

Noah Davis

January 16–February 22, 2020
525 & 533 West 19th Street, New York

Press preview:
Thursday, January 16, 5 PM

Opening reception:
Thursday, January 16, 6–8 PM



Noah Davis, *Untitled*, 2015. © The Estate of Noah Davis.
Courtesy The Estate of Noah Davis

David Zwirner is pleased to present work by American artist Noah Davis (1983–2015), organized by Helen Molesworth. On view at the gallery's 525 & 533 West 19th Street locations in New York, the exhibition will provide an overview of Davis's brief but expansive career.

Davis's body of work encompasses, on the one hand, his lush, sensual, figurative paintings and, on the other, an ambitious institutional project called The Underground Museum, a black-owned-and-operated art space dedicated to the exhibition of museum-quality art in a culturally underserved African American and Latinx neighborhood in Los Angeles. The works on view will highlight both parts of Davis's oeuvre, featuring more than twenty of his most enduring paintings, as well as models of previous exhibitions curated by Davis at The Underground Museum. The exhibition also includes a "back room," modeled on the working offices at The Underground Museum, featuring more paintings by Davis, as well as *BLKNWS* by Davis's brother Kahlil Joseph; a sculpture by Karon Davis, the artist's widow; and Shelby George furniture, designed by Davis's mother Faith Childs-Davis.

Helen Molesworth notes:

Noah Davis (b. Seattle, 1983; d. Ojai, California, 2015) was a figurative painter and cofounder of The Underground Museum (UM) in Los Angeles. Despite his untimely death at the age of thirty-two, Davis's paintings are a crucial part of the rise of figurative and representational painting in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Loneliness and tenderness suffuse his rigorously composed paintings, as do traces of his abiding interest in artists such as Marlene Dumas, Kerry James Marshall, Fairfield Porter, and Luc Tuymans. Davis's pictures can be slightly deceptive; they are modest in scale yet emotionally ambitious. Using a notably dry paint application and a moody palette of blues, purples, and greens, his work falls into two loose categories: There are scenes from everyday life, such as a portrait of his young son, a soldier returning from war, or a housing project designed by famed modernist architect Paul Williams. And there are paintings that traffic in magical realism, surreal images that depict the world both seen and unseen, where the presence of ancestors, ghosts, and fantasy are everywhere apparent.

Generous, curious, and energetic, Davis founded, along with his wife, the sculptor Karon Davis, The Underground Museum, an artist- and family-run space for art and culture in Los Angeles. The UM began modestly—Noah and Karon worked to join three storefronts in the city’s Arlington Heights neighborhood. Davis’s dream was to exhibit “museum-quality” art in a working-class black and Latino neighborhood. In the early days of The UM, Davis was unable to secure museum loans, so he organized exhibitions of his work alongside that of his friends and family, and word of mouth spread about Davis’s unique curatorial gestures.

In 2014 Davis began organizing exhibitions using works selected from The Museum of Contemporary Art’s collection as his starting point. In the aftermath of Davis’s passing, the team of family and friends he gathered continued his work at The UM, transforming it into one of the liveliest and most important gathering places in Los Angeles for artists, filmmakers, musicians, writers, and activists.

A select portion of the exhibition will travel to The Underground Museum, where it will be on view beginning in March, 2020. On the occasion of the exhibition, a new monograph, featuring an introduction by Molesworth and oral history interviews that she conducted with Davis’s friends, family, and colleagues, is forthcoming from David Zwirner Books and The Underground Museum.

Born in Seattle, Washington, Noah Davis (1983–2015) studied painting at The Cooper Union School of Art in New York before moving to Los Angeles, where, in 2012, he founded The Underground Museum in the city’s Arlington Heights neighborhood with his wife and fellow artist, Karon Davis.

Davis’s work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California (2008, 2010, and 2013); Tilton Gallery, New York (2009 and 2011); PAPHILLION, Los Angeles (2014); and the Rebuild Foundation, Chicago (2016), among others. *Noah Davis: Imitation of Wealth* opened at The Underground Museum on the same day as the artist’s untimely death at age 32, due to complications from a rare cancer, in 2015. In 2016, Frye Art Museum, Seattle, presented the two-person exhibition *Young Blood: Noah Davis, Kahlil Joseph, The Underground Museum*—the first large-scale museum show to explore Davis’s work alongside that of his brother.

The artist was featured in the landmark exhibition *30 Americans*, which was organized by the Rubell Family Collection, Miami, and traveled extensively throughout the United States from 2008 to the present (the exhibition is currently on view at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia through January 12, 2020, and subsequently travels to the Honolulu Museum of Art, the Albuquerque Museum, and the Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina in 2020–2021). Davis’s work has been included in other notable group exhibitions, including ones held at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California (2010); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2012 and 2015); Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2017); and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), North Adams (2018).

Davis was the recipient of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s 2013 Art Here and Now (AHAN): Studio Forum award. Works by the artist are included in the permanent collections of numerous institutions, including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; San Francisco Museum of Art; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Helen Molesworth is a Los Angeles-based writer and curator. While chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles from 2014 to 2018, she forged a partnership with The Underground Museum and organized the exhibitions *Kahlil Joseph: Double Consciousness* and *Noah Davis: Imitation of Wealth*. She is currently curator-in-residence at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado.

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