

HYPERALLERGIC

Beer With a Painter: Lisa Corinne Davis

26 December 2020 | By Jennifer Samet



Lisa Corinne Davis, "Cerebral Calibration" (2017), oil on canvas, 60 x 45 inches (courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery; photo Jason Mandella)

Just over four years ago, Lisa Corinne Davis curated an exhibition called *Representing Rainbows* at GP Presents/Gerald Peters Gallery, New York. It was one of the shows that marked the beginning of the Fall 2016 art season in New York, but its open and generous tone presented a welcome break from the clubbish and exclusionary feeling that can pervade that week of openings.

The show's concept was inspired by an article Davis had written for the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2014 as a way of grappling with a phenomenon she had observed in the work of her Hunter College MFA students: increasingly, representations of rainbows were cropping up. She wondered how to make sense of these images; on the one hand, the rainbow is a cliché symbol, and on the other, it is a sublime phenomenon. She ultimately noticed that in a world where everything is shared, the rainbow can't be: it exists experientially, it is unfixed, and it is perceived distinctly, depending on one's location — even two people standing next to one another might see it differently.

I have gotten to know Davis over the past several years through a group of her women artist friends, and I've been a guest at the wonderfully noisy, crowded holiday parties she has hosted. Davis has a generous, full-hearted laugh that makes one feel at ease, but she doesn't pull any punches in her observations and opinions. It seems clear that her life as an artist is not compartmentalized. Her engaged social life, her adult children, her devoted attention to her students, and her dedication to running are all absorbed into her abstract painting. This noise, the liveliness, a polyglot social experience — this "rainbow" — is the web and pulse of the shifting grids in her paintings.

Of course, when we met in late fall for this conversation, at her upstate New York home and studio, the social experience was toned down and cautious. But she had set up an outdoor “living room” for small get togethers in her backyard, and her front lawn (a week before Election Day) was a cacophony of political and activist signs. Her studio and home are meticulously ordered.

Order and disorder play against each other in her paintings, in which grids don’t behave as we might expect. We look through and into them. They are disrupted by the edges and corners of her paintings, which throw off any rigidly frontal perspective, and suggest shifting, irregular angles. They are interrupted by fleeting passages of disharmonious color. These are paintings that challenge any kind of essentialist interpretation and which, like the rainbow, invite subjective points of view.

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Davis received her BFA from Pratt Institute in 1980 and her MFA from Hunter College in 1983. Her paintings have been exhibited at the June Kelly Gallery and Gerald Peters Gallery, both in New York; and the Mayor Gallery in London. Davis was recently the subject of a solo exhibition at Pamela Salisbury Gallery, Hudson, New York. Her work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Davis is the Head of Painting at Hunter College in New York. She was recently the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. Davis is represented by Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco.

Jennifer Samet: You grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. Do you recall specific formative experiences with art or art-making? How would you describe your path to art school?

Lisa Corinne Davis: My father died when I was young. I grew up with my mother, who worked two jobs to send me and my brother to private school. She believed that if you’re going to be a successful person in the world there are things you have to know: classical music, art, dance, and theater. She really had no education in the arts whatsoever — so she made sure we did.

We would go to the Baltimore Museum of Art. I spent a lot of time with the Cone Collection of modern art. I was fascinated by the idea of it. I thought about who would collect all of that work. I liked the space itself — the quiet of it. It gave me the chance to act differently than I did in other spaces in my life. I loved the idea of looking for that long, and making sense of the work. That experience was more important to me than individual works or specific artists.



Lisa Corinne Davis, “Deliberate Deceit” (2020), oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches (courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery; photo Pete Maoney)

My mother's dream was for her children to go to an Ivy League school. But I arrived at Cornell and thought it was just like my high school. It was very elite. At Cornell there was a choice: You could be part of the Ujamaa House and live in a house with the Black people or you could live in a dorm like everyone else. I lived in a dorm. I was approached by the Black students at the end of my freshman year who said, "You should come live with us next year." I said, "I would like to do that, but you guys are at the far stretches of campus and winters are horrible here." I thought it was not cool that I had to make a choice like that.

I went to New York the summer after my freshman year at Cornell and I was in heaven — the diversity, and the feeling I could reinvent who I was. At the time, the art program at Cornell was falling apart, and they were firing the most interesting teachers. After two years at Cornell, I transferred to Pratt as a painting major.

