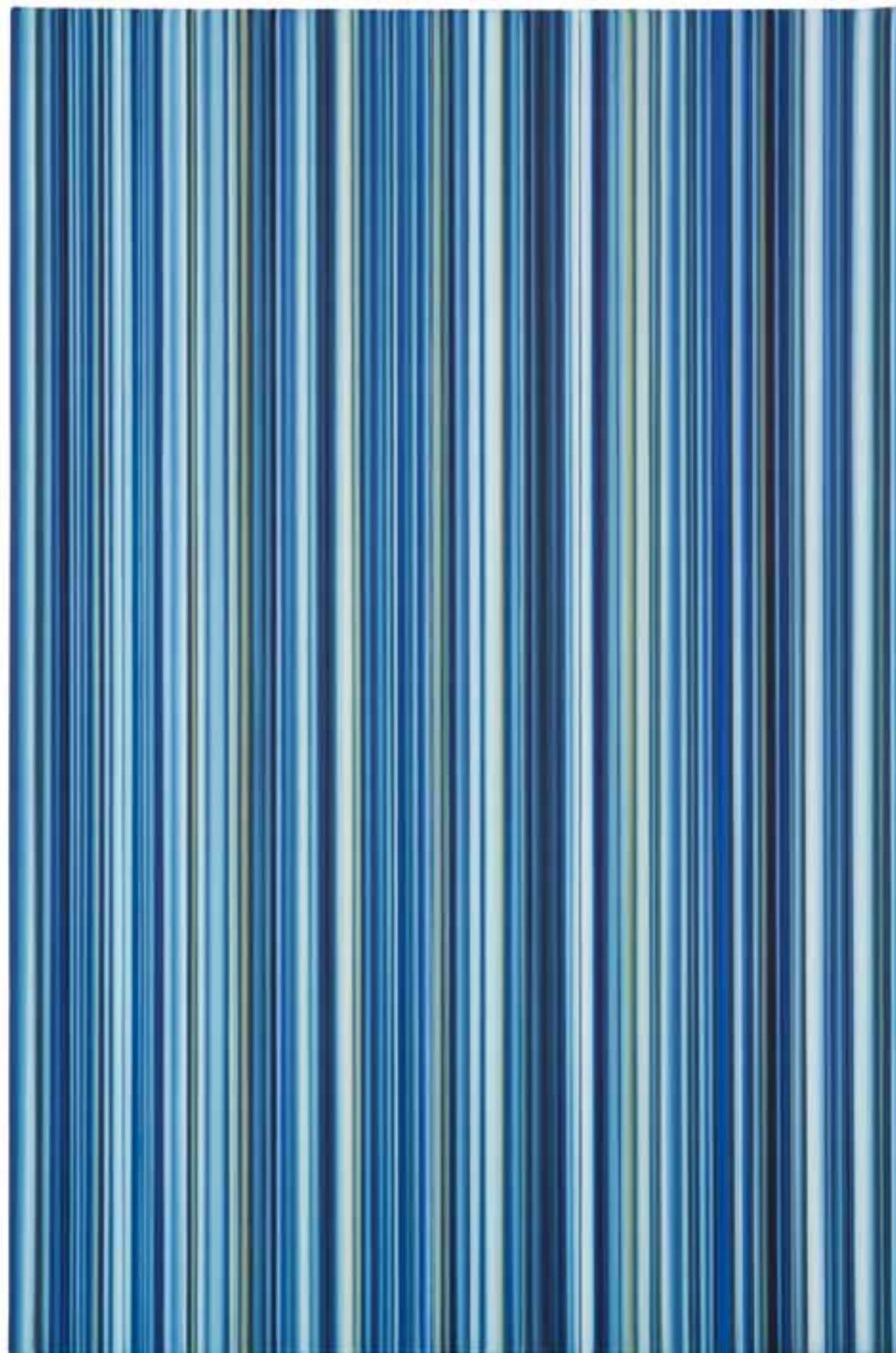
»Stripes Nr. 12«
2011, Oil on canvas, 47 ¼" × 31 ½" (120 × 80 cm)



