

**ACCOMPANYING
BOOKLET**

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**CURATED BY
PAOLA MALAVASSI**

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NOAH DAVIS

DAS MINSK presents the largest international institutional exhibition to date of the US-American artist Noah Davis (1983 Seattle–2015 Los Angeles).

The chronologically organized retrospective assembles 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.

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.

In 2012, Davis and his wife Karon Davis founded the Underground Museum in Arlington Heights creating a space to encounter art, accessible to all, in a historically Black and Latinx neighborhood in Los Angeles.

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 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.

SO MAGIC, SO REAL

The scenes that Noah Davis paints are often as magical as they are real.

His subjects encompass domestic, everyday scenes as well as life in the neighborhood and the relation between a constantly developing city and the people who live in it. Davis's protagonists are almost exclusively Black. In order to depict them, he takes up traditional art-historical subjects like interiors, representations of mother and child, or portraits. The scenes often transpire "next door," in one's own environment, at home or outside, in the neighborhood. By dispensing with contemporary details like fashion, technology, and street signs they appear universal and timeless.

Davis disrupts scenes that at first glance appear ordinary with recurring moments of the magical, dreamlike, and surreal that break with the spectator's viewing habits.

References to Romanticism, Expressionism, Surrealism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and the New Leipzig School meet Black life in Los Angeles. Davis's painting lies at the intersection between all of these different figurative art movements, somewhere between the real and the magical. In his work, Egyptian mythology meets public housing, mother and child meet a rap song, and politics meets a mythical creature: Egyptian mythology can play out in the middle of a typical Los Angeles backyard, as in the painting *Isis* (2009), in which Noah Davis's wife Karon takes on the role of the deity, and an unfulfilled political promise can appear in Davis's painting in the form of a mythical creature, here a mounted unicorn. (PM)

Single Mother with Father out of the Picture (2007–8)

A classic painting motif: mother with child. Both look out of the image, but not at us viewers. Both are clothed in white, the mother in just a white T-shirt, the daughter in white underwear or a diaper with white socks and a thick white cast on her left arm. How did she get this injury? The child stands in the shelter between the mother's legs, who is sitting on a wide, floral-patterned upholstered armchair. A frame cut from the edge of the painting stands on an end table: Is the father in the photo? Where is he?

At the beginning of the 2000s, Davis trawled through flea markets and antique shops for visual legacies of African American families and assembled a comprehensive photographic archive of "normal" Black life in the United States from thousands and thousands of snapshots. He wanted to "capture these anonymous moments and make them permanent," to represent the everyday life of Black Americans rather than the trauma, the state of emergency, the repression. And yet this image is quite ambiguous. Because, as the painter Marlene Dumas, one of his great role models, observes in the exhibition catalog, Davis is an "expert in suggestiveness [and ...] understood the concealed, the hidden, the invisible." (NB)

Bad Boy for Life (2007)

Noah Davis's *Bad Boy for Life* pictures a mother elegantly dressed, with high heels on, about to spank her son's backside. She stares at us intently with wide-open eyes; the place where her mouth should be a blur of flesh-toned paint. We are the scene's only witnesses. Davis's title suggests what the mother is wordlessly expressing: this punishment will leave its mark for a lifetime.

A mother is losing her composure, revealing herself to be all too human, similarly to the Virgin Mary in the famous painting by Max Ernst at Museum Ludwig Köln, who is about to spank the baby Jesus' naked bottom. Noah Davis's humor is evident in the dramaturgy of the painted scene, the bourgeois environment à la French painter Balthus and a title that could be a song, as well as a self-help book or a film. Indeed, the 2001 rap song *Bad Boy for Life* by P. Diddy, Black Rob and Mark Curry comes to mind, as well as the comedy action film *Bad Boys for Life* with Will Smith and Martin Lawrence. Considering that the movie only appeared 2020: Did the painting or the rap song deliver the title for a Hollywood blockbuster over a decade before?

Noah Davis breaks with the "canon" and goes against what is expected of depictions of mother-son dynamics, presenting a wholly antithetical vision to the idealized scenes of mothers turned lovingly toward their children that populate historical works of art. The painting reveals another side of motherhood. (PM)

40 Acres and a Unicorn (2007)

40 Acres and a Unicorn is a mysterious image. A white unicorn appears against a flat matte black background. It seems like it has only just managed to free itself from the two-dimensionality of the picture plane and has tipped into three-dimensionality like a pop-up picture. The magical mythical creature wears only half a bridle, a vaguely suggested western saddle without a girth and, remarkably, no reins to steer it. The human figure in the saddle also seems enigmatic. Is it a grown man or a child with a very serious facial expression? The unicorn doesn't stand on the ground, but floats in the airless black of the picture plane.

Only the title refers to the painting's socially critical, historical background. A military decree in 1865 promised freed slave families in the Southern states "40 acres and a mule" during the American Civil War as compensation for the torments of slavery. After the end of the war, however, the land confiscated for this purpose was returned to the white owners. The phrase "40 acres and a mule" has since been used as a metaphor for broken promises and the reparations to Black Americans that never came.

So where does the unbridled, spaceless ride on the unicorn (not the mule) lead? Is the justified demand for reparations only magical thinking, as illusory as a mythical creature? Or does the unicorn represent a magical optimism and the unbridled goals and desires of a young Black artist for his community? (NB)

Nobody (2008)

Nobody is the only surviving abstract painting in Noah Davis's oeuvre. It is part of a series of three works that were made for an exhibition at gallery Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles. Davis destroyed the other two canvases directly after the exhibition. None of the three works were sold at the time. It was Davis's long-time companion Lindsay Charwood who acquired the painting at the last minute.

The three paintings Noah Davis showed in the exhibition *Nobody* represent the silhouettes of three of the so-called swing states during the 2004 US presidential election, i.e., those states that are neither majority Democratic nor majority Republican and in which both major parties have a good chance of winning. One silhouette depicted the shape of Colorado, one the shape of Nevada, and the third the shape of New Mexico. This designation alludes to the coloring of political maps, which marks Democratic-majority states in blue and Republican-majority states in red. The fact that Noah Davis painted his flat, geometric shapes in purple in 2008 does not seem surprising against this background. Lindsay Charwood, who worked closely with the artist and organized the exhibition with him at the time, explains: "It was the year of the Obama-McCain election. [Davis] was thinking about the upcoming election. He was thinking about color theory. He was thinking about American Minimalist painting. And he made these three works that are also the colors of African American pride, royalty, and richness."

Davis's *Nobody* is a political, abstract painting that deals with prognoses and hopes. In retrospect, its color can be interpreted as a harbinger of the historic victory of Barack Obama, who would go down in history as the first African American president. (PM)

***Isis* (2009)**

Like many of Noah Davis's paintings, *Isis* harbors a secret. A young woman stands in a dance costume—a kind of yellow bodysuit with a train—in front of the façade of a white-painted wooden shingle house typical of certain working-class neighborhoods in Los Angeles. She holds up two huge yellow fans with her outstretched arms that resemble wings. The contrast between the banal background with its discarded air conditioner and the almost unheard-of grace of the woman in the foreground couldn't be larger.

The painting *Isis* is based on a photographic source: a shot that Davis took himself of his wife Karon in front of their first house together in West Adams, an area where many Black people live—and later also many artists. Karon posed in a 1980s bodysuit belonging to her sister, raised her arms and Noah exclaimed: "Stand there! You are Isis."

The transformation from girl to Egyptian deity can be that simple—in the imagination, in art, on canvas. Even if the painting may not differ significantly from its photographic counterpart, it nonetheless carries other more far-reaching implications. It radiates the reality of a photograph and the possibility of painting.

