



In a New York solo, diaspora artist Kenny Nguyen makes colour his language

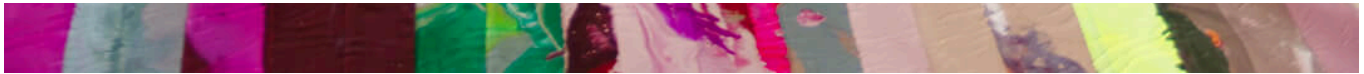
Nguyen's solo exhibition at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, *Mother Tongue*, explores culture and memory through sculptural paintings.

by [Srishti Qjha](#) | Published on : May 29, 2025

[Mixed-media artist](#) Kenny Nguyen's vocabulary of colour is inextricable from his Vietnamese-American cultural identity. What viewers might identify as a soft, warm yellow is 'màu lúa chín', or the colour of ripened rice fields during the harvest season, while magenta is the colour of *xôi*, a Vietnamese sticky rice dish, steeped with coloured leaves. Each pigment in Nguyen's [palette](#) is chosen carefully to evoke elements of his life and childhood living on a coconut farm near the Mekong Delta of Southern Vietnam. The colours are banded across dyed strips of silk, which are layered, attached and sanded into the undulating forms of Nguyen's [sculptural paintings](#). His [solo exhibition](#) at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in [New York](#), titled *Mother Tongue*, explores language, connection and culture through colours—the cultural symbols they represent and the emotions they evoke.

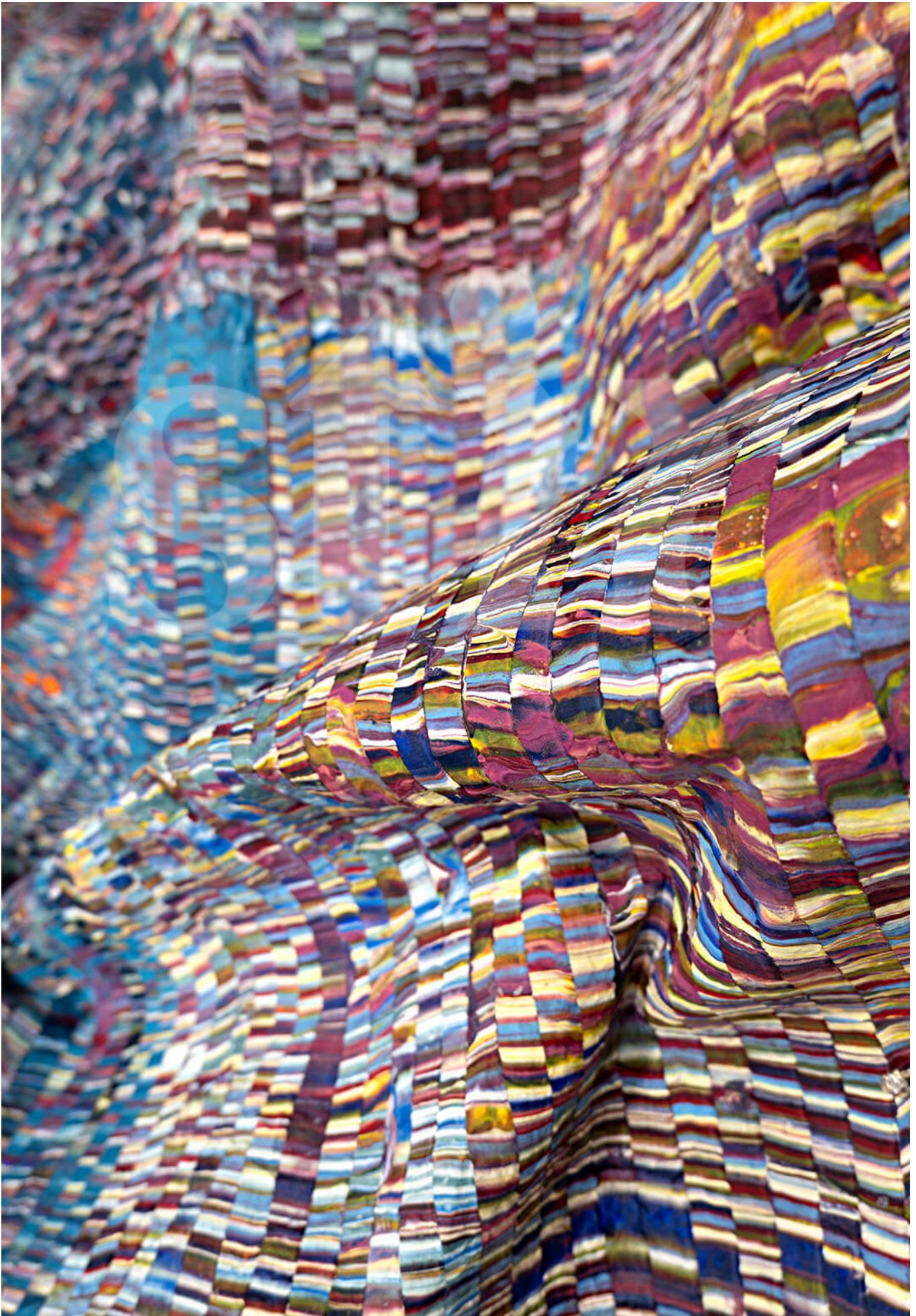
Nguyen's journey as an artist can be traced through his use of silk, which is significant to Vietnam's history as a waypoint on the Silk Road. As an aspiring [fashion designer](#) in [Ho Chi Minh City](#), he began experimenting with silk, using the [fabric](#) and its connotations of luxury and elegance to create draped garments. After a sudden move to the [United States](#) at 20 with his family, he turned to [visual art](#) for its ability to transcend the language barrier he struggled with. Initially, he used traditional Vietnamese techniques to create monochromatic works on silk canvases.