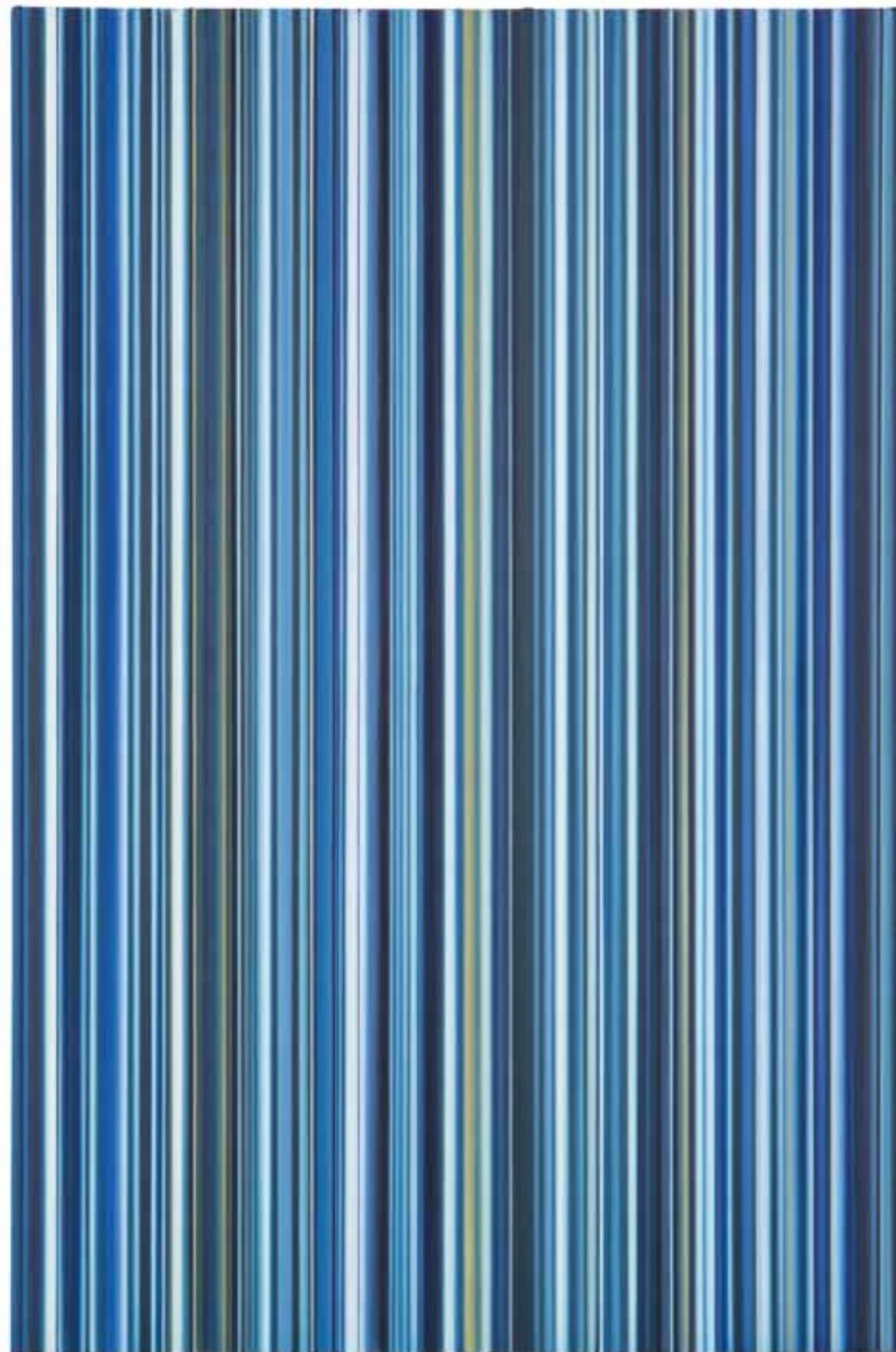
»Stripes Nr. 13«
2011, Oil on canvas, 47 ¼" × 31 ½" (120 × 80 cm)