I went to my mother with this information and, to her credit, she said, "I just want you to do what you want to do." She said, "I didn't get to do what I wanted to do because I couldn't afford it. You have the privilege to choose, and if that's what you're choosing, I'm behind it." My mother, who is 97 now, was one of the first African American women in Maryland to get a law degree. However, what she really wanted was to be a brain surgeon.

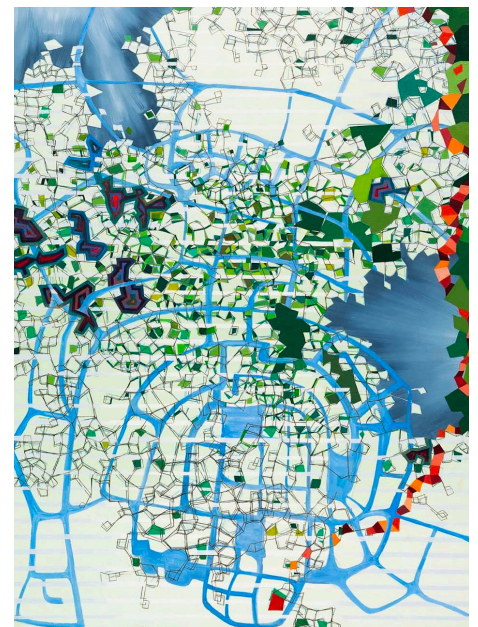
JS: Can you tell me about your experience at Pratt, and then at Hunter College for your Masters degree?

LCD: As an undergraduate, even though I was a painting major, I never learned how to paint. I didn't learn to mix color, the differences between brushes, or how to use linseed oil. We learned none of that.

By graduate school at Hunter, we were already too involved in our own work to learn the basics. Still, I had some great teachers, like Ron Gorchoy. He was probably the most well-read person I had come across. At some point I asked him, "How have you read everything?" And he said, "It's because I didn't get a graduate degree." Rosalind Krauss was also my teacher. She was fierce, smart, beautiful. I was shaking in her classroom all the time from fear, but I loved being around her. It was still such a male world in the early 1980s, and I was looking for a female role model for validation that this was all possible. And Lynda Benglis was my teacher as well. She was a character, warm and lovely, and she obviously had guts.

JS: What was your early work like?

LCD: I worked on paper for a long time because I felt like I didn't know how to paint. I was making work about gridding and cultural analysis. They were paper installation pieces. When I was pregnant with my first child, I started thinking more specifically about the importance of race and race labels, and how appearances affect the trajectory of one's life. I began making simple self-portraits in ink on paper. I would cover them with a layer of graphite, so they became reflective and hard to read. To this I would add a clear cultural sign in white colored pencil, like a Greek vase. That's what you would see. Gradually, you would see a person lurking behind. I was asking the question: "Can you or should you make a connection between who you think that person is and the Greek object?"



Lisa Corinne Davis, "Deliberate Disinformation" (2020), oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches (courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery; photo by Pete Mauney)

I would look at American history books in terms of codes of illustration. If you were a white man, you were represented as a bust. If you were a woman, you were a figure, and if you were “other,” you were in the landscape. I would take the pages apart, reassess, and draw over them. I would rewrite histories in between the lines.

That is where the grid entered the work, because I was lining things up for analysis. However, it was more about a personal quest as opposed to establishing myself as a political artist. By the mid-1990s, abstraction became my language.

When I was hired by Yale to teach in the Painting department, and I first went into the graduate studios, I thought, “Wow. You can really paint. You really know this stuff.” I envied the deep dive the students were making into the medium. I realized how far painting could go, in an expressive way. It made me stop making the works on paper and start to paint.



Lisa Corinne Davis in her studio (photo courtesy the artist)

However, I think of identity in painting, too. When I am painting and making different moves, I think, “Now I am a grid painter, or a spiller, or an Expressionist.” I try to embody these personas, because none of them quite feels like home. Therefore, I try it on and see what it feels like. It never feels quite right, so I don’t fully act it out.

JS: Yes — I wondered if you identify with other grid painters, or see your work as responding to them?

