

'Noah Davis' at the Barbican, London

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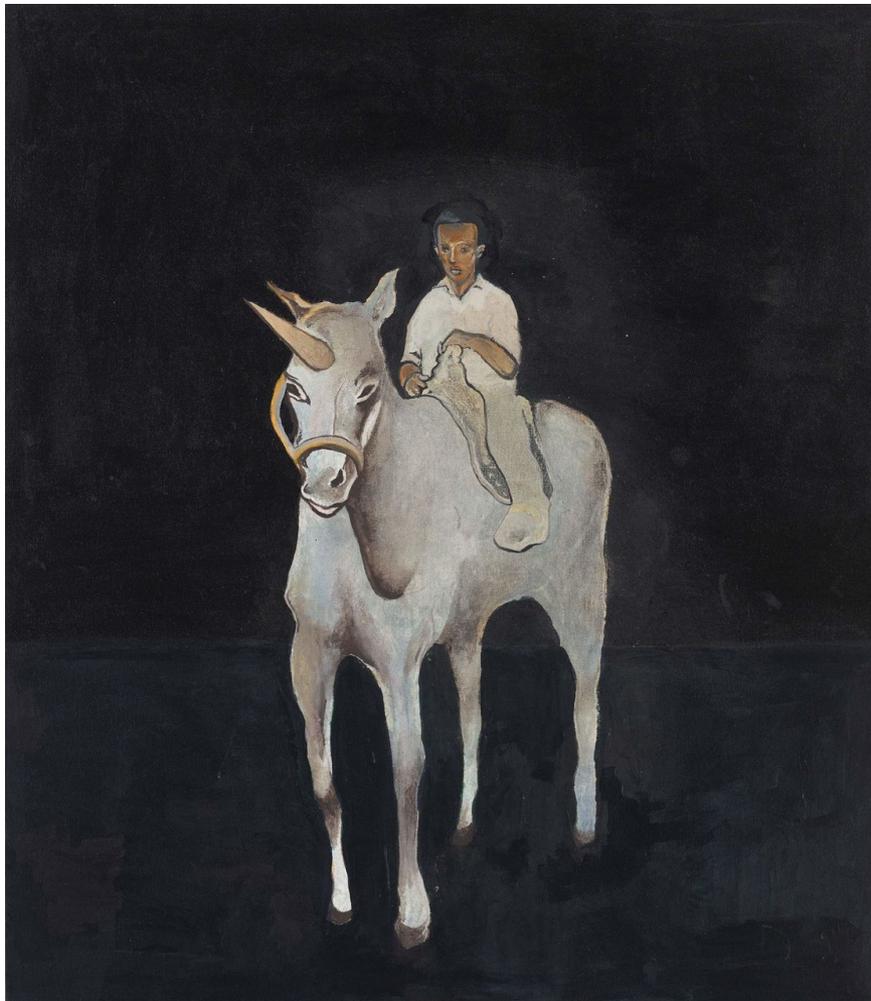
'Noah Davis', Barbican Art Gallery, London, 6 February – 11 May 2025

Early deaths undoubtedly change the perception of an artist. The 27 club, all people who burned bright, dazzling all, fizzling out in a drug-induced death in their twenty-seventh year includes Jean-Michel Basquiat, Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix and the blues singer, Robert Johnson. It is possible, if they had lived longer, that they might have gone on to produce terrible work and would not have gained any posthumous fame keeping them alive in the minds of the public. This is a thought that is uppermost in my mind as I visit the exhibition I am writing about. To what extent are the crowds coming (I was told that tickets sold out in no time) due to the fact that Noah Davis died young and beautiful – of a terminal illness? Or was it due to the several positive reviews written on the show? Adrian Searle in *The Guardian* points out: 'It is impossible to look at Davis's work without the intrusion of his early death. Inevitably, it gives this exhibition a sense of poignancy.'¹ Showcasing a remarkable collection of over fifty oil, acrylic and gouache paintings, sculptures and works on paper, all created before his untimely passing in 2015 at the tender age of thirty-two, this inaugural major retrospective of Noah Davis's artistry is now at London's Barbican centre – a decade after his death – in the main gallery. Renowned for his unique painting style, Davis was an extraordinary artist with a keen eye for the unusual and an expansive grasp of art history, melding these talents to craft compelling works often marked by a thrilling weirdness. The exhibition opens with a segment titled 'Domestic Spirits', emphasising the uncanny aspects of Davis's creations. One stellar highlight is *The Conductor* (2014), featuring a levitating figure before a storefront, adorned with various shades of blue that evoke a captivating sensation.

