

# An Interview with Kenturah Davis

Akin Oladimeji

Kenturah Davis is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her interdisciplinary practice encompasses drawings, textiles, sculpture and performances. Solo exhibitions have included her 2020 show at the Savannah College of Art and Design Museum (SCAD) and her work is in collections at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Walker Art Centre. Her commissions include 'Sonder' for the Los Angeles Metro, in which she made murals for the public transport system. Her engaging and electric exhibition at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, 'clouds' (31 May – 20 July 2024), her first solo show in the UK, was composed of three series. The first, inspired by the choreography of the pioneering African-Americans Katherine Dunham and pianist Florence B Price, is drawings of black women in different postures. The second consists of individual drawings of figures encased in recessed frames featuring vessels of different sizes and shapes. The vessels are made of either ash from Los Angeles or ebony from Ghana, where Davis has lived. The inspiration for the third series is Davis's photographs of clouds and it consists of twelve drawings. With the cloud serving as a symbolic source for choreography and composition, she explores its natural formation through the perspective of quantum physics, especially the theories of physicist Carlo Rovelli. In this email exchange, Davis discusses various aspects of her practice, as well as her exhibition at Stephen Friedman.

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**Akin Oladimeji:** Even though this is your first time showing by yourself in London, I notice quite a few critics highlighted your show as one of those worth visiting during London Gallery Weekend 2024. How does that feel?

**Kenturah Davis:** Yes, this was my first solo show in London. I am super happy with this body of work and the ways it expands my practice. It is always affirming to have people respond positively to the work.

**AO:** I notice you have been a lecturer. What are your thoughts on teaching? Something you benefit from in various ways, or a distraction from the 'real' work – your art practice?

**KD:** I find teaching to be really challenging and also rewarding. I teach at a liberal arts school (Occidental College in Los Angeles), so it is interesting to have students who have growing expertise on non-art disciplines. I have a fair amount of freedom in developing my courses, so I really try to create situations where I am learning together with my students. This helps blur the distinction between my work and teaching, so it is more of an expansion of my practice rather than a distraction from it.

**AO:** What was at stake with the public commission you undertook for the LA Metro system?<sup>1</sup>

**KD:** My work centred people who are connected to the community where the artwork lives, so it was important to create images that they could take pride in. Public art is tough because there is often a point where the original work leaves my hands and falls into the hands of fabricators who have to translate it onto a different material, so I have to give up some control over the final outcome. I think we still accomplished something that creates a compelling picture of the community of Inglewood.

**AO:** Following on from that, I know public art can be controversial, with reactions ranging from acclaim to derision. Do you have any idea about how your LA Metro work has been received?

**KD:** I think people were pleased to see everyday, relatable people represented in the drawings. Across the various public art installations across the transit lines, I think it is important to have a variety of different kinds of images, forms and materials. The selection committee included people of the community, which was the first indication that people would find value in the kind of images I make. Another step towards developing the artwork included community engagement events where I made photographs of the community, which were used ultimately to make the final images. I believe that my efforts to make dignified drawings were met with pride... but they were also probably equally relieved when the entire project was complete, since it took such a long time.

**AO:** Beauty seems to be a dirty word among your peers. Did you set out to create beautiful works, or did that happen by chance? The dance images remind me of contemporary dance, which I appreciate as it's a visual feast.

**KD:** Beauty is so subjective and shifts meaning in different contexts. I am not allergic to the description, but I don't set out to make beautiful work. Most of the drawings in the London show are images of dancers who I met via an amazing choreographer, Kyle Abraham. I think they are truly beautiful beings, but that wasn't the criteria for working with them at all. My hope is that these works are compelling because of the intersection of many parts: how my meaningful encounter with the dancers meets the handmade paper—meets the text—meets the pigment—meets the image—meets the wooden frames—meets the handmade vessels—meets the handpainted walls.