Karon, now his widow, notes, that Noah himself can be seen in the reflection in the window. Is this recognizable or a magical projection? *Isis* reminds us that magic can also occur in abandoned backyards, that creative deities can flourish in everyday surroundings. Considering Davis's artistic and cultural legacy today, *Isis* seems like a metaphor of potential and possibility. (NB)

***The Architect* (2009)**

The painting *The Architect* obscures the identity of its subject. Their facial features are hidden beneath a dripping swathe of white paint. An elegant suit and tie can be seen under the colored trickle. The architect is bent over a model from behind, pointing with a pencil at the modernist structure, which has only been roughly sketched with broad brushstrokes.

Yet, it is precisely this posture that exposes his identity, as it can be read as a reference to what is likely the best-known anecdote about Paul Revere Williams (1894–1980), one of the most significant Black architects in the United States. Williams was famous for drawing his designs upside down to ensure an often-requested spatial separation between himself and his white clients. This allowed them to sit on the other side of the table and still follow his explanations and sketches.

Noah Davis was fascinated by Paul R. Williams. He appeared repeatedly in Davis's work. Williams's biography reads like a parable of the racist experiences that Black people constantly undergo in their everyday lives in the "land of (allegedly) unlimited opportunity." He was one of the most successful architects of his time and was the first officially licensed African American architect. In 1923, he was the first Black member of the American Institute of Architects, founded in 1857, and was the first Black person to posthumously receive the institute's prestigious gold medal. Between the 1920s and the 1970s, he designed over 3,000 buildings, predominantly for white clients. Williams had a decisive influence on the cityscape of Los Angeles, built in the city's most upscale neighborhoods, and even once joked that there was likely not a single street in Beverly Hills without a house designed by him. Due to the housing restrictions for African Americans, he was not permitted to live in these areas himself: "Today I sketched the preliminary plans for a large country house . . . in

one of the most beautiful residential districts in the world. Sometimes I have dreamed of living there. . . . But this evening I returned to my own small, inexpensive home in a comparatively undesirable section of Los Angeles. Dreams cannot alter facts," Williams wrote in 1937 in his influential essay "I Am a Negro."

For many years Williams was as good as forgotten. To this day, he is unjustly lesser known than equally talented white colleagues. Is this the reason why Davis blurred his face with white paint? (NB)

Leni Riefenstahl (2010)

Leni Riefenstahl, painted by an African American painter: that's what makes this work so complex. The inspiration was a photograph published in the photobook *Die Nuba von Kau* by Leni Riefenstahl in 1976. This is the later of her two photo books about the Nuba, which have been translated into several languages and have been distributed worldwide.

The name "Nuba," originally introduced from outside and now adopted by the community, refers to over fifty small ethnically and linguistically diverse groups living in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. Riefenstahl's photograph was created during a stay of several weeks in the region Kau Nyaro in 1974–75 and was taken by her husband Horst Kettner. She deliberately arranged the captured scene. It is the only photograph in the picture section of the publication in which Riefenstahl can be seen herself.

In the photographs, staging took place on several levels: on the one hand, Leni Riefenstahl stages the subjects and their culture. In this shot, however, she also stages herself as "photographer/ethnographer" on her mission to photographically capture the Nuba. Riefenstahl's trips

to Africa can be understood as a continuation of the body cult that she already engaged with as a propaganda director under National Socialism. She produced the two-part propaganda film *Olympia* for the 1936 Summer Games, in which the African American track and field athlete Jesse Owens won four gold medals. In retrospect, it is assumed that Riefenstahl's interest in Black bodies was sparked by the encounter with Owens. A certain complexity cannot be denied in the circumstances. Owens's victory (and his friendship with the Leipziger Luz Long) was a thorn in the side of the National Socialists, but for Riefenstahl it generated a fascination for the athlete, albeit an ambivalent one.

Now Noah Davis, as an African American painter, takes up this motif of the photographer as "ethnologist." It is a photographic view, translated and interpreted by a painter. In this painting, as in many others by Davis, the photographer's gaze meets the gaze of the painter. In our exhibition, these gazes in turn meet those of the painting's viewers. The image of an equally famous and controversial director is now presented in the context of African American art and German-German history at DAS MINSK.

The painting doesn't only depict, as the title suggests, the film director and Hitler supporter, but also a naked Black man who carries the artist's photo bag. The two hold hands. "Why don't we know the man's name?" the curator and Noah Davis expert Helen Molesworth asks me during a conversation in Los Angeles. Why is only Riefenstahl mentioned in the title? Riefenstahl wanted to show "her Africa" through her photographs. The camera in her hands was also an instrument of power and violence, a mediator of her colonial gaze.

In Davis's painting, Riefenstahl now appears like a caricature of herself, her face captured in shades of grey, the landscape, in comparison to the original photograph, robbed of all plants, sky, and sun. Davis takes up

her obsession with the idealized, “perfect” Black body in the contrasts between Riefenstahl and her nameless companion. She fully clothed, he nearly naked. Her “whiteness” emphasized by the light dress (in the original photograph she is wearing a khaki-colored skirt with a matching striped blouse and classic tropical straw hat). Leni Riefenstahl’s Nuba photographs and films are currently being researched with representatives of the Nuba societies in a joint cataloging project of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and the Berlin Art Library, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. It was in this context that the man in the photo was identified and initial discussions were held with him. The history of this complex photograph and, in connection with it, the painting has not yet been told.

We cannot longer ask Noah Davis why he chose this motif. However, we can exhibit it because he considered it important to paint it. And we can conclude that this image challenges questionable motivations for engaging with Black art and culture and should therefore be shown again and again in order to lead to a deeper reflection—personally and institutionally, in Germany and elsewhere—on the motivation and context behind the increased exhibition of art by Black artists today. Who is showing their art and how? (PM)

UNDERGROUND MUSEUM

The Underground Museum (2012–2022) is Noah Davis’s greatest curatorial accomplishment. Along with his wife Karon Davis and his family, the artist created an exhibition space and forum for Black art and culture at his former studio in a primarily Black and Latinx working-class neighborhood that had a lasting impact on the art scene in Los Angeles, and far beyond, over the course of its ten-year existence.

Davis’s oft-cited credo was that no one should have to “travel outside the neighborhood to see world-class art, or learn from leading thinkers, educators, chefs, and artists.” In 2012, he took the inheritance from his father and rented four adjacent abutting buildings in order to bring “museum-quality” art into this community and to create a unique place for art, artists, and residents. And he did this during a time (only twelve years ago) in which Black art and audiences were underrepresented in the almost exclusively white-dominated art world.

Initially, no institution in Los Angeles wanted to lend works from their collection, so the first exhibition at the Underground Museum consisted of pieces by artists like Marcel Duchamp, Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, or Jeff Koons that Davis unceremoniously produced himself. With this defiant homage, Davis humorously exposed art world power structures.

The big coup came in 2014, when the MOCA (The Museum of Contemporary Art) in Los Angeles agreed to grant the Underground Museum access to its outstanding collection and to provide loans for a series of exhibitions through the mediation of Helen Molesworth, who was working there as a curator at the time. This was followed by a solo exhibition by William Kentridge and thematic group exhibitions with great titles like *Water and Power* (2018) with works by Olafur Eliasson and James Turrell or *Artists of Color* (2017–18), a show about color in art with Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, Dan Flavin, Diana Thater, and others. There were always astute allusions to racism and power relations in the United States, prejudices were subverted or exposed. The second collaborative exhibition *Non-fiction* (2016–17) painfully addressed the culture of violence that still prevails against Black citizens of the United States today, with works by Kara Walker, Henry Taylor, Robert Gober, Theaster Gates, David Hammons, and many more.

Davis did not live to see most of the exhibitions. He died in 2015 at the age of thirty-two from cancer. After his death, his family and museum leadership, and the director of the museum Megan Steinman, carried on his legacy with great devotion and his vision of an inclusive, vibrant cultural institution lived on. Davis left a list with exhibition ideas and artist names. He had jotted down over eighteen exhibition ideas. Later, they further developed the program together in his spirit, with fascinating solo exhibitions by artists like Roy DeCarava, Deana Lawson, or Lorna Simpson.