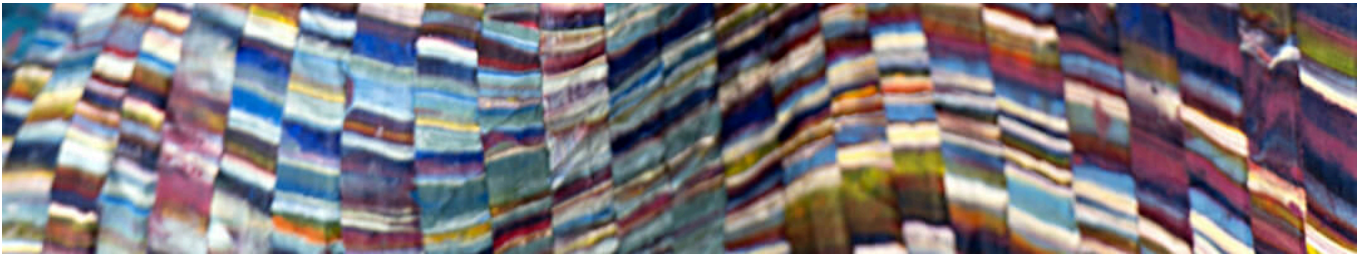




Kenny Nguyen in his studio in Charlotte, North Carolina Image: Courtesy of Kenny Nguyen and Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Each of Nguyen's three-dimensional artworks is made of thousands of silk strips, overlapped, woven and sewn together. Nguyen dips these strips in acrylic paint, dying and adhering them onto raw canvas. The expansive flat canvases are shaped with pushpins to keep their folds and curves in place. This repetitive process is meditative for Nguyen, who is quoted as saying in the exhibition note, "Silk may appear delicate, but it's the strongest natural fibre on earth, so it reflects resilience."





