

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

EXHIBITION TEXT

"I feel there is immense freedom in painting to create your own universe—if you don't let 'Art History' or pretense get in the way. I'm actually not a big science fiction guy at all, I'm more of a sappy romantic. These elements of fantasy may arise from my need to 'break the spell,' or the constraints of art theory, and move more into the realm of mysticism."¹ —Noah Davis

DAS MINSK presents the largest international institutional exhibition to date of the US-American artist Noah Davis (1983 Seattle–2015 Los Angeles). It is the first time that artworks by Noah Davis are being shown in Germany. The chronologically organized retrospective assembles approximately sixty works, including previously unexhibited paintings, works on paper, and sculptures from the eight years of his artistic activity—from his first exhibition in 2007 to his untimely death in 2015. Alongside iconic paintings from international collections and museums, sculptures will be presented from his legendary exhibition *Imitation of Wealth*, which was first shown in 2013 at the Underground Museum, Los Angeles, and two years later in the *storefront* space of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles.

"Race plays a role in as far as my figures are black. The paintings aren't political at all though. If I'm making any statement, it's to just show black people in normal scenarios, where drugs and guns are nothing to do with it. You rarely see black people represented independent of the civil rights issues or social problems that go on in the States."² —Noah Davis

Davis knew that he had a responsibility to represent the people who surrounded him. He created a series of paintings that focused on the lives of Black people. He elevated normality to the subject of art: his figures dive into swimming pools, they sleep, dance, play music, they read and look at artworks in environments that can be interpreted as both realistic and dreamlike, cheerful and melancholic. It was precisely there, in the everyday, that Davis found the human, existential, and universal. He often also transferred traditional subjects and magical elements to his immediate surroundings in Los Angeles, creating timeless scenes full of references that are at once site-specific and universal.

The exhibition underscores Davis's unique perspective and his comprehensive knowledge about the history of figurative painting—including German art from *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Magical Realism to the Leipzig School. At the same time, it shows how his motifs break from and interrogate the so-called canon by incorporating his immediate surroundings. To this end, he drew upon anonymous photographs that he found at flea markets, from personal archives to images from film and television, music, literature, and art history as well as his own imagination—and in this

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

way has created a fascinating body of work that is neither expressionistic nor surreal, neither romantic nor *neusachlich*. It lies somewhere between all of these categories—between the real and the magical.

“Ultimately, I want to change the way people view art, the way people buy art, the way they make art. I’ve always tried to balance the tight rope of making my art accessible to those who are aware of the craft, and those who aren’t convinced of art or more specifically my artistic objective. I believe that concealing too much in theory is problematic and that art can function in everyday life. I strive for an artistic legacy that not only transcends blackness but confluences and impacts all cultures.”³ —Noah Davis

In 2012, Noah Davis and his wife Karon Davis founded the internationally renowned Underground Museum in Arlington Heights, a historically Black and Latinx neighborhood in Los Angeles. Their aspiration and goal was “to change the way people view art, the way people buy art, and the way they make art.”⁴ The Underground Museum was a place to encounter art of “museum-quality,” as Noah Davis himself put it in quotation marks, but it was also equipped with a lending library, a bar inspired by Donald Judd, and a “Purple Garden” (partly in homage to Prince). As a space accessible to all, the Underground Museum hosted exhibitions, lectures, live music, film nights, and wellness sessions.

The exhibition *Noah Davis* is accompanied by a 270-page, fully illustrated catalogue. Produced and edited by the Barbican and DAS MINSK, the publication is published by Prestel and offers a comprehensive scholarly examination of Davis’s oeuvre, his creative process, and the multilayered impulses in his paintings. It contains texts written especially for the catalogue by the curators Wells Fray-Smith, Paola Malavassi, and Eleanor Nairne and the scholars Tina M. Campt and Claudia Rankine. The publication also includes personal, sometimes poetic responses to individual works of art by Noah Davis, written by Dawoud Bey, T. J. Clark, Francesco Clemente, Karon Davis, Marlene Dumas, Helen Molesworth, and Jason Moran. This comprehensive survey is supplemented by previously unpublished archive material and an illustrated chronology.

1 Noah Davis interviewed by Lauren Haynes, “3Qs: Noah Davis,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, n.d.

2 Noah Davis interviewed by Ben Ferguson, “Noah Davis,” DAZED, 9 February 2010, <https://www.dazed-digital.com/artsandculture/article/6483/1/noah-davis> (last accessed 25 April 2024).

3 Noah Davis cited on “About Us,” The Underground Museum, <https://theunderground.museum/about/> (last accessed 24 June 2024)

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

Curator: Paola Malavassi

Assistant Curator and Project Lead: Marie Gerbaulet

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The exhibition *Noah Davis* was initiated by Barbican, London, and DAS MINSK, Potsdam. The project was organized in close collaboration with the Estate of Noah Davis and David Zwirner Gallery. The exhibition will travel to Barbican Art Gallery, London, and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

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KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

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The exhibition at DAS MINSK was beautifully designed by the Kooperative für Darstellungspolitik in cooperation with Fasson Freddy Fuss, who developed the graphic design for the show.

The C& Center of Unfinished Business in the exhibition at DAS MINSK is a project by Contemporary And (C&).

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