This was all free for the visitor. Everyone who came by was welcome. And this gave rise to the extraordinary nature of this self-made institution: a unique atmosphere of inclusion and a real diversity, the likes of which could not be experienced anywhere else in Los Angeles. All age groups came and were warmly welcomed. Particularly striking was the number of children, who attended the events until late in the evening. Anyone who has ever experienced a film screening in the beautiful Purple Garden or one of the colorful street festivals will never forget this place. (NB)

***Imitation of Wealth* (2013)**

Imitation of Wealth was Noah Davis's first exhibition project in his own studio spaces that would later become the legendary Underground Museum. In four converted storefronts in Arlington Heights, a working-class in Los Angeles inhabited mainly by Black and Latinx people, between a tattoo parlor, an auto body shop and a lawnmower dealer, Davis wanted to realize "museum-quality" exhibitions. According to Helen Molesworth, who would later become one of Noah Davis's close companions, he even liked to put the term "museum-quality" in quotation marks when speaking, gesturing with his fingers. When neither museums

nor private collectors agreed to lend their "precious" works of art for the exhibitions, however, Davis set about producing the works he wanted to see in his future museum himself.

The fluorescent tubes on the studio ceiling were the first to be transformed into a Dan Flavin-style light installation. His wife Karon Davis bought an imitation vacuum cleaner after Jeff Koons for just fifty dollars on the classified platform Craigslist. Other elements of the exhibition included a self-made gravel mirror corner after Robert Smithson, a fake bottle rack by Marcel Duchamp, and a self-painted On Kawara from the *Today* series—although the dimensions differ significantly from the original series and didn't use the date of creation as the motif, as was On Kawara's practice, but rather the birthday of Davis's father.

As an independent art project, *Imitation of Wealth*—whose title refers to the famous film *Imitation of Life* (1959) by German director Douglas Sirk, in which two single mothers, one Black and one white, move between various identity categories defined by race and class. Part homage, part act of defiance, part open critique, Noah Davis's exhibition *Imitation of Wealth* exposed the power structures of the artworld. In 2015–2016, the entire exhibition with the imitated works was presented in the so-called *storefront* of the MOCA (The Museum of Contemporary Art) in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, Davis did not live to see the opening of this exhibition. (NB)

REALTY SHOW

The format of the afternoon talk show, as we know it from the 1990s—such as *Arabella* or *Hans Meiser*—took on much more extreme proportions in the United States than in Germany. Every day, talk show hosts like Jerry Springer or Maury Povich brought socially precarious guests

in front of the studio cameras—many of them Black—to fight out their conflicts in a dramatic, sensational manner. Topics were addressed that ranged from teenage pregnancy, infidelity, and paternity tests to domestic violence, rape, and even child abuse. These conflicts, which were often staged, regularly escalated, and spiraled into physical confrontations. Chairs flew, there were fights, scuffles, shoving, and wild swearing. A sensation-seeking, hooting and hollering audience was enraptured by the spectacle. The moderator, or “ring master,” as Springer called himself, humiliated their guests and millions of people tuned in.

Noah Davis devoted an entire series of paintings to this radical form of American entertainment. He is particularly interested in the media representation of Black life, the moment when reality becomes fiction. He shows the television studios with their brownish fake furnishings, technical equipment, theatrical inserts and screens that provide the framework for genuine and simulated emotions and actions, for despair, consternation, and violence. Here, the artificiality of television meets the completely different artificiality of painting, which uses its own means to highlight and analyze the former. (NB)

Maury Mondrian (2012)

Maury Mondrian demonstrates how Noah Davis explored painting as a medium with distinct qualities in his work, reflecting on art-historical references, image composition, and intrinsic artistic questions, even when depicting seemingly trivial subjects like a television talk show studio. This painting's composition is striking: the entire upper half of the image consists of a blue color field. The situation depicted is therefore largely concealed. One sees an adult who bends forward to grab a child's hands, but his head and his facial expression in particular disappear behind the blue monochrome band of color. It's not clear

what kind of touch is happening here: one of care or one of aggression? Davis subverts the extreme voyeurism of these shows and thematizes painting as a reflexive medium, one that can not only depict a scene, but reflect it at the same time.

The composition of geometric color fields obscuring the action on the talk show stage is echoed in an explicit reference to a classic of abstract painting: namely, Davis has “hung” a painting by Piet Mondrian in the background of the image on the studio wall. This pictorial allusion to classical modernist painting juxtaposes art and life: The ordered reality, as depicted by Mondrian in his geometric abstract compositions of primary colors, and which is only possible in art, appears here in direct contrast to the complexity of real life in a media context. (NB)

THE MISSING LINK

Noah Davis's paintings entitled *The Missing Link* (2013) were presented for the first time in an exhibition by the same name, his second solo exhibition at the gallery Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles, California. We are showing four large-scale works from this series.

All of the paintings have a filmic quality. They resemble film stills that capture a moment and generate suspense because we don't know what's happened before and after. The images depict exclusively Black protagonists in a seemingly unspectacular day-to-day life. But a strange thing happens: What is this man, leaning against a thick tree trunk, doing with the shotgun? Is he on guard or a hunter? Has the man with the suitcase in an elegant suit just arrived in the city or is he about to leave? Is the young man who rises a meter above the group a reference to Icarus? And why don't the others notice that he's taken off? Who are the people swimming in the pool in front of the seemingly endless

Lafayette Park housing development by architect Mies van der Rohe in Detroit?

In *The Missing Link* we see people in places that appear so real and everyday that they seem all too familiar: however, each painting seems to harbor enigmatic gaps that can be filled with memories and fantasies.

Places, neighborhoods, their inhabitants, and their everyday lives shape people, but it is precisely these people who equally shape and mold these places. Perhaps this is exactly the missing link that Noah Davis refers to, a lack of connection between art, the city, and the community, which the artist bridges with what he referred to as his “alternative canon.” *The Missing Link* paintings have a “cosmopolitan coolness” as the press release of the exhibition at the time announced. It is the audible and palpable “beat” of an urban Black life that are transported by Davis’s works. (PM)

The Missing Link 1 (2013)

In Noah Davis’s *The Missing Link 1*, a group of children are playing on a front lawn. It is a perfectly everyday scene, except for the presence of one child, who looks toward the viewer as he levitates with outstretched arms several feet off the ground. His playmates appear oblivious to the boy’s seemingly effortless flight. As curator Helen Molesworth has rightly pointed out, weightlessness is frequently encountered in Davis’s paintings: “His figures often seem to float, as if in a nimbus; they are in the picture but not tethered to it by gravity. Look carefully, and you’ll see there is rarely a pool of shadow to indicate weight around the feet of his figures.” In *The Missing Link 1*, the figure’s ethereality isn’t just gently suggested by a lack of shadow—he is clearly in flight, hovering far above the grass.

Is this an Icarus? The mythological figure comes to mind: half-man, half-bird, all bird, occasionally taking off, sometimes falling to earth, like in some paintings of Wolfgang Mattheuer. The scene is also reminiscent of photos of the singer H. R. of the hardcore band Bad Brains, in which he is leaping several feet above the stage; or the image of Boston Celtics player Bill Russell in Paul Pfeiffer’s ongoing *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* series, in which he appears to hover in mid-air; or Henry Taylor’s painting *See Alice Jump* (2011), based on a press image of the legendary Olympian Alice Coachman caught in mid-leap over a high jump bar. Davis’s child conquers gravity.

Flying is the visualization of possibilities. The child in this painting could be a visionary like Noah Davis was, a future artist, one, that thinks big, bridges gaps, and builds the missing links to open the so-called canon for what Davis called an “alternative canon.” A kind of existential sound emerges from this painting: it is the sound of dreams and self-determination, of adventure, of departure, of leaving—either willingly or under duress—and of escape. (PM)

The Missing Link 4 (2013)

Modern architecture is a recurring motif in Noah Davis’s work. In *The Missing Link 4*, an impressive steel-glass facade by the famous German architect Mies van der Rohe fills nearly two thirds of the image surface. The tinted, coated glass panes of the high-rise towers of Lafayette Park—built between 1956 and 1959 in Detroit and van der Rohe’s largest residential development worldwide—shimmer between pastel brown and blue tones depending on the light incidence.

