

## Fantastic Impermanence

The career of Ivor Davies spans over six decades and is not marked by a single defining style but by his immersive engagement with both materials and with time. As his one-man show at the Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales was about to open, **Ric Bower** spoke to him in his studio. Portrait: **Gastón van Mülders**.

Sometimes time can assume a physical presence and, as I walked up the wooden stairs into the Penarth studio of Ivor Davies, that presence hung heavily around me. The layering of the decades and the residue from the accumulation of years were strung from every hook and laid out carefully on every shelf. Time has never been passive for Davies; it is the medium into which he mixes the materials of his practice. For Davies' career as an artist spans the entirety of the nuclear age. It is an embodiment of Einstein's revelation that materially extended space and the fabric of time are so intimately connected. It also communicates the anxiety which accompanies that knowledge for the species that harbours it—a premonition of sudden and violent destruction.

In the late 1950s, Davies was painting richly-patinated colour field canvases in the University of Lausanne Switzerland. In the late 60s, he was performing his Anatomic Explosions, as part of the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) held in Africa Gardens, Covent Garden, alongside such esteemed practitioners as Ralph Ortiz, Otto Muehl, Gustav Metzger and Yoko Ono. Evidence from these, and the many other seasons in his career, he has kept carefully in his studio where he continues to fold them into his practice. His one-man-show, Silent Explosion at Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales, is the largest exhibition of its type the museum has ever undertaken. It was soon to open when I met up with him and I began by asking him if he had ever thrown work away.

**Ivor Davies:** Only once have I ever destroyed a picture, apart from destructive art (assemblages which I've destroyed systematically with explosives, which is a different thing of course), and I've regretted it ever since. It was a very simple picture on hessian and it had several pieces of coat-hanger wire poking through it.

**Ric Bower:** Don't you worry about someone going into the attic one day and pulling out piles of work that were never intended to be shown?

**ID:** Not really, I keep work for years. I might bring something out that I started decades ago, work on it for a while and, then, put it away again.

**RB:** Do you feel that after such a long career you can stand aside from the vagaries of art world fashions?

**ID:** No one can. All you can do is dream of standing aside from them, and I do a lot of that! When as an artist you look at a work, first you look at it as an object, then you enquire into its history, where it has come from, what is its provenance, so to speak? And then you move onto thinking about what you, as an artist, can take from it. You can't escape from doing that.

I've said to people that the best place for an artist to be would be on a desert island where no one is looking over your shoulder. Perhaps you might take no other works of art with you, except for those that have been

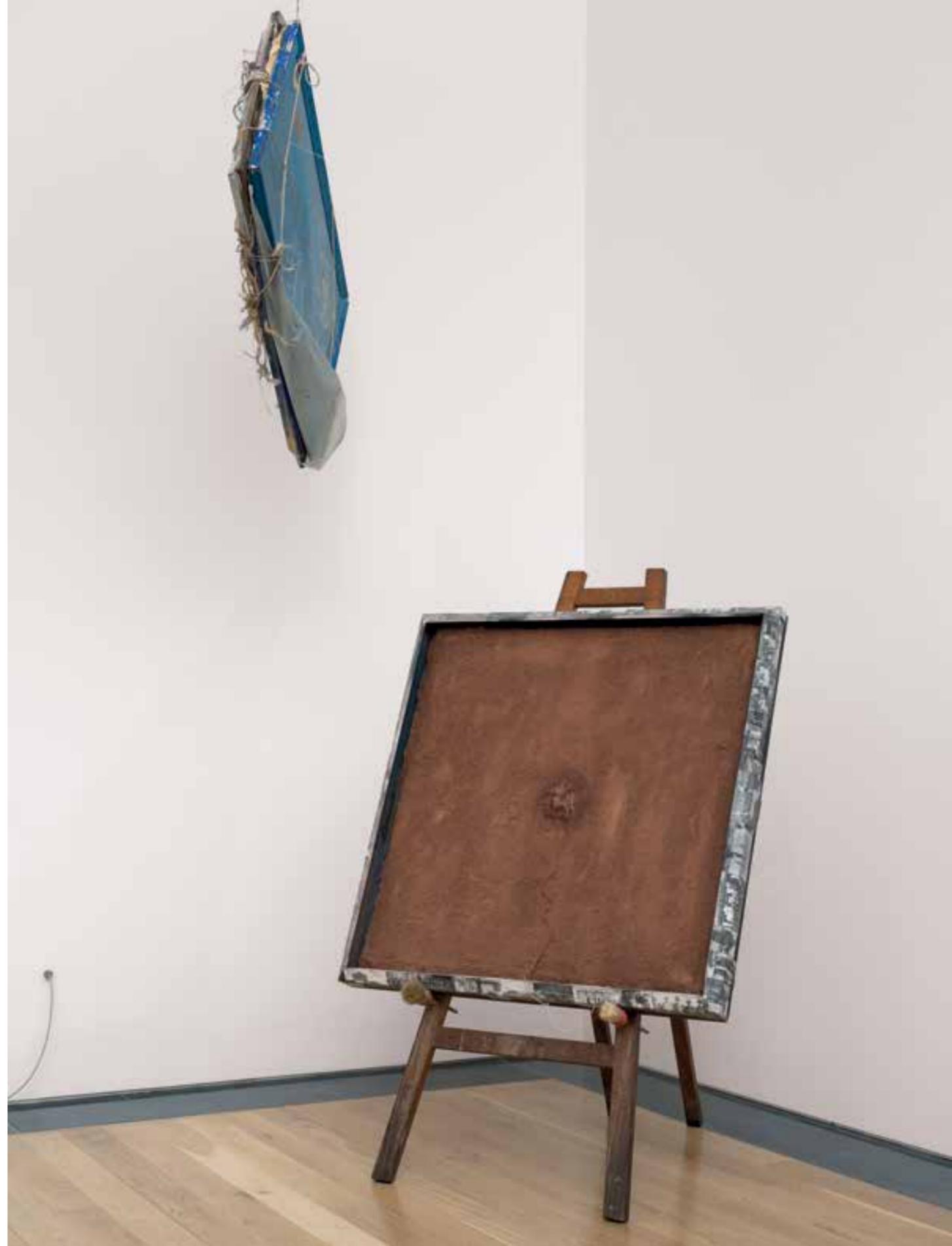
ingrained in your memory. Only then are you free from constraint. My studio is a kind of desert island, I think.