LCD: I don’t identify with grid painters. The grid is the linchpin because it is the most fascist, unbending, unyielding painting move you can make. It defines the surface and it puts it into measurable equal, timed zones. It is the most organized system in a painting that’s reliable. You can compare it to systems in the world. What would feel as secure in the world as a grid does in painting? Nothing.

By nature, people want other people to be clear: you’re female; you’re male; you’re from the East Coast; you’re from the West Coast. The grid is the metaphor for that kind of stable, unquestioning zone. But I don’t relate to that at all. I was a light-skinned Black woman, whose mother moved us to an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood when I was 12, and I went to a Quaker school for my entire childhood.

I am trying to breathe humanity into this system — to breathe life into the grid. I think I have two vocabularies. There is a set of things that are objective, and there is the subjective vocabulary — the weird things, elements that are about feeling. I keep interweaving them and making them come close to each other. I want the work to feel like someone is trying to knit things together which, perhaps, should not live together. That process keeps me engaged in the studio. It is happening in real time in the studio.

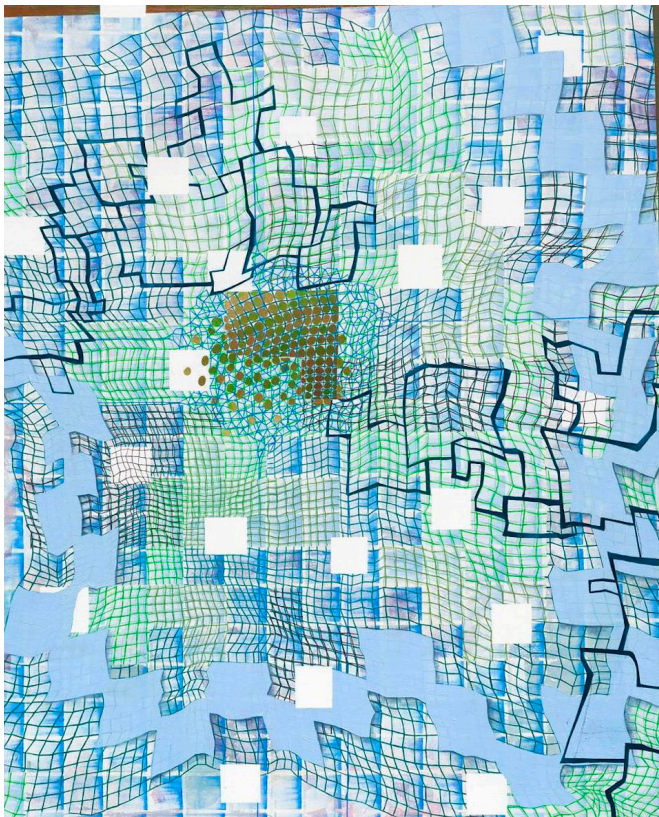
JS: I know maps are an important starting point for the work. Do they also relate to real spaces which you are moving through?

LCD: They are about mapped spaces, and about how we understand space: mental space, physical space, painting space. I think about all those things and how we navigate them. They are also about growing up with an indeterminate history. Many African American histories are lost, so you have bits and pieces.

I also had a mother whose attitude was, “I’m going to push you further.” So I was always landing in spaces that I was trying to understand and thinking, “How do I want to navigate the space? What do I want to take away from it? Am I comfortable here?” There is never a lack of consciousness around the space being inhabited. It is always an active expression of memory and wanting to connect.

Even though many maps are lies, a map is made with geometric shapes and primary colors and black and white. We just assume that it is delivering facts to us. I am constantly playing with whether you can trust what you are seeing in the work.

I also move from color that is more trustworthy to color that’s more expressive or less trustworthy. In the book *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor discusses how when the New York Times moved to color photography, people were up in arms. Black and white photography symbolized truth, whereas color photography felt like a lie. In literature, like *Moby Dick* or *Heart of Darkness*, elements are described as black and white until the story becomes crazy, and then it is in color. When elements move from primary color to more toxic and invented color, it suggests a move from actual, territorial spaces to psychological spaces. I play with that in the work.



Lisa Corinne Davis, “Calculated Computation” (2020) 42 x 34 inches, oil on canvas (courtesy Jenkins Johnson Gallery; photo Pete Mauney)

JS: In many of your recent paintings, you notice a ghost image of painting marks that came earlier. Do you leave and use this to help generate what comes later?