Noah Davis's creative path is distinguished by a singular fusion of mundane scenarios and surreal components. His early works, such as *Single Mother With Father Out of the Picture* (2007–08) and *Bad Boy for Life* (2007), present seemingly typical moments infused with subtle, fantastical

¹ See Adrian Searle, 'Noah Davis review: thrilling strangeness from a painter brimming with ideas and adventure', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2025, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/feb/06/noah-davis-thrilling-strangeness-barbican

touches that evoke a feeling of timelessness. His artistic voyage commenced with works like *40 Acres and a Unicorn* (2007), which subtly addressed the historical injustices surrounding the unfulfilled promises of land ownership for freed African Americans. However, his focus shifted upon discovering portrait photographs at flea markets celebrating daily Black existence. According to Marlene Dumas, Davis's technique, with its dribbled painting style and blurred figures, produced suggestive imagery that infused ordinary life with an enchanting quality – transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.² By utilising soft lighting and focus reminiscent of romantic cinema, he blurred harsh realities and emphasised a dreamlike aesthetic in his paintings, which are characterised by a timeless quality devoid of specific geographical references. Instead of relying on fashion or architecture for context, these elements function as emotional triggers, evoking both mystery and familiarity while crafting inviting, reassuring spaces that resonate on an emotional spectrum.



Noah Davis, *40 Acres and a Unicorn*, 2007, acrylic and gouache on canvas, 76 x 66 cm, courtesy of David Zwirner and the Estate of Noah Davis

² See Nancy Durrant, 'Noah Davis review – an enchanting tour of a tragically short career', 5 February 2025, www.thetimes.com/culture/art/article/noah-davis-review-barbican-nzzzvvgk7

Isis (2009) encapsulates Davis's signature style with its moody atmosphere, slightly obscured composition and restrained colour palette. The painting contains an emotionally charged self-portrait of Davis as a smudged reflection in a window, symbolising his identity as Osiris, the Egyptian god of death, while his wife Karon represents Isis, the healing goddess. This piece takes on a poignant, prophetic significance in light of Davis's cancer diagnosis in 2013. From the same era, *The Architect* (2009) reinforces the Egyptian allegory, illustrating a Black man donned in a suit, examining a model next to a pyramid alongside a modernist building's crisp lines. The figure is modelled after Paul Revere Williams, a respected Black architect known for his designs of many landmark buildings in southern California and whom Davis admired. Portions of white splashes obscure the figure, referencing Williams's unconventional practice of drawing upside-down to reassure white clients who might have been uncomfortable about sitting next to him. The incorporation of collages invoking Egyptian myth and iconography reflected a subject matter that intrigued both Davis and Karon, who had delved into ancient myths and history shortly after they met. As she recounted: 'We exchanged stories, dreams, and techniques for creating art.'³



Noah Davis, *Isis*, 2009, oil and acrylic on linen, 122 x 122 cm, courtesy of David Zwirner and the Estate of Noah Davis

³ See Elisa Carollo, 'Karon Davis On Noah Davis' Legacy and How Their Relationship Continues Through Art', *The Observer*, 25 February 2025, <https://observer.com/2025/02/interview-karon-davis-noah-davis-artist>

Painting for My Dad (2011), conceived after his father's death, denotes a figure standing on a rocky precipice, gazing into seemingly infinite darkness, poised at the brink of another reality. After inheriting funds following the loss of his father, Davis channelled this into establishing an art centre, the Underground Museum in Los Angeles. His exhibition 'Imitation of Wealth' in 2013 marked the centre's first display, a response to institutions' reluctance to lend him art. He demonstrated his profound knowledge of art history alongside an 'ode to the bootleg', engaging in activities reminiscent of Elaine Sturtevant's revolutionary practice. Sturtevant, an American artist born in 1924, ingeniously began replicating her contemporaries' works in 1964, using canonical artworks to spearhead discussions about originality, authorship, and the frameworks of visual culture.⁴



Noah Davis, *Painting for My Dad*, 2022, oil on canvas, 193 x 231 cm, courtesy of David Zwirner and the Estate of Noah Davis

In one section at the Barbican, a vacuum cleaner pays homage to Jeff Koons's *New Hoover Deluxe Rug Shampooer* from 1979, a mound of dirt refers to Robert Smithson's earthworks, and fluorescent lights echo the work of Dan Flavin's proposals. This exhibition could be understood as Davis's challenge against the assumptions inherent in contemporary art museums, filtering his critique through the juxtaposition of notable works, while also busting the myths encapsulating art creation.