**RB:** Over the course of your career you've embarked on journeys through such rich cultural environments as Russia and China. You've gone a long way from that desert island you speak of, in other words. Your practice shows a complexity of ideas and materials that doesn't chime with a search for pure isolation.

**ID:** If you call yourself an artist – and there's something wrong with the title, but we're stuck with it – you can't really be separate, pure or isolated, because you have to believe that the context of art and artists exist.

**RB:** Much of your own creative process is completely out of your control; a painting would degrade and rot in a damp corner, whether you intervened or not. How do you define the limits of your practice?

**ID:** Those zones between reality and art are maybe the most interesting for me these days – colour for its own sake: for instance, the pure pigment, Prussian blue; I've got two pots of it, which I bought in the 1950s when I first found out about pigments and laboratory suppliers. I was leaving school and going to art college back then and, quite honestly, paints were so expensive, I thought I would make my own. I started to explore the possibilities and the chemistry, and then I started to find out what paint was, —>





in terms of its chemical makeup that is. I'd start mixing these pure pigments I had acquired with various media, whether that was oil or egg or gum Arabic – the gum from the Acacia tree. Prussian blue is one of the earliest synthetic colours; it's iron oxide, volcanic in origin, from Naples, I think. Not the sort of thing you should leave on a low shelf with kids about, it's pretty poisonous. It's got other names too: Berlin blue, Antwerp blue, Paris blue, Chinese blue.

**RB:** It's like alchemy, to a certain extent. There's a mystique that surrounds what is possible in the laboratory isn't there?

**ID:** Yes, but I wouldn't dare make many colours, except for red oxide, which is quite easy. You just heat yellow ochre. I remember, when I was about 14, going up to the mountain Gwaelod-y-Garth, near here, to climb. The earth there is yellowish and reddish in parts. I saw this hole in the hill no bigger than I could crawl through. I went in and found myself in this gigantic cathedral-like space with water dripping into a pool in the centre. There was this strange blueish light reaching through into the cavern from above and abundant clean yellow ochre on the cavern's floor; because the water had filtered it in some way, I guess. I took away some of the yellow ochre and heated it. It turned into a lovely reddish brown pigment.

**RB:** The potency of explosive powders is concealed; it is not immediately apparent to the eye, unlike your colour pigments. How did you come to interact with those kinds of materials?

**ID:** This jar of Prussian blue I am holding is so pure. If you were to buy a tube of Prussian blue, however, only a quarter of it contains actual pigment, the rest is fillers and oils. It's the same with explosive powders; that is why I mixed my own. The commonest is gunpowder: carbon, saltpetre and sulphur, tightly packed together; how tightly they are packed influences the violence of the explosion. I didn't pack them in metal because that would be too dangerous; I use very tight paper packing. It's not a good idea to use a metal spoon for mixing either, because that could spark.

