

# Two Coats of Paint

## Karin Davie's new sense of self

By Sharon Butler | 21 September 2021



*Karin Davie, installation view at Chart.*

At Chart, Karin Davie, in her first NYC show since 2007, has moved with elegant decisiveness from pop-inflected stripes, slapdash and dripping, to wide, sine-wave brushstrokes that gently oscillate in glowing geometric formations. The Metabolic Series, all large-scale on linen, feature a square-within-a-square composition in which the wavy lines emanate from a white square in the center. They get progressively darker and opaque as Davie carefully layers them outward towards the edges. The lightness and meticulous perfection of the brushstrokes evokes Chinese painters who make their landscape scrolls in one go. Yet, for all that precision, she fashions paintings that are also richly heartfelt and distinctly handmade. How does she do it?

The final composition creates a kind of tunnel-to-the-light experience that we might expect in a James Turrell installation. The physicality and playfulness of Davie's earlier work is replaced with a near-monochromatic spiritual gravitas, but she also adds a small shape to the bottom of each canvas like an unexpected plot twist. These odd shapes were originally based on thumbprints that appeared in the original drawings, and they add some object-image painting humor as well as serving a subtler purpose. When the u-shapes are cut out, like cartoon mouseholes, they appear to offer a way into the painting that is physical rather than visual, and when they stick out beyond the rectangle's border, they look like the edges of jigsaw puzzle pieces that might tether the ethereal paintings to one another and keep them from floating off the wall. The shapes ground the images in their objectness and, reminiscent of Moira Dryer's work, keep us from falling for the images rendered by the paint alone.



Karin Davie, *In the Metabolic No 5*, 2019, oil on linen over shaped stretcher, 60 x 60 inches

In the two *While My Painting Gently Weeps* pieces, the wavy lines are strictly horizontal, pulled from side to side. Painted from the top edge down to the bottom, and from light above to dark below, they create a deep sense of space, as if we were looking at waves in the ocean. The supports themselves are shaped with a scalloped edge at the bottom that holds drips from the process and reinforces the painting as an object again, as though Davie is compelled to remind us that the illusion on the front isn't what it seems. She has said that the curved shapes are based on her body, particularly knees and elbows, rooting them in a corporeal sense of self despite their less tangible associations.

In the smaller work, the lines turn vertical, and the associations are with veins, arteries, bones, and x-rays. Some are diptychs, and one, *Down My Spine No. 1* from 2018, interposes a wavy line where two shaped panels join in the center such that the space between can look like an integral if differentiated element of a single painting. For the past several years, Davie has been living in Seattle, dealing with the effects of long-term Lyme Disease, and the images, especially in *Shape of a Fever* from 2019, depart from her earlier interest in the physicality of the painting process itself to present a visualization of what being inside of her body feels like.

Downstairs is a series of large works on paper made of gouache and cut paper from 2011-12. In anticipation of making new bodies of work, Davie focuses on drawing, and it was through drawing and making these works on paper that she developed the ideas for the large-scale paintings upstairs. Here the waves are proportionately thinner and more tightly overlapping, creating a more fluttering, jittery sensation. In the later work, made seven years on, a sense of calm seems to prevail. Davie's work has always been extraordinarily physical. It now takes on nuances of self-awareness and worldly context to achieve new levels of sophistication, beauty, and humanity.