Davis translates this effect into a diverse grid of countless monochrome color fields. Each individual window looks like a mini-Rothko in light blue,

sky blue, and gray blue, in cream gray, dark gray, and gray-violet, in different gradations of brown, in black, and in white. In front of the building: a strip of green lawn, a few sun loungers, and a pool with a few swimmers. As is often the case, Davis sets depictions of Black leisure activities and youth culture against the backdrop of well-known works of art and architecture. In the reflection of the water surface, the pixelated color areas blur into a brownish shimmering color soup, only the trail of a young man swimming in the pool brings out the water's original blue.

Lafayette Park consisted of two residential towers, 186 rowhomes, a swimming pool, a shopping center, a school, and different parks. It is considered one of the few successful urban renewal projects in the United States that is still alive today. White and Black people live here together. "I am fascinated with instances where Black aesthetics and modernist aesthetics collide," Davis said in an interview. In the painting, everyday Black life meets an outsized architectural icon, and it works perfectly, just like in real life. However, it also shouldn't be forgotten that a district inhabited primarily by African Americans called "Black Bottom" was torn down for this ambitious building project. (NB)

PAINTING THE NIGHT

And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow. —Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon

In landscape and history painting traditions, the night has always been a subject of inspiration. In Romantic painting the night embodies a moment of observation, of solitude and reflection, a moment of awareness of one's own limitations and finality as well as the grandness and mystery of the universe. In Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* the night also embodies the end of a journey, but with contrary behavior, these are hours dedicated to adventure, gathering, excesses, and loudness.

Noah Davis's paintings of the night like *40 Acres and a Unicorn* (2007), *Painting for My Dad* (2011), but also other ones that we are not showing, like *NO-OD for Me* (2008) or *LA Nights* (2008) all visually reference Romanticism to convey powerful, serene, and uncanny scenes of loneliness. They are all ambivalent mysterious scenes that confront us with our own finiteness and the endlessness of the dark sky.

Davis had mastered the color black in all its nuances, fully aware that black is not simply black—just as Toni Morrison claimed that "night black" could be like "a rainbow." As the US-American curator Helen Molesworth points out in the catalog, in Noah's paintings you will find different kinds of black: "Coal black, midnight black, ebony black, ink black. The black of tar, of velvet, of a raven's feather, of obsidian. The black that absorbs all other colours, the black that is the total sum of all colour. The black of the ocean at night, the black of the galaxy, the black of the universe, the black of the multiverse. Manet's black, John McCracken's black, Kerry James Marshall's black. Vantablack."

At DAS MINSK's cabinet Noah Davis's *Painting for My Dad* is being shown together with an INTERPLAY of two night scenes by the painters Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927, Vogtland – 2004, Leipzig) and Dan Namingha (b. 1950, Arizona). If we try to "listen" to all these paintings of the night, we might perceive that the scenes appear to have been plunged into an

eerie quietness, far away from the loudness of modern life, but: Which light sources do we see, and most importantly, which light sources do we carry with us? (PM)

Painting for My Dad (2011)

It is pitch-black night. A solitary figure stands on a rocky precipice and looks out into the unfathomable darkness. The dim oil lamp in his left hand cannot illuminate the surroundings. It only lights up for itself. Numerous small points of light penetrate the dark firmament. But they don't provide any light either. The male figure is depicted from behind—a Caspar David Friedrich from Black America, in T-shirt and jeans, with hunched shoulders. The outline of his head and exposed arms barely stand out against the background. They meld with the dark of the night. It is as if he is standing on the threshold between two worlds. But it is uncertain where the journey will take him, whether he will look into this black distance full of longing or trepidation. Is this an end or a beginning? Or even both?

Like many of his paintings, *Painting for My Dad* has a dreamy disjointedness and mysterious narrative undertone typical of Noah Davis.

Like its romantic predecessors, however, the painting also implies metaphysical questions. *Painting for My Dad* was created during a time in which Davis's father lay dying. With reference to Caspar David Friedrich's figures depicted from behind, Hartmut Böhme described the seeing of vision as "a figure of reflexivity," which transforms it into a "seeing of the heart, of the soul's interior." *Painting for My Dad* could be understood as an act of empathy with the father, but also as a representation of solitude, as the painter Francesco Clemente, whom Davis himself greatly admired, observes in the exhibition catalog: "Again, someone

turns away from the viewer. Is this the solitude of the observer or the observed? Or is it the solitude of observation?" (NB)

NORMAL SCENARIOS

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. —Noah Davis

Noah Davis wanted to paint "normal scenarios," which is precisely where he found the human, existential, and universal. He frequently superimposed both traditional subject matter and magical elements onto images of his Los Angeles neighborhoods, creating timeless scenes full of references that are both local and universal.

Drawing on art history, his personal archive of photographs, magazines, and books, and anonymous snapshots found at Los Angeles flea markets, and his own imagination, Davis's figurative paintings include a vibrant cast of characters that take a nap, dance, play musical instruments, and swim in public pools. Almost always, they seem at ease in the world. It is hard to say who exactly is depicted and when the scenes took place, lending each scene a kind of nostalgic tranquillity, universality and timelessness.

For Davis, "to show Black people in normal scenarios" was an act of refusal of the prevalent imagery of Black trauma that has historically circulated and continues to move in the media. Elevating the everyday lives of Black people by making them subjects of art was a form of

self-determination and empowerment. Davis created an “alternative canon,” as he called it, one full of power, dignity, beauty, and poetry. (PM)

1975 (2013)

As with many of Noah Davis’s paintings, snapshots serve as sources of inspiration and imagery for the series *1975*. This time, however, it is not anonymous photographs like those Davis used to collect at flea markets, but undeveloped film belonging to his own mother, Faith Childs-Davis. The pictures are particularly captivating due to the casualness and matter-of-factness with which they capture everyday scenes of Black life at the time: a rear view of a passerby lost in thought with a lowered gaze, the back of his head illuminated by a ray of sunlight; a teacher in front of a blackboard reading from a sheet of paper; a sleeping person in the backseat of a car. Nearly forty years later, these pictures haven’t lost any of their immediacy and intimacy. Only the saturated and vivid palette, atypical for Davis, refers to the time that has passed since then. Scenes from a public pool in particular capture moments of unbridled joy and freedom. The people at the pool are busy with all kinds of banal activities: they splash, they dive, they sit on the edge and talk, they change their clothing, they lounge in the sun, they kiss. And they are all Black, without exception.

Even though racial segregation was officially abolished in public places in 1964, white US-American citizens still avoided public pools in particular when they were frequented by Black people and retreated to private clubs in the suburbs. All the more expressive is the eighth picture in the series, in which an athletic boy jumps headfirst into the turquoise water. He seems to be literally flying, his long legs stretched far into the air. A carefree, fearless leap.

An expression of freedom that at that time could only be granted to him in a so-called Black space. (NB)

Pueblo del Rio: Arabesque (2014)

Six young ballet dancers have gathered by the roadside and positioned themselves in a symmetrical formation in the green areas in front of a housing estate. They have adopted the graceful arabesque posture, a classical ballet pose in which one leg is extended behind the body with a straight knee. The arms gracefully imitate the position of the legs. Their elbow-long satin gloves are creamy white, as are their tutus and pointe shoes. The sky above them is a strange grayish purple that can only be seen in Los Angeles. Their uniform arrangement mirrors the symmetry of the architectonic stage: a row of houses in a social housing complex. The touching beauty of this scene unfolds a palpable magic. The enchanting dance moves fill the balmy night air.