Detail view of *The Thread Between Us No. 2*, hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, 2024, Kenny Nguyen Image: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Although many of Nguyen's themes and motifs are inspired by pastoral scenes from his childhood memories, the resulting works are abstract with a modern, technological look as the squares of contrasting colours seem to form pixels. "For me, silk has become the connector tying both cultures together," Nguyen said to Sundaram Tagore Gallery. *Mother Tongue* features works from Nguyen's recent series, exploring identity, culture, memory, loss and adaptation through the careful juxtaposition of colours.



Nguyen often uses hundreds of colours for a single artwork Image: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery

In Vietnamese, colours are central to culture, philosophy, poetry and literature. Nguyen says in a video released by the gallery, "I have to ignore that I know English...I have to ignore what I learned and try to remember what it would be like if I speak of these colours in Vietnamese." For example, while there are no words to distinguish between green and blue, there is a colour named 'khói lam chi'ầu' which translates to "evening smoke blue"—the colour of cooking smoke from village homes against a darkening sky.



Encounter Series No. 51, hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, 2025, Kenny Nguyen Image: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Encounter, a series featured in the [exhibition](#), was inspired by a recent visit to [Vietnam](#), his first since immigrating to the United States. Complementary hues flow into each other on the rippled canvas, suggesting overlaps between the familiar and the alien, or the past and the present. Another series, *Eruption*, meanwhile, is a different take on the same trip, less concerned with harmony, using bold, contrasting colours to create works that are rhythmic and pulsing. *Mother Tongue* will also debut works from a new series titled *White Noise*, which marks the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. With its muted, limited colour palette and jagged shapes, *White Noise* is inspired by the black and white photos and [documentary films](#) of the Vietnam War that Nguyen grew up seeing.



White Noise, hand-cut silk fabric, acrylic paint, canvas, 2025, Kenny Nguyen Image: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery

In exhibiting works from different periods in Nguyen's career, *Mother Tongue* allows viewers to see his evolution as a bicultural artist. "In a way, the [paintings](#) reveal who I am," Nguyen said of his work in a previous exhibition at the [Singapore](#) outpost of the [gallery](#). "The way I construct them reflects what's in my mind and how I want to present myself on the canvas. As I change the way I look at myself, the work also changes."

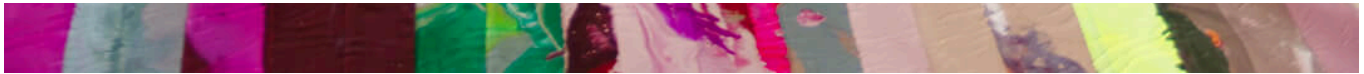
'*Mother Tongue*' is on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York from May 1 - June 7, 2025.