The end result of the explosions I made were both aesthetic and, in a complicated sort of way, socio-political, just as colour or a painting is. Within an object or assemblage, which is charged with explosives and then detonated – systematically, carefully and at precisely defined moments – a language like music develops. It comments on the nature of the society we live in; a society that imposes its ideas on us. There are aesthetic implications from the results of an explosive work too – a beautiful ugliness emerges. —>



p33: *Epynt*, (installation view), Ivor Davies, 2015. National Museum Wales.

p34: *Portrait of Ivor Davies*, photo: Gáston van Mülders for CCQ.

p35: *Ivor Davies' Studio*, collaborative image with Ivor Davies, technical facilitation: Gáston van Mülders for CCQ.

p36, top row, left: *Terrestrial Nocturnal*, Ivor Davies, 1959, oil on paper on oil gesso on hessian, 91x92cm.

p36, top row, right: *Sicily*, Ivor Davies, 1959, oil on oil gesso on hessian and board, 102cm x102cm

p36, middle row, left: *Teimlad Coch (Red Feeling)*, Ivor Davies, 1959-1961, oil on oil gesso and board, 101cm x101cm

p36, middle row, right: *Contents of the Sea*, Ivor Davies, 1959, oil on oil gesso on hessian and board, 103cm x103cm

p36, bottom row, left: *Cosmic*, Ivor Davies, 1959, oil on oil gesso on hessian and board, 105.5cm x105.5cm

p36, bottom row, right: *Beach*, Ivor Davies, 1959-61, oil on oil gesso on hessian and board, 92cm x92cm

All installation photography: Gáston van Mülders for CCQ, images courtesy the artist and National Museum Wales.

**RB:** Is time is an important component in your practice then? Things are placed in your studio and then left for long periods, or you destroy them in an instant with explosives.

**ID:** There are many ways that time is related to painting, or indeed to any art object. If you go to an exhibition of 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian painting, how long do you have to stand in front of the same picture before it reveals itself to you? Sometimes I spend four days looking at the same exhibition. Each day it seems different. Maybe I'm a slow absorber of things?

In my own work I start quite arbitrarily, then I put it aside when I can't do any more to it for days, weeks, months or even years. Some things I started in the '60s, continued in the '70s and finished in the '80s. The idea of finishing work is an illusion anyway.

**RB:** A lot of what you do though is held within the bounds of a traditional rectangular support. Why is that?

**ID:** It's embarrassing in a way, because it limits the work before it starts.

**RB:** Maybe that is just the embarrassment of being human, of being finite. We are limited by nature and that, in a way, gives us something to fight against. Like paper packing an explosive charge, perhaps the rectangular support supplies the necessary containment for the potential power of the work to push out against.

**ID:** That's true. In a sense, when I use explosives in a work I am escaping from the restrictions of permanence. I spent a long time studying how to make things permanent and, then, there I was with an explosion which is fantastically impermanent – the very opposite of the study of fine art painting techniques. It's also extending the work into a fifth dimension. You experience something in three dimensions of space and, then, four dimensions when you take into account movement; but, you also have a fifth dimension, and that is time. The implications of an exploding artwork are more geopolitical than archaeological, though. The straight lines you see drawn around countries, or even any subject that is taught in school, didn't arrive there organically. It is political in its connection with the terrible destructiveness of the world around us too.

**RB:** Your show *Silent Explosion* is composed primarily of memories and fragments; representations of things that once were, it seems. Is the explosion a silent one because it no longer exists?

**ID:** All works are self-destructive eventually; mine are no different in that sense. I wanted things to explode in a musical sort of way, to take control of the periods of time between the explosions, to control more than just the visuals of the performance.

A long time ago, in 1940 I think, there was a huge area of mid South Wales, north of Sennybridge, that was commandeered for military exercises by the War Office. 219 people from the village of Mynydd Epynt had to clear out of their homes, at very short notice, so that the army could come in and practice there. There are two types of earth around that area. One of them is red, the reddest soil in Wales (I just put it straight onto the canvas in my work *Epynt*), and the other is a deep black loamy soil, into which bombs and bullets would sink, so they wouldn't bounce up and kill the soldiers, I guess. There are still a few tanks rusting away up there now, but the people will never go back to their homes, even though they had been there for hundreds of years. This is all deeply political to me.

**RB:** How do you feel about your work being reproduced and the processes of translation that it necessitates?

**ID:** It's a very interesting question. When you're looking into this pot of genuine indigo powder, it has something that you cannot reproduce, I don't know what it is. Even if I were to use it to paint with, it wouldn't be as good as how it looks in the pot. It's just like how we use words. The words we have at our disposal don't really describe feelings. They're just words—**CCQ**

*Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art runs at Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales, Cardiff until 20 March 2016* [museumwales.ac.uk/Cardiff](http://museumwales.ac.uk/Cardiff)  
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