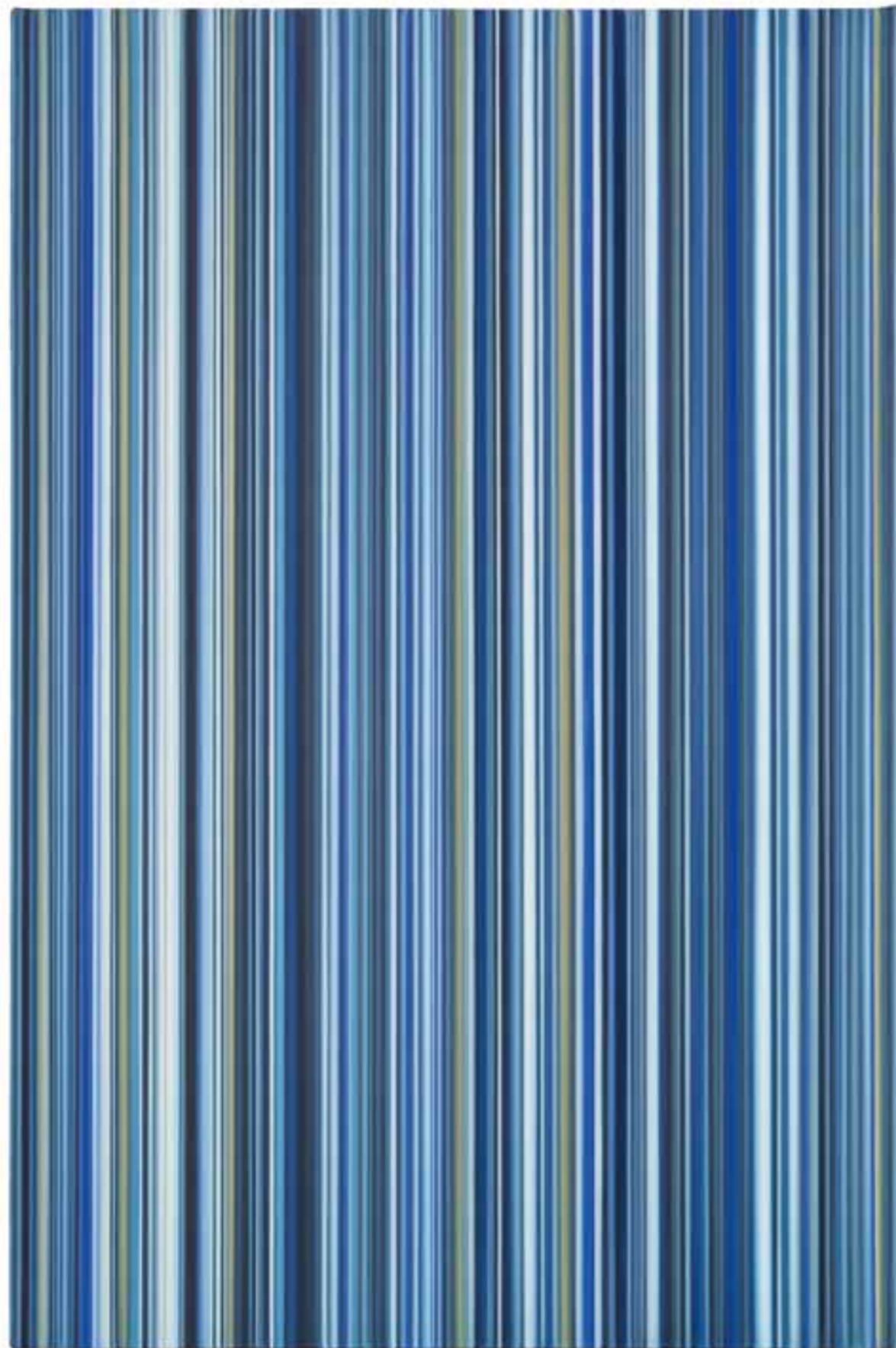
»Stripes Nr. 14«
2011, Oil on canvas, 36" × 24" (91.5 × 61 cm)