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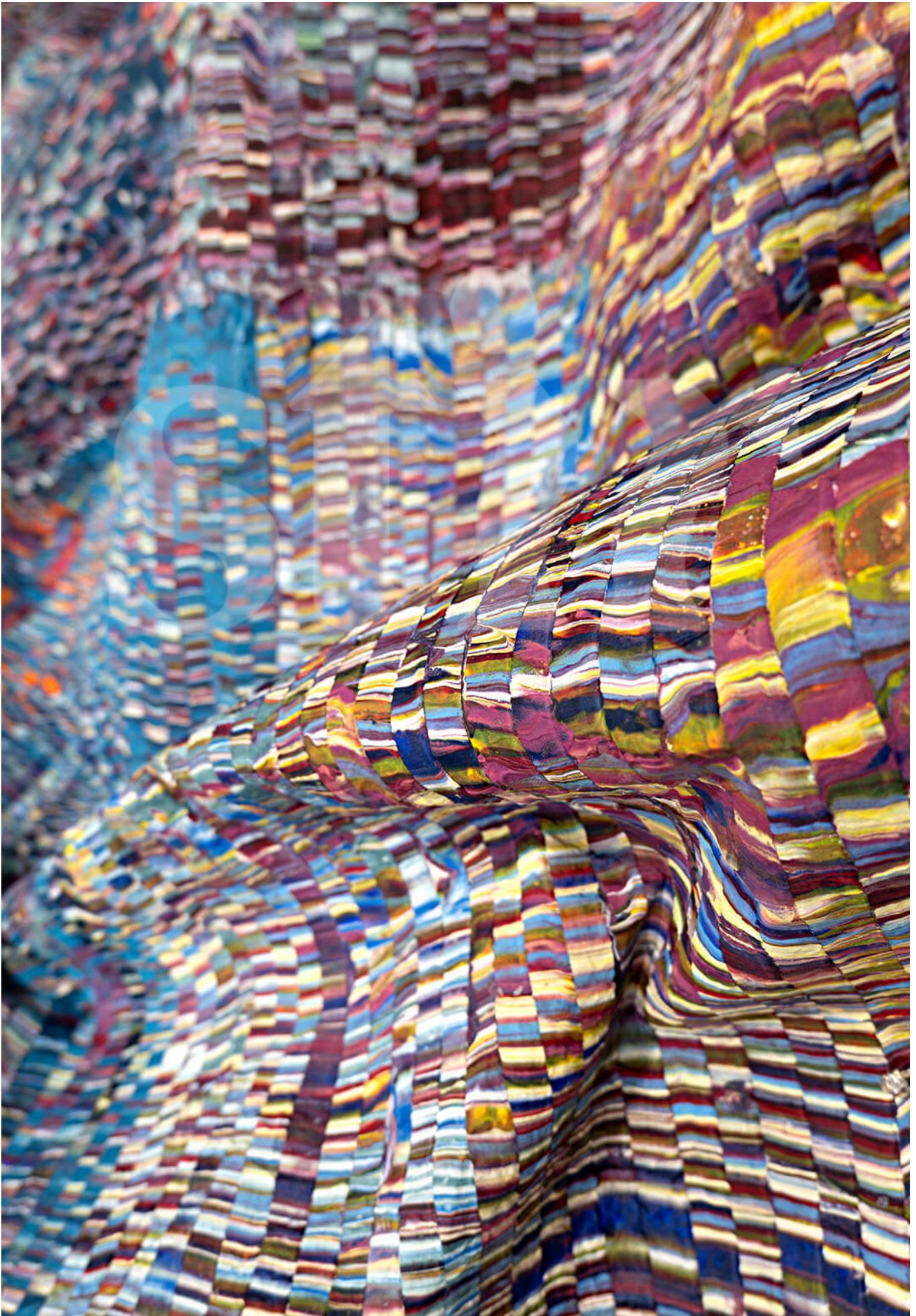
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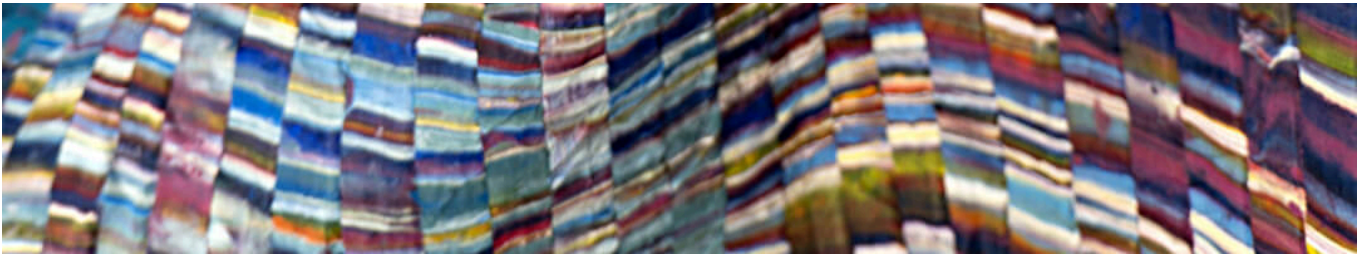