Pueblo del Rio: Arabesque comes from a series of seven paintings depicting Pueblo del Rio, a social housing development built in 1941 for African American factory workers in Los Angeles—one of the earliest and largest of its kind. The leading architect, alongside others like Richard Neutra, was Paul Revere Williams, the first Black architect to be admitted to the American Architectural Association and who built over 3,000 buildings in and around Los Angeles, many of which are iconic. Davis elevates this project, which failed in many respects—segregation, poverty and violence prevailed soon after its completion—into a sphere of utopian virtuosity in his paintings. A pianist at a grand piano plays in the middle of a street crossing; a clarinetist in uniform blows his instrument under a tree; a conductor in a tailcoat conducts on a chair in front of a simple façade—all per-

performances take place under the same violet-blue sky and are open to all.

The painting thematizes the exclusion and discrimination of African Americans during the time of segregation, but also the potential, the diversity and beauty of artistic and cultural creativity that can spring from such places. Individual pictorial elements still resonate today, such as the snow-white, shiny pointed shoes of the dancers. They recall the racism that prevails in classical dance and other artistic disciplines. Just last year, a short video by Misty Copeland, the first African American to be named prima ballerina by the American Ballet Theatre, sparked a worldwide uproar. In the video, she showed how she rubs her ballet shoes with brownish make-up to match her own skin tone. It was seen and commented upon by millions of people, because to this day there are only a few companies that offer ballet shoes in a range of different skin tones. (NB)

Untitled (2015)

Noah Davis's work *Untitled* captures a moment of calm and intimacy: two young women in summer dress sit close together on a sofa and rest. Their backs lightly touch one another, their eyes are closed.

Resting and pausing together for a moment seems to be the power of this work. The painting can be understood as an invitation to join the two women: "*Come. Come in. Join them. Rest. Whatever form it takes, rest. All feeling belongs here. The exhaustion belongs to*

everyone. Time is timeless," as Claudia Rankine writes in her essay for the exhibition catalog.

The right to rest and relaxation is reserved for only a few people in a capitalist system and is often missed out on by the middle and working classes. With the aim of breaking through these structures, various contemporary movements have been founded, such as The Nap Ministry with the slogan "Rest is resistance," which encourages people to take care of themselves and allow themselves the necessary rest. Rest can be resistance and the "Resistance [in this painting] is rest" (Claudia Rankine). (PM)

CHRONOLOGY

compiled by Colm Guo-Lin Peare

This text is based on and expands the first published chronology of Davis's life by Lindsay Charlwood in *Noah Davis: In Detail* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2023).

Please note that the chronology as well as some quotations in texts were taken from the publication *Noah Davis* and were originally written in British English. The publication accompanies the exhibition *Noah Davis* and is produced and edited by the Barbican and DAS MINSK and published by Prestel.

1983

On 3 June, Noah Davis is born in Seattle, Washington. His parents, Faith Childs-Davis and Keven Davis, raise him with his older brother, Kahlil Joseph. Keven Davis works as a corporate lawyer, representing diverse clients including the rapper Ludacris, the jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, and Venus and Serena Williams. Faith Childs-Davis works as a teacher.

1997

At age 14, Davis has a formative experience visiting the exhibition *Kara Walker: Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored* when it travels to the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, Seattle. He later reflects that it is the first truly radical art he has experienced.¹ The work was originally commissioned for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago by Hamza Walker, who writes in the exhibition's accompanying essay: 'Maybe the issue is not whether some imaginations are more active than others but what some imaginations are willing to wield and therefore yield...The mind can be a terrible thing, a frightening thing, only because it is a powerful thing; a thing, as Walker proves, capable of breaking the shackles of history.'²

1999

Davis travels from Seattle to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire for an interdisciplinary educational summer programme. There, he becomes friends with Lindsay Charlwood (who would later become a gallery director and a staunch advocate of Davis's work throughout his career) and takes a class called 'The Art of Being Human', where students discuss art, music, literature, philosophy and psychology.

2000

During Davis's junior year of high school, his parents rent an apartment near their home in Seattle for him to use as his first painting studio.

At Broadway Market shopping mall in downtown Seattle, Davis mounts an exhibition of his work in a corridor outside a former cinema, showing watercolours inspired by Francesco Clemente.

2001

Davis moves to Dumbo in Brooklyn, New York, where his father is already living. He enrolls at Cooper Union School of Art in the East Village, gaining admission at the competitive institution with a concertina book in which he reinterprets Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Davis's first term begins one week before September 11. Davis stays at Cooper Union for three years, studying under artists including Hans Haacke and Lorna Simpson.

2004

During his time at Cooper Union, Davis works with the Bruce High Quality Foundation (BHQF), an artists' collective created as 'an alternative to everything' by fellow students Seth Cameron, Rhys Gaetano and John Kiehnhoff.³ The first image the collective exhibit is *The Raft of the Medusa* (2004), a photographic imitation of Théodore Géricault's 1818–19 oil painting depicting the 1816 wreck of a French naval frigate, which was commanded by an incompetent aristocrat of the recently reinstated *ancien régime*. The painting's modern sympathy towards revolution makes it a fitting reference for BHQF's inaugural artwork, in which Davis stands at the helm of a raft made from urban debris.

Davis drops out of Cooper Union, struggling to reconcile the school's emphasis on conceptual training with his desire to

paint. He later reflects: 'I think it's very important that art remains to be about ideas, but it shouldn't be an either-or battle between concepts versus painting. They can exist together. I guess when my school force-fed us a conceptual education I reacted against it. I left school because it wasn't teaching me anything.'⁴

Davis moves to Los Angeles and takes a job working for the City of Los Angeles Public Art Division.

2005

Davis leaves his job at the Public Art Division and begins working at Art Catalogues, an independent bookstore specialising in exhibition catalogues, run by Dagny Corcoran. The store had recently relocated to the Pacific Design Center, the Museum of Contemporary Art's (MOCA) satellite space in West Hollywood. Corcoran later recalled how Davis would scour the Art Catalogues bookshelves, building his own imagined library for a speculative museum.⁵

Davis meets Tyler Gibney, who opens the HVW8 Art + Design Gallery in West Hollywood in 2006 with Addison Liu. The gallery becomes a local hangout, bringing together art, music and design. This interdisciplinary ethos extends to the artworks Davis and Gibney later collaborate on, including experimental painting performances and large murals.

2006

Davis studies at the newly opened Mountain School of Arts, a radical, artist-run school founded by Piero Golia and Eric Wesley. The school aims to teach its students how to sustain themselves creatively and professionally, encouraging them 'to engage with the widest possible audience'.⁶ With free, part-time tuition, the school has a rotating guest faculty of visiting artists and curators who teach an interdisciplinary programme. It is based at the Mountain Bar in down-

town Los Angeles, established in 2003 by artist Jorge Pardo and co-founder of China Art Objects gallery Steve Hanson as a place for artists to gather. Davis attends the school with other young artists, including Jordan Wolfson. He later reflects: 'The Mountain School ... helped me out massively when I came to LA. Eric Wesley and Piero ran it from a little room in the back of a bar. Students were taken on tours of artists' studios during the two classes a week and I found it to be a really inspiring place.'⁷

In 2009, Jorge Pardo makes a bespoke bar for the school using plexiglass, MDF and fluorescent lights, which operates both as a functioning bar and an art object.

Many years later, Davis will install a bar inspired by Donald Judd's furniture in the Underground Museum, following a similar sentiment of situating art and life in the same space.

2007

Davis and his brother Kahlil Joseph start *FEB MAG* (the title of which is a play on the art journal *October* and Black History Month, which is celebrated in February in the United States). The blog is the brothers' answer to the early website *Tiny Vices*, an online gallery and image archive started by photographer Tim Barber in 2005. *FEB MAG* specifically focuses on images of Black life, featuring old Polaroids found at the Fairfax Flea Market and other swap meets, home video footage by friends, and Joseph's photographs from his trip to the Congo. Some of these latter photos become the reference images for Davis's *Congo* series (2014–15).