Davis's artistic journey showcases a rich series of works that highlight his evolving style and thematic preoccupations. The *Savage Wilds* series, from 2012, although conceptually formidable,

⁴ See 'Sturtevant: Double Trouble', on the MoMA, New York, website: www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1454

critiques the clichéd representations of Black individuals in American talk shows through splashy freeze-framed moments – despite being visually less engaging than his other pieces.

As his style matured, the vibrant magical realism characteristic of his earlier work transformed into an ethereal dreamscape. The *Missing Link* series (2013) epitomises this evolution, featuring anachronistic elements and melding art historical references with modern scenarios. His technique of diffusing images evokes a nostalgic ambiance reminiscent of vintage film memories. A striking piece, *The Missing Link 1* (2013), shows a group of children playing outdoors. There is a boy in the foreground, arms outstretched, looking at the viewer, who seems to be levitating. Another compelling painting depicts an ostensibly ordinary man holding a briefcase, captured in a poignant moment of urban solitude. Surrounding him are walls painted in shades of mauve, russet and smoke. The theme of death forces itself through the canvas.

At the apex of his career, the *1975* series, from 2013, was inspired by his mother's high school photographs, celebrating lively snapshots of Black American existence across various social realms. Shortly thereafter, Davis was diagnosed with a rare cancer, yet he persevered in his artistic endeavours throughout his treatment.

The *Pueblo del Rio* series (2014) exemplifies Davis's phenomenal ability to transfigure a deteriorating neighbourhood into an idyllic setting filled with rhythm and dance. Designed by Paul Revere Williams, this neighbourhood was initially established as a public housing project for Black workers in the defence industry, but over time, unfortunately, it became crime-ridden. Davis reimagined it as a resplendent world, although he acknowledged the realistic elements that emphasised urban infrastructure. One work that left a mark on me is *Arabesque* (2014), with its



Noah Davis, *Pueblo del Rio: Arabesque*, 2014, oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm, courtesy of David Zwirner and the Estate of Noah Davis

depiction of six dancers poised gracefully against some dreary apartment façades. Davis elegantly intertwines ballet with the everyday environment of the Pueblo del Rio housing project in South Los Angeles, subverting standard stereotypes around race and class. The *Seventy Works* series, from 2014, produced while Davis was undergoing chemotherapy, comprises mixed-media explorations manifesting his persistent artistic drive despite his illness. The inclusion of these pieces, along with his deviation from portraiture, provokes intriguing speculation about the artistic directions his work might have followed had his life not been cut short.

As part of his art centre project, Davis planned a number of exhibitions. The only one that was realised was a screening of William Kentridge's *Journey to the Moon* (2003). This eight-minute film, which can be seen in the penultimate room of the exhibition, provides a glimpse into Kentridge's creative process, both physically and mentally. It examines the studio as a space of performance, with Kentridge himself playing the protagonist as he explores themes of vision and creativity. Everyday objects like espresso cups, saucers and a percolator appear in his journey, as Kentridge seeks to break free from the limitations of his studio and discover openings to a world that is both absurd and deeply meaningful. It might be that Davis was drawn to this as it serves as a metaphor for him in different ways: the studio as a place to experiment playfully; artmaking as a way to transcend the physical.

The final gallery has a film in which Davis is interviewed alongside images of him in action in the studio and other pictures showing him interacting with his wife and child. A mournful saxophone solo serves as the soundtrack, sensitively conveying feelings of introspection, sorrow and melancholy. Davis's final creations, crafted mere days before his death in August 2015, compellingly confront mortality through some striking imagery. These late paintings, trending from funeral scenes to solitary figures sifting through a storage space, illustrate his mastery of evocative expression and symbolise a powerful conclusion to his brief yet profound artistic journey.

Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is currently in the first year of a PhD at University College London (UCL) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.