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Sonder' on the LA Metro website <https://art.metro.net/artworks/sonder/>



Kenturah Davis, 'volume II (marjani)', 2024, carbon pencil rubbing and debossed text on igarashi kozo paper with walnut and brass vessel in walnut frame, drawing size 75.57 x 75.57 cm, framing size 76.2 x 96.20 x 10.16 cm, courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles and New York, photo by Paul Salvesson

**AO:** The sterile white cube has become synonymous with contemporary art displayed in commercial galleries, making the objects in them reminiscent of holy conduits to divine knowledge, as Brian O'Doherty suggested.<sup>2</sup> I noticed the gallery walls were painted in various hues, none of which were white. Whose decision was that?

**KD:** I chose to have the walls painted with a limewash technique where pigment is hand-brushed to create a varied finish. The cloudy, hazy effect extends the blurry and ephemeral quality in the drawings across the gallery.

**AO:** Another question about decision-making: as someone who loves Saidiya Haartman's project in *Wayward Lives*,<sup>3</sup> I like how you bring to the surface Price's music. I have heard some of Price's beautiful music, but I wonder if there is any reason why the score was reproduced but the music wasn't played in the background in the gallery?

**KD:** I came to learn about Price's music via my study of the choreographer and anthropologist, Katherine Dunham. Many of her compositions resurfaced when they were discovered in an abandoned home, which is such an interesting thing to consider in the context of Hartman's work. The two scores that are shown in the drawings replicate Price's own

<sup>2</sup> See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000 [1976/1986]

<sup>3</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, Serpents Tail, London, 2021

handwriting. We discussed the possibility of having a small concert in the gallery before the show comes down that would feature a pianist playing Price's music. In any case, I think the presence of her scores in the drawings are at once an archive of this composer's work and also evokes sound because we recognise it as musical notation.

**AO:** There is a lot of text on display in the exhibition. Are you worried about visitors who are resistant to reading in a gallery space or those who feel the work should speak for itself?

**KD:** My choices in materials and techniques take into account the fact that we can't know everything or even see things in its entirety. Viewers encounter snippets of text that are integral to the moving figures and slip in and out of legibility. I do think the drawings reward slow and attentive looking for anyone who cares to try and read them, but I also think that its fine for the totality of the work to just wash over you. To some degree, the movement in the images affirms and demonstrates the ideas conveyed in the text. If someone never reads a single word, I think all the components of each work communicate about how we perceive and move through the world and how language is so fundamental to that process.<sup>4</sup>



Kenturah Davis, 'planar vessel XXVII (jada)', 2024, carbon pencil rubbing and debossed text on Igarashi kozo paper, 4 panels in walnut frame, drawing size 75.57 x 75.57 cm each, framed size: 156 x 156 x 7.62 cm, courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York, and Matthew Brown, Los Angeles and New York, photo by Paul Salvesson

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<sup>4</sup> There is a short video on YouTube where Kenturah Davis talks about using text and language in her work: see 'How Kenturah Davis created "AVA", a portrait of Ava DuVernay, acclaimed filmmaker' [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiyweRcr1D0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiyweRcr1D0)

**AO:** How do we decipher the hieroglyphics on one of the *Cloud* images? Does it matter if we can't decode it?

**KD:** One of the cloud drawings has an impression of the Rosetta Stone, which became a key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. It doesn't matter that you can't decode it, because, frankly, I can't either (although translations can be found online). It is symbolic of an era and culture that embraced the intersection of image/text and illuminated how we can make meaning through marks on a surface. This ancient technology of writing transformed the world.

**AO:** What future project are you most excited about?

**KD:** I'm really excited about developing my publishing imprint and design studio called Accordion Press. It will illuminate a facet of my practice that is really important to me. It will feature small, handmade editions of objects, books and works on paper that inform the direction of my unique works. I am also going to be teaching a new course called 'Sonic Materiality', with my colleague at Occidental College, that explores the intersection of sound and visual art.

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**Akin Oladimeji** is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is about to start a PhD funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at University College London.