Lindsay Charlwood (now a director at the Los Angeles gallery Roberts & Tilton) runs into Davis at Art Catalogues.⁸ Charlwood is mounting an exhibition exploring the idea of the domestic entitled *Bliss* and invites Davis to exhibit. Davis at first proposes to show a woven blanket depicting a man sleeping on the street but instead

submits two paintings: *Bad Boy for Life* (2007) and *Delusions of Grandeur* (2007), which debut at the opening on 13 October. Curator Franklin Sirmans later writes that the palette of *Delusions of Grandeur*, which was installed in the gallery bathroom, recalls Clyfford Still's use of colour and abstract forms.⁹

2008

In the spring of 2008, Davis meets Karon Vereen, and they fall in love. By the summer, they have moved into a house in West Adams. The neighbourhood is home to many historic turn-of-the-century homes, such as the Fitzgerald House designed by Joseph Cather Newsom in 1903, which Davis would later feature laid over a Rothko-inspired colour field in his painting *The 'Fitz'* (2015). West Adams was also the neighbourhood of Paul Revere Williams, the first Black architect to gain entry to the American Institute of Architects in 1923 and the subject of Davis's painting *The Architect* (2009).

When driving with Lindsay Charlwood to see the Marlene Dumas exhibition *Measuring Your Own Grave* at MOCA, Davis asks Charlwood to stop by an open house at the Fitzgerald House, which Davis and Vereen dream of turning into a public art space.

Dumas is an important influence on Davis, inspiring works like *American Sterile* (2008). He continues experimenting with texture and composition in ways suggestive of Dumas, such as in *Indigo Kid* (2010). He also, like Dumas, increasingly uses found photography as his source material.

On 11 October, Davis opens his first solo exhibition: *Nobody* at Roberts & Tilton. The show is titled after the popular 1905 Bert Williams song of the same name, which was performed by Vereen's father, the acclaimed entertainer Ben Vereen, at Ronald Reagan's All-Star Inaugural Gala – the televised event held on the eve of his inauguration. Vereen's performance, which was an homage to

Williams, incorporated elements of Vaudeville and mime to comment on the history of minstrelsy. And, as Williams had in his stage routines, Vereen executed the performance in blackface. Although Vereen had been promised his whole performance would be aired, the broadcast omitted its final section, which implicated the mostly white, Republican viewers.

For the exhibition, Davis is expected to present new figurative paintings (for which he is becoming known) but instead shows three restrained works reminiscent of formalism, with each painting comprised of a single flat geometric plane of purple. Each refers to the shape of a swing state in the 2004 United States presidential election: Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada. These paintings are early precursors to one of Davis's defining fixations: how do the social and political inform the formal development of abstraction? None of Davis's works in the exhibition sell, but Charlwood acquires one at the last minute before they are returned to the artist. Davis destroys the remaining two.

Davis and Karon Vereen influence each other as they live and work together. Vereen's books, including Geraldine Harris's *Gods and Pharaohs from Egyptian Mythology* and Gary Null's *Black Hollywood: The Black Performer in Motion Pictures*, steer Davis's research interests, and Vereen's film *Goat* (2008) directly inspires Davis's painting *The Goat from Grayson* (2008).

On 3 December, the Rubell Family Collection's landmark exhibition *30 Americans* opens in Miami, featuring an influential pantheon of Black artists, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, David Hammons, Barkley L. Hendricks, Glenn Ligon, William Pope. L, Lorna Simpson and Kara Walker. Davis is the youngest artist to be included. Commenting on being shown alongside this group of artists, Davis says: 'For a while, I thought I was being put in a box. But it's probably the most glamorous box I've ever been in, so whatever. I was fucking

honoured.'¹⁰ At the opening, Davis meets Henry Taylor for the first time. Taylor would become a close friend of Davis's, painting a portrait of them entitled *Right hand, wing man, best friend, and all the above!* in 2023.

On 4 December, Davis and Vereen get married at the Miami Beach Courthouse.

2009

On 7 April, Davis's first solo exhibition in New York opens at Tilton Gallery. The show includes a series of works on paper that depict the body of Osiris in 14 parts (in reference to the myth of the deity's dismemberment) alongside paintings loosely inspired by Egyptian mythology. The exhibition's opening party is held at the home of collectors A.C. and Thelma Hudgins, where they also celebrate John Outterbridge, who has an exhibition of recent sculptures a floor below Davis's show. Outterbridge's longstanding friend David Hammons, a hero of Davis's, also attends. The Studio Museum in Harlem acquires *The Gardener* (2009) from the show. Leading up to and during the exhibition, Davis and Vereen spend six weeks living in the gallery's basement apartment, where they make a performance painting, pouring chocolate syrup on a canvas covered in gold leaf.

Former Cooper Union student Marlon Rabenreither becomes Davis's studio assistant after the couple returns to Los Angeles. Davis (an avid collector of photos who was increasingly engaged with the burgeoning internet culture) had first connected with Rabenreither through his photo blog. Rabenreither will continue to work with Davis for the rest of the artist's life.

The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, acquires Davis's *Black Widow with Brothers Fighting* (2008).

2010

On 16 January, *Noah Davis: The Forgotten Works* opens at Roberts & Tilton. The show takes its name from Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968), a science fiction novel set on a commune built outside of the 'Forgotten Works', an expanse of refuse that is the ruins of a past society. Many of Davis's paintings for the exhibition take inspiration from the novel's series of vignettes, featuring several characters who all variously repress, venerate or scavenge from the past. Davis makes a video of himself idling around Los Angeles to circulate as a press release. The show sells out and is reviewed by Sharon Mizota for the *Los Angeles Times*, who commends its depiction of 'isolation and mortality'.¹¹

On 16 February, Noah and Karon's child Moses is born.

On 20 May, Davis's first exhibition in Europe, *Noah Davis: More Paintings*, opens at Annarumma 404 in Naples. Noah stays in Los Angeles with Karon and Moses instead of travelling to Italy for the show. Paintings exhibited include *Untitled (Kids in the Front Yard)* (2010) and *Untitled (Sketch for Larger More Realistic Painting)* (2010). On the gallery's invitation is a photo of Davis with his face daubed in purple paint, recalling his intrigue with the history of minstrelsy and the colour purple in his past exhibition *Nobody*. In the summer, Davis moves into studios in a formerly disused building on Pico Boulevard between Boyle Heights and Vernon in Los Angeles. Known as Pico Studio, the space is owned by developer Lonnie Blanchard, who leases out studios to artists, often accepting art for rent. Davis rents a large studio previously occupied by Thomas Houseago and moves Daniel DeSure, Kahlil Joseph and Malik Sayeed into the space. Amy Bessone and Aaron Curry are also renting spaces in the building at the time.

Noah and Karon rent a house in Calabasas, around 40 miles from Pico Studio. Davis will come to paint a series of works inspired

by the many rockfaces he passes on his long drive into the studio. Tired of the commute, the couple eventually start sleeping on an air mattress at the studio with Moses.

On 14 October, Davis opens *Noah Davis: New Paintings*, his first solo show at James Harris Gallery in his hometown of Seattle. Works in the exhibition include *The Future's Future* (2010) and *Spoonfed* (2010).

Davis curates his first exhibition, *Gray Day*, which opens at Roberts & Tilton on 30 October. Concerned with 'the apathy of the present moment', the show is 'an ode to group shows such as Tony Shafrazi [Gallery's] *Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?* [conceived with Urs Fischer and Gavin Brown] and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *Jasper Johns: 'Gray'*.¹² The exhibition brings together 30 artists to respond to the colour grey, including Larry Bell, the Bruce High Quality Foundation, Daniel DeSure, Inner City Avant-Garde (an 'anarchic collective' Davis formed earlier in the year with his friends Ulysses Pizarro and Darnell Prince) and Davis's studio assistant Rabenreither. Davis also includes Sydney Littenberg, the owner of Fine Art Stretcher Bars, who makes most of Davis's canvases.

On 11 November, Inner City Avant-Garde's exhibition *LOOK MOM, NO TALENT* opens at HVW8 Art + Design Gallery. The show features ten works, including spray-painted works on canvas, sculptures and assemblages made using found objects. The collective's invitation uses the emblem that will later become the logo for the Underground Museum.