LCD: I never give up on a painting. The process of painting is a conversation. I have sanded paintings and let that residue become part of the conversation again. This was initially out of convenience. However, I later realized that it created a situation where the back plane of the canvas became less determined. I like that ability to absorb into the space, and to not know where it ends.

Also, I always want to communicate the sense that someone is building this world. They are not graphic. I don’t build them on the computer or draw them first. I do something, the painting does something, and then I try to counter it with the next move. That is the conversation.



Lisa Corinne Davis, "Captious Computation" (2019),
oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches; private collection
(photo Stan Narten)

JS: You published an article, "Towards a More Fluid Definition of Blackness," in 2016. It seems like your work is trying to communicate a more nuanced expression of Black experience, and of shifting or unstable identity markers. Why do you think we haven't moved toward a conversation about racial fluidity as it relates to painting content?

LCD: Some Black painting has communicated, "Here is history, but I'm going to retell it in a different way, or make you look at this through a different lens." This is completely valid, but there are also other ways to think about it. Sometimes, the content of painting is not so easy to understand. It can be difficult to understand. But that fluidity needs to happen so people can understand the different nuances of Black experience. For instance, when I was teaching at Parsons, there might be a request like, "We've got this kid who grew up in the inner city. Lisa, can you talk to him?" I would say, "No. We don't share an experience just because we are Black."

I certainly have had dealers come into my studio and say, "You should make your work more Black." I am like, "What does that mean?!" It is as Black as I want to talk about. I'm an abstract painter. Just accept me on those terms. It navigates through the thread of my experience, which is one type of Black experience. I can't take up the banner for everybody.

I'm really happy about the success — although it came very late — of Jack Whitten or Alma Thomas. But these are artists who worked their whole lives with no one paying attention to the work. I'm happy there is one collector — Pamela Joyner — who has been putting together a significant collection of African American abstraction. But she is still pretty much alone in her mission.

JS: When you talk about the different sets of vocabularies becoming interwoven in your painting, it also makes me think about how you have described the art world as particularly non-inclusive — that there is a Black art world and white art world. Are the multiple grids and dichotomies in your work an expression of this? Also, I wonder if there are historic artists in whom you recognize the kind of destabilization or lack of terra firma that you describe as a goal in your own work?

LCD: Yes, definitely. I don't think it has helped me to always have these things bouncing off each other. If I was firmly rooted in the Black art world, I think my career or experience would be very different. But I don't understand the need to isolate in that way. I feel the art world is decades behind other parts of society, in terms of inclusion. It certainly looks more inclusive now. There are more African American artists being shown. However, the cliques and clubs among collectors and curators are not very fluid and this situation forces artists to pick a club. I don't want to do that. I've never wanted to do it. But I don't think it has helped me.

I never play by the rules. The grid is never really a grid. It is never measured right, or it might become web-like. I have never been able to fully understand the societal rules I'm supposed to be playing by. So all of the formal elements in the paintings are always a little bit off. There is something you expect about how they will behave, but then they start to do something that lets you off the hook.

Rebellion in art has always come with a subtle rejection of the rules of the game. Poussin did this in "The Sacrament of Marriage" (1647-48), Veronese's "Allegory of Love" (1570) did this, and so did Brueghel's "The Land of Cockaigne" (1567). Perspective was supposed to lay everything out clearly: Here is the vanishing point; here is the horizon. Each one of those painters subtly tipped it.

Brueghel changed how the surfaces of the landscape were expected to look. He wanted the figures glued to the ground for their gluttony. He wanted the ground to feel almost like it was swallowing up the figures. He was making a political statement about a tale. He was saying that if the world was full and you could have all the food you want, that might not be a good thing. Brueghel's rebellion happened in not playing strictly by the rules of perspective.

The same was true of Veronese and Poussin. They all created a kind of destabilized perspectival house for the narrative to live in. In Veronese's case, it was for the purpose of questioning love or marriage or the relationship between men and women. I look at how, with every step of art history, there was an accepted way of constructing the painting to communicate the story. But certain artists placed questions within these constructions. They did it without throwing the game entirely out of the window.

Artists are cultural critics — but painting is a language. There is an accepted language with every given moment in time. If you are just trying to communicate the questions about the narrative within the accepted painting system, it feels like you're not really trying to do anything. I am interested in how to think about things, like your cultural moment, in ways that don't play by the rules.