

# BOMB

## Fluid Interpretations: Lisa Corinne Davis Interviewed by Leslie Wayne

30 September 2021



Lisa Corinne Davis, *Deductive Data*, 2021, oil on canvas, 56 × 48.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.

*Abstract painting as  
a way of rendering  
the complexities of  
individual experience.*

The postmodern battle between abstraction and representation is an old canard, and yet it keeps persisting. We like categories. They make us feel safe, that is, when they include us. But categories are inherently divisive and can often serve no purpose other than to neatly package history, information, and ideas that are inherently messy. And the art world is messy.

Lisa Corinne Davis is an artist and a friend. She paints abstractions, though she has not always done so. She is a Black woman and a woman “d’un certain âge,” neither young and emerging nor a revered grande dame. She’s simply been working with determination for years and is finally having a well-deserved moment. Last year she received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, a coveted Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was picked up by Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco. Her work was recently included in the exhibition *Subliminal Horizons* at Alexander Gray Associates alongside artists Huma Bhabha, Melvin Edwards, Glenn Ligon, Martin Puryear, and Tschabalala Self, among others. She is currently one of ten artists in the exhibition *Point of Departure: Abstractions 1958–Present* at the Sheldon Art Museum. We met in Tribeca in New York City on a warm Sunday afternoon and talked about her childhood, her work, and the remarkable turn of events in her career.

- Leslie Wayne

## Leslie Wayne

Lisa, I've known you long enough to know that you do not take this newfound success for granted. In fact, I've often noted with a bit of alarm your self-deprecation and sense of distrust in the system. Those aren't uncommon feelings in today's art world, but they also don't come out of a vacuum, and with you I sense they spring from a deeper source, deriving perhaps from your childhood. Is that fair to say?

## Lisa Corinne Davis

Wow, Leslie, that is such a good and complicated question. I guess I would begin by saying when you grow up Black in America, and particularly in a town like Baltimore, more South than North, you are always looking around, navigating spaces that you want to enter. The right to these spaces is not given, so you find ways to be accepted into them, and it is never clear what those perceptions are or how things have shifted to open a door. The art world is no different, and I would guess, as you said, that since I have been working for many



Lisa Corinne Davis, *Quizzical Quantum*, 2021, oil on canvas, 40 × 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.

years as a painter and a professor, I wonder what has caused this recent attention, this new space. I guess I cannot help but believe it is based on these mercurial perceptions and constructs created by others, because the reality of working in my studio has not changed.

## LW

Yes, I think we've all come to accept that the prevailing trends in the world of critical discourse and market desirability are more often than not determined by forces beyond our control, so we continue on our own paths and hope that one day they will converge.

## LCD

I'm not talking about how the art world functions with the market and trends, but how I understand perception on all fronts, including the art world, to be about spaces you occupy and those you don't, and how ultimately the logic of how things fit comes from a certain point of view at a given time. This perception is constructed and understood as it relates to someone's lived experience.

## LW

Aha. Yes, I understand you're talking about a much more nuanced and personal point of view. But I do feel that the external systems that are beyond our control inform the views that we have of ourselves in the world and of others who perceive us and our work. But going back to your childhood for a minute.

## LCD

Yes, well, this all comes from my early childhood in Baltimore. My father died when I was four. My mother was a very accomplished woman; she realized her potential but could never afford to study brain surgery due to the years of education needed. She had a law degree and a PhD. Having been born in 1921, this was a stratospheric accomplishment for a woman.

## LW

So complicated. I do see a direct relationship between this aspect of your early life and the complexity that resides in your paintings today. You often speak about

your work as an attempt to throw one's perceptions off by presenting systems of information, but systems that have been disrupted and destabilized. Are these disruptions built into their DNA as it were, or do they develop as you work through the paintings? In other words, how much of it is the result of the unconscious act of painting, and how much of it is determinative?

### **LCD**

There is a direct relationship to my early life. I believe perceptions are derived from one's learned experience and context. Society has structures for simplifying this reality by having categories like Black and White. And visual communication has structures to control our understanding. Like when we see geometry, primary colors, or aerial views like a subway map. We understand this to be based on fact, delivering objective information. But if you would have traveled to the old Soviet Union, you would have been presented with a map using the same visual language, yet it would have been delivered with subjective untruths in order to keep travelers away from certain locales. In the context of Russia, one knew this. Here, you would never think that untruths are being dispensed in this form. I work with these codes of understanding and mix them up to present to the viewer a conundrum about the choices they make in understanding what is merely suggested in the work.

### **LW**

You're talking about the primacy of direct experience: the map is not the place; it's a sign. I think that what you are getting at is that information is malleable and perceptions are unique to the individual. These ideas are very abstract, and you're using the language of abstraction to explore them, which is not easy. There's a long history of Black abstraction, from artists like Alma Thomas to Jennie C. Jones, but it's been a battle for them to have agency in the art world. Do you feel the moment changing for that?

### **LCD**

I love how you put this. I am talking about the primacy of direct experience over the collective, which I am not sure really exists. I have thought a lot about why abstraction has been such a combative space for African American painters going back to the Whitney show of 1971. It seems that curators then—and now—have wanted Black artists to speak directly to the condition, to narrate politics. The idea that Black artists could speak through more indirect means and more personal rather than broad social issues has not been granted by the galleries and museums. But I do feel that things are changing because society is becoming more accepting of the idea of an individual experience for marginalized people.

### **LW**

Yes, we are in a watershed moment. It seems like there is a greater hunger to know more—to read what has been left out of history books and civics classes. Writers like Isabel Wilkerson and Ta-Nehisi Coates have



Lisa Corinne Davis, *Deliberate Deceit*, 2020, oil on canvas, 50 × 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.

done so much to fill that gap. But visual art is much more nebulous and expansive as a form than writing and film, which are so dominated by the narrative structure. You were not always an abstract painter. Why did you choose abstraction?

### **LCD**

I chose abstraction because my work is not political, it's personal. My desire to explore and understand my Black self lives in a visceral, tactile, metaphysical, and psychological place. These sensibilities are abstract ones, and I felt I could better express them through abstraction rather than representation, which by its very nature is not fixed and allows for more open and fluid interpretations.

*Lisa Corinne Davis's work is on view in the Point of Departure: Abstractions 1958–Present group exhibition at the Sheldon Art Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, until December 31.*



Lisa Corinne Davis, *Cerebral Calibration*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60 × 45 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.