On 31 December, Noah and Karon leave Pico Studio and their house in Calabasas and settle into an apartment across the street from MOCA.

2011

Davis temporarily moves to New York to spend time with his father, who has been diagnosed with cancer. He paints at a small studio in Harlem. Along with Henry Taylor, Davis is invited to paint at A.C. and Thelma Hudgins's home in Long Island over the summer.

On 10 November, Davis's second solo show at Tilton Gallery opens in New York. The exhibition pivots on his three *Canyon* (2011) paintings – inspired by the rocks Davis passed on his commute from Calabasas to Pico Studio – and *Painting for My Dad* (2011), a meditation on mortality depicting a lone figure looking into an abyss. The Rubell Family Collection acquire this last painting from the show.

On 23 December, Keven Davis dies.

2012

On 22 January, Noah and Karon perform in *Tirs: Reloaded*, an event organised by curator Yael Lipschutz for the Getty's Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival. The event consists of contemporary artists responding to Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs* series (c. 1961–64), in which the artist shot a .22 rifle at white plaster-covered assemblages of various objects interspersed with sacks of coloured paint, which would explode upon impact. For the festival, Karon conceives of a work entitled *Boys in the Hoods* (2011), for which she and Davis shoot at Ku Klux Klan effigies with cans of red paint concealed under their white robes.

Davis is included in a group show, *In the Making*, which opens at Roberts & Tilton on 25 February. Instead of submitting paintings, Davis shows a sculpture made from synthetic hair and twigs entitled *Tumbleweave* (2012), inspired in part by David Hammons's hair sculptures. He installs the work in the parking lot outside the gallery.

In June, Davis rents four abutting buildings on West Washington Boulevard (numbers 3506–12) in Arlington Heights with the money

inherited from his father. Davis demolishes the internal walls between the properties to create a gallery space and installs a library, and a bar inspired by Donald Judd's furniture. At first, the library is filled with Noah and Karon's own books. Later, Dagny Corcoran lends books from Art Catalogues before helping to set up the library with vendor accounts. Noah and Karon install a screen in the parking lot at the back of the buildings to function as a community cinema and start planning the Purple Garden, a glade of purple flora dreamt up by Davis in notebook collages. The space is initially known as the Inner City Avant-Garde (after Davis's collective) but is officially named the Underground Museum (UM) by 2014. In one of Davis's notebooks, he writes that the museum's mission is 'to provide inner-city neighbourhoods with free access to world-class art'.

On 12 July, *Noah Davis: Savage Wilds* opens at James Harris Gallery in Seattle. The exhibition takes its name from Ishmael Reed's 1988 satirical play in which two gameshow hosts hire a Black comedian to be hunted on reality television, with an ensuing farce that comments on the paranoia and spectacle of American racism. The works in the show are based on stills from daytime chat shows, subverting formal visual elements such as perspectival framing devices and the superimposition of graphics to conceal, reveal and encase figures. Certain paintings, like *Maury Mondrian* (2012), bring these formal elements into conversation with representational tactics of modern European abstraction. In August, Davis is invited to participate in *The Bearden Project*, an exhibition organized by curator Lauren Haynes at the Studio Museum in Harlem, featuring 100 contemporary artists influenced by artist and writer Romare Bearden. Davis submits a collage on paper entitled *The Frogs* (2011).

On 11 November, the Studio Museum opens *Fore*, a group show of emerging artists organised by Lauren Haynes, Naima J.

Keith and Thomas J. Lax. In *Artforum*, Ara H. Merjian describes Davis's work in the show, *Found Photo* (2012), as 'a characteristically arresting portrait of a foregrounded young man in three-quarter profile, set against a window frame and an abstract section recalling a vagrant Clyfford Still painting.'¹³ The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art takes Davis's *The Messenger* (2008) into its collection.

2013

On 23 February, *Noah Davis: The Missing Link* opens at Roberts & Tilton. The exhibited series marks a turning point in Davis's practice. *The Missing Link 3* (2013) centres a working man in an urban environment, which is translated into an array of abstract colour fields, while *The Missing Link 4* (2013) takes the gridded façade of one of the modernist housing blocks in Mies van der Rohe's Lafayette Park in Detroit as a backdrop. In *The Missing Link 6* (2013), a figure in repose among a dense thicket of colour alludes to a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble With Harry* (1955), and Manet's subjects painted in states of leisurely recline.¹⁴ The show demonstrates Davis's ability to bring the concerns of modern European painting to contend with Black figuration. On the eve of the opening, Lipschutz interviews Davis for *Art in America*, and Davis speaks about *The Missing Link 4*, saying, 'I am fascinated with instances where Black aesthetics and modernist aesthetics collide.'¹⁵

Davis holds the afterparty at the Underground Museum, serving a rather dandyish spread of champagne and frog legs. On show are the museum's first exhibitions: *Karon Davis: new sculptures and photographs* and *Imitation of Wealth*.

The latter's title references Douglas Sirk's 1959 film *Imitation of Life*, in which two single mothers, one Black and one white, move between various identity categories defined by race and class. Museums do not agree to loan work to the UM and so Davis decides

to present facsimiles of easily replicable works by Constantin Brancusi, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Marcel Duchamp, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, On Kawara, Jeff Koons, Barnett Newman, Fred Sandback and Robert Smithson, thereby bringing 'world-class' art to Arlington Heights while playing with the history of institutional critique and the readymade. The works also have personal resonance for Davis: the date depicted in *Imitation of On Kawara* (2013) is his father's birthday (7 October 1957), and *Imitation of Marcel Duchamp* (2013) was given to Davis by James Harris after the artist noticed an unassuming bottle rack at his home while visiting Seattle for the *Savage Wilds* exhibition the year before.

Around this time, a number of curators at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) take interest in Davis's work. On 7 March, Franklin Sirmans (curator and department head of contemporary art at LACMA) chairs a panel discussion at the Studio Museum in Harlem with Davis and artists Sadie Barnette and Brenna Youngblood, whose work is also included in *Fore* (the Studio Museum exhibition that opened the year before).

As part of LACMA's Art Here and Now programme (which supports acquisitions from emerging artists based in and around Los Angeles), a curatorial committee, including Sirmans and led by Rita Gonzalez and Christine Y. Kim, decide to acquire Davis's *The Missing Link 4*. Kim also organises a roundtable to discuss the future of the space led by Noah and Karon. Participants include Edgar Arceneaux, Mark Bradford, Dagny Corcoran, Karin Higa, Bob Johnson and Rochelle Steiner.

Davis refines the Underground Museum's mission. As he and Karon build the institution, they host six-week residencies in the space and invite artists to display their work.

On 26 June, Brooklyn-based artist Aaron King opens an exhibition at the space following a residency. In the invitation email,

Davis explains: 'The Inner City Avant-Garde Residency Program is committed to providing space and resources to artists of merit. The ICAG encourages the artist in residence to collaborate with at least one local business on a piece that can be integrated into the artist's practice.'¹⁶

On 23 December, Davis is diagnosed with liposarcoma, a rare form of cancer, after a tumour is found next to his heart. He starts a six-month treatment plan of chemoradiotherapy at Cedars-Sinai.

2014

While in and out of hospital, Davis creates his *Seventy Works* series, which consists of 70 small-scale drawings, collages and paintings on archival paper. These works provide Davis with a source of income to support his family and become gifts for loved ones while allowing him to continue to make work from his hospital bed.

Davis's tumour is successfully removed, and he begins to recover.

On 17 May, *Noah Davis: Garden City* opens at PAPILLION, Los Angeles. Davis takes as his subject the Pueblo del Rio public housing project in South Los Angeles, designed in part by Paul Revere Williams and completed in 1942. Against bruised skies and the austere geometry of the architecture's modernist functionalism, Davis paints Black figures immersed in acts of creativity and leisure, reflecting his hopes for the UM. The Hammer Museum acquires one of the works from the show: *Pueblo del Rio: Public Art Sculpture* (2014).