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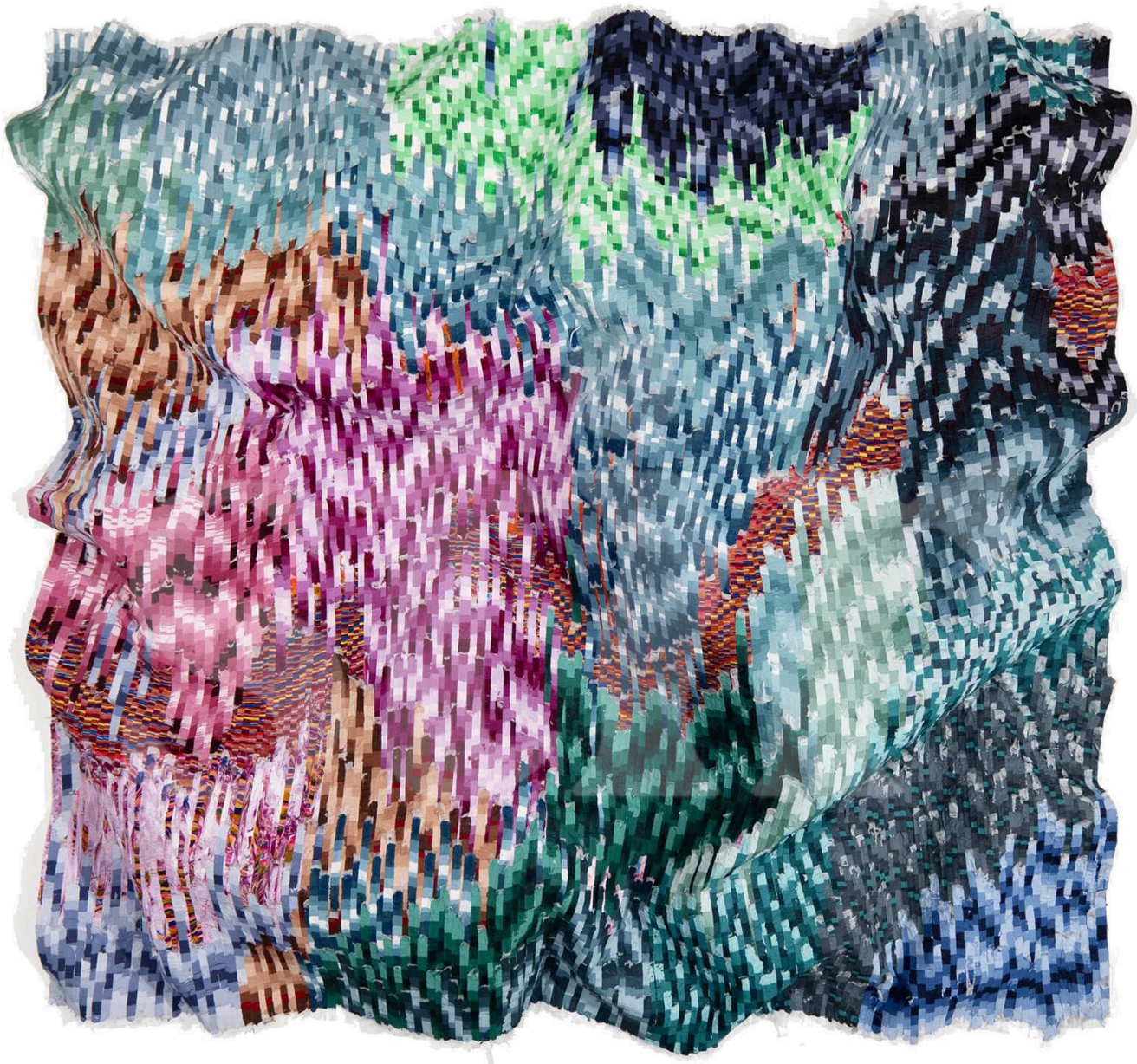
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