

Noah Davis *Ancient Reign*

Curated by Karon Davis

November 13, 2024–January 25, 2025
34 East 69th Street, New York



Noah Davis, *Untitled*, 2014 © The Estate of Noah Davis. Courtesy The Estate of Noah Davis and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present a selection of works on paper by American artist Noah Davis at the gallery's East 69th Street location in New York, the first exhibition to focus on this significant and generative area of the artist's practice. Curated by Davis's widow, the artist Karon Davis, this intimate grouping of works will provide insight into the wide-ranging interests, influences, and ideas that equally informed his paintings and curatorial activities. The exhibition's title, *Ancient Reign*, plays on that of the anthology *The Ancient Rain* by Beat poet Bob Kaufman, an important figure for both Davises. The exhibition coincides with the largest retrospective of Davis's work to date, which is on view through January 5, 2025, at DAS MINSK, Potsdam, Germany, and will subsequently travel to the Barbican, London, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Davis's work will also be on view in the group show *Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now*, which opens November 17 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A voracious consumer of images and information, Davis preferred collage as a method of working on paper. He was constantly tearing pages from books and magazines, combining these found images and others in formally inventive ways as an outlet for his ever-evolving visual interests. Often done on scrap paper or even discarded envelopes or cardboard, Davis's collages are undergirded by vibrant passages of color, texture, and pattern—essentially abstract compositions in their own right—that are sometimes embellished with playful line drawings. Davis frequently utilized these small-scale compositions to inform the content and construction of his paintings; but, more than a testing ground for his ideas, they formed an important and deeply personal practice, produced consistently throughout his career and in parallel to his canvases. While these works may appear improvisatory, every juxtaposition is deliberate, allowing for a wide range of readings. As curator Franklin Sirmans describes, "Davis's work is characterized by its sense of possibility.... [They] are open to interpretation, depending on what history or baggage we bring to our encounter."¹

¹ Franklin Sirmans, "Once in a Lifetime: Noah Davis," in Helen Molesworth, ed., *Noah Davis: In Detail*, exh. cat. (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2023), p. 56.

Among the works on view will be several collages that reference Egyptian mythology and iconography—an enduring interest for the artist, as well as for Karon. As in his 2010 group of paintings loosely inspired by the myth of Isis and Osiris, these works blend modern-day imagery with references to Egyptian sculpture and architecture. Other works play with the idea of referentiality, creating a lively tension between abstract and figurative registers where nothing is quite what it seems. Also included are excerpts from a rarely seen artist's book outlining Davis's ideas for the Purple Garden at the Underground Museum, the experimental Los Angeles exhibition space that he and Karon founded together. Both fanciful and instructive, these compositions underscore Davis's holistic approach to visual culture, and the clarity of his vision.

The presentation will be complemented by a small selection of paintings that further elucidate the back-and-forth between media inherent to Davis's body of work.

American artist Noah Davis (1983–2015) created a distinctive body of paintings that effortlessly synthesizes a wide range of reference points, pivoting between scenes of everyday life and surreal derivations thereof. As curator Helen Molesworth describes, “[Davis’s] paintings are both figurative and abstract, realistic and dreamlike; they are about blackness and the history of Western painting, drawn from photographs and from life; they are exuberant and doleful in their palette, influenced by European painters Marlene Dumas and Luc Tuymans, as well as American ones such as Mark Rothko and Fairfield Porter. They tend toward the ravishing. A master of sophisticated compositions, he had a knack for establishing three-dimensional space while remaining highly attuned to the flatness of the canvas.”²

Born in Seattle, Davis 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); PAPILLION, Los Angeles (2014); and the Rebuild Foundation, Chicago (2016), among others. *Noah Davis: Imitation of Wealth* opened at The Underground Museum on the day of the artist's untimely death at age thirty-two, due to complications from a rare cancer. In 2016, the 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's. In 2020, an acclaimed solo presentation of Davis's work went on view at David Zwirner, New York, later traveling to The Underground Museum, Los Angeles, in 2022.

In 2022, a selection of the artist's work was presented at the 59th Venice Biennale. The artist's work 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 2022. Davis's work has been included in other notable group exhibitions, including ones held at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California (2010 and 2020); 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 is currently featured in *The Time Is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black*

² Helen Molesworth, “Noah Davis, An Introduction,” in Molesworth, ed., *Noah Davis*, exh. cat. (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2020), p. 7.

Figure, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through February 9, 2025. The exhibition was previously on view at the National Portrait Gallery, London and The Box, Plymouth, England; it will travel to the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, later in 2025.

In 2021, David Zwirner, London, presented a solo exhibition of the artist's work, providing an overview of Davis's brief but expansive career. A monograph, *Noah Davis: In Detail*, from David Zwirner Books, was published on the occasion of the exhibition, featuring a new essay by curator Franklin Sirmans; a roundtable discussion with curator Thomas Lax, artists Glenn Ligon and Julie Mehretu, and poet and scholar Fred Moten, moderated by Helen Molesworth; and an extensive new chronology by Lindsay Charlwood.

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; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; Rubell Museum, Miami; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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