On 29 July, *The Oracle*, a group show curated by Davis, opens at the UM, featuring work by contemporary practitioners alongside loaned objects from the private collection of Jeremiah Cole, an African antiquities dealer from Sierra Leone. The loan is enabled by Davis's mother, Faith Childs-Davis, who encourages Cole to meet her son after buying an African drum from his Collection of Arts d'Afrique. Cole agrees to lend the UM five objects, persuaded

by the idea of Arlington Heights locals seeing the works without having to pay museum admission. Davis originally wanted to show the artefacts alongside sculptures by Thomas Houseago (as Houseago often used forms derived from modernist artists such as Picasso and Matisse, who appropriated traditional African art), but instead presents Cole's objects in dialogue with works by Kahlil Joseph, Ruby Neri, Henry Taylor and Kandis Williams.

In the summer, a comprehensive book of Davis's *Seventy Works* is co-published by the UM and Omid Fatemi. The book includes an epilogue by Dagny Corcoran, who writes that for Davis, 'it is the life that is the work of art.'¹⁷

Davis meets artist Deana Lawson when Joseph invites Lawson and Henry Taylor to a barbeque in the UM's Purple Garden. Davis is already aware of Lawson's work from a previous job organising slides for the William H. Johnson Prize, being particularly struck by her photograph *Daughter* (2007). Davis asks Lawson to exhibit at the UM, suggesting they show her work opposite Diane Arbus.

Davis is told that his cancer has returned, and he begins further treatment.

On 17 September, Helen Molesworth, the new chief curator at MOCA, conducts her first Los Angeles studio visit with Joseph, who has recently moved his studio into the UM. There, she meets Davis, and they talk for hours about Black Mountain College, Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (1977), Marcel Duchamp, David Hammons and Henry Taylor. They also talk about their shared love for the work of Kerry James Marshall, whom Molesworth is working with on his first major retrospective in the United States (which will open at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2016). Molesworth would later write that the UM felt like an artwork in itself, following the tradition of historic projects such as Katherine S. Dreier, Duchamp and Man Ray's *Société Anonyme, Inc.*,

Marcel Broodthaers's Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles and David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology.

Davis's *Black Wall Street* (2008) is acquired by the Studio Museum in Harlem.

2015

Through Molesworth's advocacy, MOCA formalises a partnership with the UM. MOCA's recently appointed director, Philippe Vergne, approves the lending agreement. Molesworth would later write that for Vergne, 'it was a way to rethink museum expansion: No big-name architect needed! Let's move horizontally, not vertically.'¹⁸

Molesworth brings a large three-ring binder containing MOCA's complete collection (known as 'the bible') to Davis's bedside at Cedars-Sinai, from where he plans 18 exhibitions of works from MOCA's collection. One exhibition Davis conceives, entitled *Non-fiction*, includes a 1995 Kara Walker work, *The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, which recalls the works he had seen as a 14-year-old at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, Seattle.

The Bruce High Quality Foundation University (an alternative, unaccredited art school established in the autumn of 2009 by BHQF, with whom Davis had collaborated at Cooper Union) open a gallery on 431 East 6th Street in New York and invite Davis to be in their first exhibition. On 4 April, the gallery presents *Noah Davis and the Underground Museum*, featuring works by Davis, Henry Taylor, Lyle Ashton Harris, Kahlil Joseph and Deana Lawson.

Hernan Bas, a painter greatly admired by Davis, selects a portfolio of Davis's works to be featured in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* Spring 2015 issue. The portfolio includes Davis's *The Year of the Coxswain* (2009), which appears on the magazine's cover.

On 3 June, Henry Taylor surprises Davis on his 32nd birthday

by bringing David Hammons to the UM.

On 25 June, the first exhibition made possible by the MOCA loan agreement opens at the UM: *William Kentridge: Journey to the Moon*. Alongside *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès* (2003) and *Day for Night* (2003), the show features Kentridge's titular 2003 video work in which drawings and everyday objects from the artist's studio become animated, blurring and smudging the boundaries between the real and the represented. The piece's whimsical dissolution of the distinctions between art, the studio and life chimes with the UM's ethos, while the exhibition allows the two institutions to test-run their agreement (with works that do not require specific environmental conditions and are not at risk of theft). The exhibition also features a Kentridge print, *LARGE TYPEWRITERS* (2003), lent to the UM by Dagny Corcoran.

Molesworth spearheads MOCA's acquisition of Davis's *The 'Fitz'* (2015), which consists of a Rothkoesque colour field with two photograph-like images of Fitzgerald House painted in the centre of the canvas. Molesworth later hangs the painting outside the gallery where MOCA's Rothko works are installed.

In July, Davis moves with his family to a house in Ojai, about 80 miles north of Los Angeles, and uses the garage as a studio to create what will become his last works.

On 29 August, a restaging of *Imitation of Wealth* opens at MOCA. On the same day, Davis passes away.

1 Noah Davis: *In Detail* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2023), p. 178.

2 Hamza Walker, 'Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through The South And Reconfigured For The Benefit Of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored', The Renaissance Society, <https://renaissancesociety.org/publishing/84/presenting-negro-scenesdrawn-upon-my-passage-through-the-southand-reconfigured-for-the-benefit-of-enlightenedaudiences-wherever-such-may-be-found-bymyself-missus-keb-walker-colored>.

3 Roberta Smith, 'Museum and Gallery Listings', *New York Times*, 16 May 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/05/16/arts/design/16wart.html?pagewanted=all.

4 Ben Ferguson, 'Noah Davis', *Dazed Digital*, 9 February 2010, dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/6483/1/noah-davis.

5 Dagny Corcoran, 'Epilogue', *Noah Davis: Seventy Works* (Los Angeles: The Underground Museum/Omid Fatemi, 2014), n.p.

6 Piero Golia in Steven Henry Madoff (ed.), *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 321.

7 Ferguson, 'Noah Davis', *Dazed Digital*.

8 Now Roberts Projects.

9 *Noah Davis: In Detail*, p. 53.

10 Jen Graves, 'Mystery and Strangeness: A Seattle Painter Makes It', *The Stranger*, 21 October 2010, <https://www.thestranger.com/visualart/2010/10/21/5244421/mystery-and-strangeness>.

11 Sharon Mizota, 'There Are Truths Underneath', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 January 2010.

12 Davis's annotated press release for *Gray Day*, Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, 2010.

13 Ara H. Merjian, 'Critics' Picks: "Fore": The Studio Museum in Harlem', *Artforum*, 2012, <https://www.artforum.com/events/the-studio-museum-inharlem-194790>.

14 Yael Lipschutz, 'Links: Q+A with Noah Davis', *Art in America*, 7 March 2013, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/noah-davis-robertstilton-56309>.

15 Ibid.

16 E-invitation, *Hold Still*, Aaron King, 26 June 2013. Shared by The Estate of Noah Davis.

17 Dagny Corcoran, 'Epilogue', *Noah Davis: Seventy Works*.

18 Helen Molesworth, 'Some Years Count as Double', Helen Molesworth (ed.), *Noah Davis*, exh. cat. (New York: David Zwirner Books/The Underground Museum, 2020), p. 165.

DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam speaks a gender-sensitive language.

Using gender-sensitive language entails addressing and making visible all genders and gender identities, as well as avoiding propagating gender stereotypes.

DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam speaks an anti-racist language.

The self-designation "Black" (with capitalized "B") has become accepted in recent decades due to the increased internationalization as well as the struggle of visibility and emancipation of Black lives. The term does not refer to skin color, but rather to a socio-political ideology that respectfully recognizes a cultural history of a people. In this publication, the ideological term "Black" is written accordingly.

Noah Davis

Curator: Paola Malavassi

Assistant Curator and Project Lead: Marie Gerbaulet

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.

DAS MINSK
KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

barbican

HAMMER

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