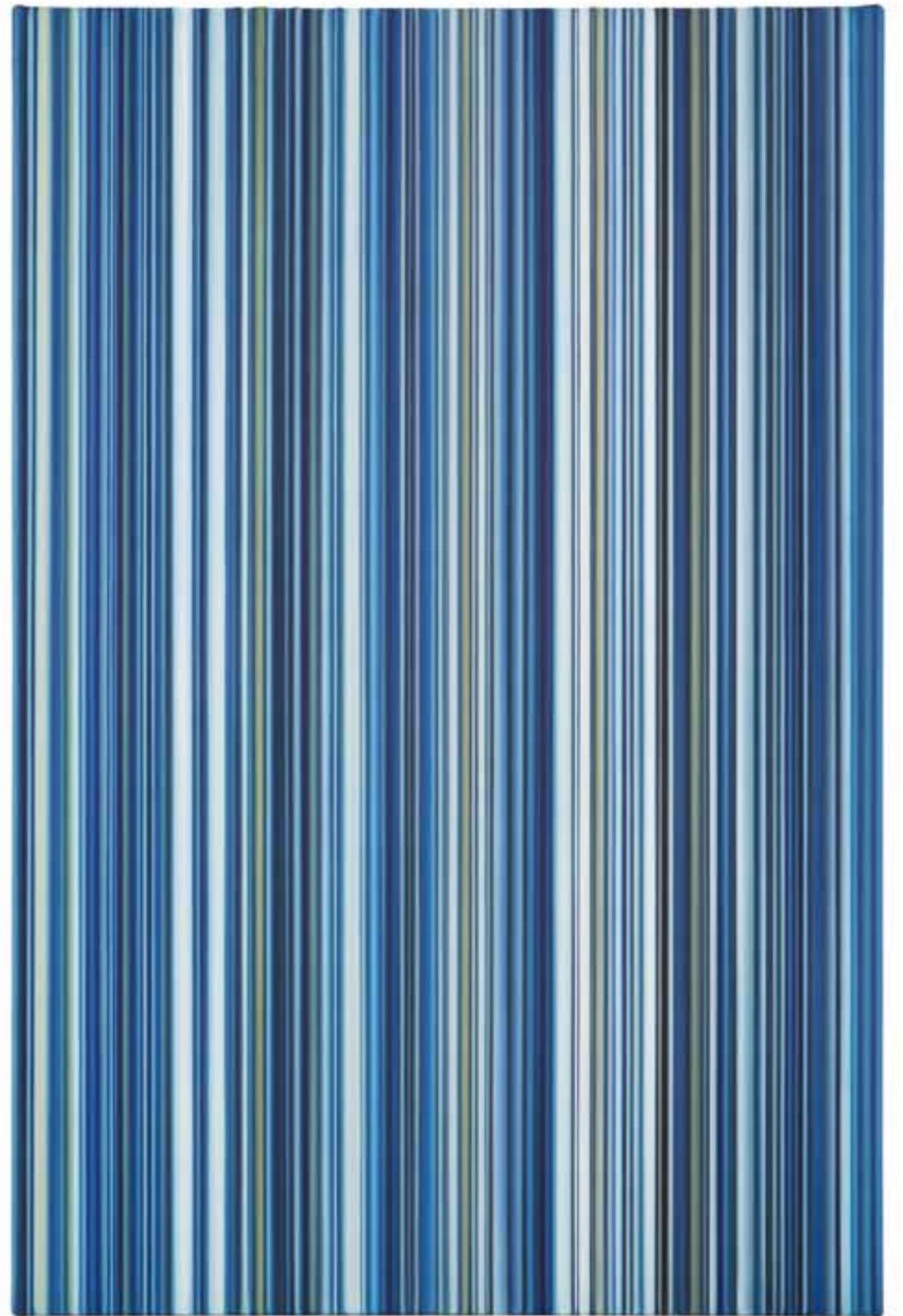
»Stripes Nr. 15«
2011, Oil on canvas, 36" × 24" (91.5 × 61 cm)



»Stripes Nr. 16«
2011, Oil on canvas, 36" × 24" (91.5 × 61 cm)



»Stripes Nr. 17«
2011, Oil on canvas, 36" × 24" (91.5 × 61 cm)





»Stripes Nr. 20«
2011, Oil on canvas, 24" × 18" (61 × 45.5 cm)



»Stripes Nr. 23«
2011, Oil on canvas, 24" × 18" (61 × 45.5 cm)



Cornelia Thomsen

Personal History

Born 1970 in Rudolstadt, Thuringia, Germany

Lives and works in New York City

Painter at Meissen Porcelain Company (1986 - 94)

Pohle-Stiehl Art School, Darmstadt, Germany (1997 - 2002)

University of Art and Design Offenbach/Main, Germany (2002 - 2011), MFA 2011

Solo Exhibitions

Cornelia Thomsen »Stripe Paintings« Erik Thomsen LLC, New York, NY, 2011 (catalog)

Cornelia Thomsen »Nature's Reflections« Behnke & Doherty Gallery, Washington Depot, CT, 2010

Cornelia Thomsen »Works on Paper« The International Art & Design Fair, New York, NY, 2005 (catalog)

Group Exhibitions

»Retrospective« Behnke & Doherty Gallery, Washington Depot, CT, 2011

»Etchings and Prints« Manhattan Graphics Center, New York, NY, 2010

»Fragile Diplomacy« The Bard Graduate Center of New York, NY, 2008

»Art Attack« Frère Independent, Chelsea Hotel, New York, NY, 2007

Broome Street Gallery, New York, NY, 2007

»Immer die schönste Malerei« Galerie K9 aktuelle Kunst, Hannover, Germany, 2006

»Kunsthalle Sandwiese« BKI Sandip Shah, Alsbach, Germany, 2004

»Was isst ein Künstler« BKI Sandip Shah, Darmstadt, Germany, 2004

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Front cover: Cornelia Thomsen, 1:1 detail from »Stripes Nr. 14«

Back cover: Cornelia Thomsen, 1:1 detail from »Stripes Nr. 17«

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