

Franne Davids' Ongoing, Past Lives

A painting's outermost layer is typically what offers itself to the eye. More than likely, there are foundational layers—a ground, perhaps some gesso, a substrate of some kind or another—to secure the image and give it a structure, but we can be sure that any given painting has within it layers that are not accessible to us. The so-called ground of the image is very often comprised of hues and textures that give a painting its dimensionality and what is often characterized as presence. The hope is often that a painting contains imperceptible layers of labor that provoke, in the sensitive viewer, the idea that an image has been constructed over time. A failure to account for this accretion and accumulation is to succumb to the deceit of pictorial representation, to believe that a picture lends itself fully to what can be seen and that it withholds no secrets from its viewers.

The body of work left by the late artist Franne Davids makes itself only partially available to vision. This is because Davids, who spent most, if not all, of her days in a self-fashioned basement studio for nearly four decades, added countless layers of oil paint to the forty-two canvases and several hundred works on paper she left behind when she died in 2022. It seems that her consistent efforts toward painting were inaugurated by a diagnosis as a paranoid schizophrenic in the late 1970s. The irresolute dating of Davids' output implies decades of labor. We cannot be sure at what point any work was started, in what years she added paint to their surfaces, nor will we ever know when she designated anything as finished. Davids worked until 2018, when her physical health deteriorated to the extent that she could no longer descend the stairs to her studio. But the individual weight of the works left in the artist's wake speak to her resourcefulness, her tendencies toward reuse, and her intent to paint images anew from the phantoms of her paintings' past lives. Davids' canvases contain within them layers of paint that can no longer be seen, but that embody the conditions of her status as an artist removed from the worlds of exhibition and display that she imagined for herself and her art. This occlusion is the typical fate of artists marked by mental illness, and Davids was no exception.

By age twenty-nine, Davids committed herself fully to artmaking, a decision that initiated her continuous alteration and maintenance of a limited suite of paintings on canvas. Davids' abundant works on paper, by comparison, bear fewer traces of their reworking; they are more stable in relation to the canvases built up over years of paint application. The plentitude of Davids' works on paper illustrate how unrestrained her imaginings must have been. Without Davids here to differentiate one work's relation to the next, her output poses a productive challenge for anyone subscribing to art history's chronological rigor. There is no individuated series of paintings by Davids, nor is there a discernible sequence, only a flood of images that defy the frameworks typically used to talk about an artist's evolution over time. Her world, as it was distributed over multiple surfaces and layer upon layer, was populated for the most part almost exclusively by women—a cast of repeating characters that may have been her interlocutors as much as they may have been her surrogate selves. The scenes they inhabit are tapestries of interlaced texture and line; the characters are bound by interior spaces that hem them in. The enclosure and containment they occupy is palpable from one painted image to the next.

Without Davids here to confirm or deny how a painting may have preceded or contributed to the making of another, it may be difficult to ever find the thread that narrates a story of her art. It is tempting to draw conclusions, to project how her psychosis may have informed her radical conception of time, or how she conceived of a painting as an ongoing process more than an artifact. There are few records that indicate Davids submitted a small number of works to local art competitions in Connecticut where she lived, but aside from these exceptions there are few if any consistent titles or dates to assist in the efforts of posthumous interpretation. Admittedly, there is a critical preoccupation with this kind of extrinsic information, it tends to give assurances to respondents whose words cautiously emerge from the absence of an existing interpretive framework. Whether consciously or as a byproduct of her marginalized status, Davids defied the stringent notions of time to which art historians and writers typically subscribe.

Her awareness of art history and her understanding of the institutional function of museums are crucial to how we might begin responding to the many artworks left in her absence. Lyle Rexer of *The Brooklyn Rail* recently wrote of Davids, “In her basement, she painted the Matisses, the Picassos (an artist she apparently didn’t care for), the late Impressionists, the Soutines, Fauvists, the Ensors, and who knows what else.”¹ Who knows what else. If only it had been possible to ask Davids while she was alive about her influences and any reverence—or irreverence—she may have held toward them. Davids may have been apprehensive to answer the typical questions that help ground an argument, perhaps her mental state would have rendered her inaccessible to such queries. It is hard to know from this vantage point in the years since her passing how or why the artist’s preoccupations took shape the way they did. We do know, however, that on at least three occasions she submitted her slides to museums for possible consideration.

In 1995, Ann Temkin, curator of twentieth century art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art respectfully passed on the opportunity even though she “enjoyed looking at the slides” that Davids had sent.² Again in 1996, Robert Storr, curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, politely thanked the unnamed recipient of his letter for showing him what they were doing but concluded he was not “in a position to take direct action in the form of exhibiting or acquiring” her work.³ A year later, in 1997, Lynn Corbett of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh appreciated the unsolicited materials that she was regrettably returning after some delay.⁴ We can be sure there were other rejections that Davids experienced in her lifetime, but the letters she received from these museums offer the most discernable traces of her aspirations that persisted despite mental illness. One wonders if she would have continued to alter her paintings in the same manner that she had if one of these responses produced a more favorable response.

The question of whether a work of art is ever complete is one that haunts any artist. In Davids’ case it is a particularly thorny question because it seems in the absence of any formal recognition the artist developed a methodology of revision and repetition that was carried out until she could not continue any longer. The misfortune of her circumstances helped produce Davids’ most potent contribution to the history of recent art. Her manner of painterly accretion finds few comparisons among Davids’ contemporaries. Jay DeFeo’s *The Rose* (1958–66) is often cited as an example of an artist’s obsessional return to a single painting, but there are others who defied the periodizing comfort of art history and the canonizing impulse of museums. There are innumerable artists whose obsessions have evaded recognition. The women in Davids’ paintings are contained and suspended by thick layers of paint. For every woman who appears visible to us as viewers there are countless others subsumed by each painting’s past life. It is hard to say how many women there are in Davids’ painted universe, but we can be sure that the ones we do not see are her most kindred spirits.

- Aram Moshayedi

¹ Lyle Rexer, “Following Franne Davids,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2024, <https://brooklynrail.org/2024/11/art/following-franne-davids/>.

² Rolando Corpus to Franne Davids, December 12, 1995, privately held by the Franne Davids Estate.

³ Robert Storr, letter, June 18, 1996, privately held by the Franne Davids Estate.

⁴ Lynn Corbett to Franne Davids, June 11, 1997, privately held by the Franne Davids Estate.