

For immediate release

barbican

Noah Davis

Barbican Art Gallery

6 February – 11 May 2025

Press Preview: Wednesday 5 February, 10am – 1pm

This exhibition is generously supported by Clore Wyndham.



L: Noah Davis, *Isis*, 2009. Mellon Foundation Art Collection © The Estate of Noah Davis. Courtesy The Estate of Noah Davis and David Zwirner. Photo: Kerry McFate.

R: Noah Davis, *Untitled*, 2015. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © The Estate of Noah Davis. Courtesy The Estate of Noah Davis and David Zwirner. Photo: Kerry McFate.

From 6 February 2025, the Barbican hosts the UK's first institutional survey of the late American artist **Noah Davis** (1983 – 2015), bringing together over 50 works spanning painting, sculpture and works on paper. This major exhibition, accompanied by a rich, multidisciplinary programme of events, charts the breadth of Davis's relentless creativity from 2007 to his untimely death in 2015. It offers a comprehensive overview of his practice in painting, curating and community-building as co-founder of the Underground Museum, Los Angeles.

Davis created a body of figurative paintings that explores the emotional, and fantastical, textures of everyday life. Based primarily in Los Angeles, he believed he had a “*responsibility to represent the people around me*” and drew on an expansive pool of references – anonymous vintage photography found in flea markets, personal archives, film and television, music, literature, art history and his imagination – to paint a cast of characters, some real, some fictional, that dive into swimming pools, sleep, dance and look at public art. Davis agilely moved between painting styles, often using unorthodox techniques and a diverse palette to create scenes that feel both realistic and dreamlike, joyful and melancholic.

Davis understood the power of art to uplift others and believed art was for everyone. In 2012, he and Karon Davis, his wife and fellow artist, co-founded the Underground Museum, a revered and much-loved institution in the historically Black and Latinx neighborhood of

Arlington Heights, Los Angeles. They converted four storefronts into a cultural centre that was free and open to all, transforming the car park into a garden planted with purple flowers in homage to Prince. In his lifetime, Davis used the Underground Museum as a studio, a site for residencies and an exhibition space, convincing the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) to lend their collection in a three-year partnership starting in 2014. By the time he died in 2015, he had planned 18 exhibitions for the Underground Museum using MOCA's collection, motivated by the desire to *"change the way people view art, the way they buy art, the way they make art."*

Organised chronologically and featuring loans from both public and private international collections, the exhibition features groups of paintings made between 2007 and 2015 that chart his interest in politics and current affairs, everyday life, ancient Egypt, family history, the racism of the American media, art history and architecture. The paintings are positioned alongside Davis's experimentations in sculpture, installation, works on paper and curation, giving special attention to the conceptual underpinnings of his practice, as well as his engagement with the complex histories of representation and image-making. The exhibition also includes a selection of Davis's eclectic source material, on display for the first time.

This gallery show is accompanied by a cross-arts series of events at the Barbican, inspired by Davis's spirit of creative togetherness and his vision for the Underground Museum. Activating multiple locations across the Centre, this multidisciplinary programme comprises a series of talks – including from American poet and playwright **Claudia Rankine** and jazz pianist and composer **Jason Moran** – as well as musical performances, workshops, exhibition tours, cinema screenings and wellness activities. The full programme is available [here](#).

Shanay Jhaveri, Head of Visual Arts at the Barbican, said: *"We are delighted to be bringing the work of Noah Davis to audiences here in the UK. A most original and uncanny painter to have emerged in recent years, Davis's distinctive vision captures the nuances of life with poignancy and depth, bridging personal and collective narratives in ways that profoundly connect with our times. This exhibition is an opportunity not only to celebrate his extraordinary legacy but to inspire dialogues around representation, identity, and community."*

Highlights of the exhibition include:

- **40 Acres and a Unicorn, 2007** – a painting of a young man riding a unicorn which emerges from a black background to blend the fantastical with the political. The work's title references the unrealised decree that formerly enslaved families freed during the American Civil War would be given '40 acres and a mule'.
- **Nobody, 2008** – the sole survivor of a series of three abstract paintings – the only abstract works Davis produced – depicting the shape of Nevada, a swing state in the 2004 US presidential election. Rendered in deep purple with glitter applied to the surface, the work blends republican red and democrat blue to consider how abstraction – rather than figuration – might be political.
- **Isis, 2009** – exhibited at his first solo show in 2009, this painting is inspired by ancient Egypt and portrays Davis's wife Karon as the titular Egyptian goddess of magic,

standing in front of a white clapboard house. Davis often drew on source material from different time periods to blend historical and contemporary imagery.

- **Savage Wilds, 2012** – a series of paintings shown for the first time since 2012 in which Davis cast his gaze on the white talk-show hosts of daytime television, notably their often racist and misogynistic portrayals of Black subjects for the sake of entertainment.
- **1975, 2013** – painted directly from photographs taken by Davis's mother in 1975. This series of mostly anonymous bodies in landscapes and urban settings demonstrates the artist's commitment to showing people in what he described as "normal scenarios".
- **Imitation of Wealth, 2013** – a partial re-staging within the Barbican Art Gallery of the first exhibition Davis curated and opened at the Underground Museum in 2013, in which the artist created 'imitations' of sculptures by Dan Flavin, Jeff Koons, Marcel Duchamp and Robert Smithson.
- **Seventy Works, 2014** – a selection of painted collages which combine images of friends, anonymous figures cut out from magazines, modernist sculptures and newspaper clippings.
- **Pueblo del Rio, 2014** – a series of paintings that reimagines one of the oldest, largest and most impoverished public housing developments in Los Angeles as a site for music, song and dance.
- **Untitled, 2015** – one of Davis's final paintings showing two girls lying on a sofa within a living room, a Rothko painting behind them.
- **Journey to the Moon (2003), 2015** – staged at the Underground Museum, *Journey to the Moon* – a solo show of the eponymous film by South African artist William Kentridge – was the first exhibition Davis curated using the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and stands as the only one he lived to see realised before his death in 2015.

Born in Seattle, Washington in 1983, Davis had his first painting studio in high school. He briefly studied film and conceptual art at Cooper Union in New York before leaving to pursue his own artistic education. By 2004 he had moved to LA and was working at the bookshop Art Catalogues, where he could feed his appetite for a wide-reaching history of culture and, in particular, painting. Drawing on the legacy of artists ranging from Caspar David Friedrich to Mark Rothko, Romare Bearden to Kerry James Marshall, he developed a distinctive painterly style – one that engaged deeply with both the histories of representation and abstraction. Davis blended historical and contemporary source material to create images of Black life that are unbound by a specific time or place. To show Black life with beauty, majesty, joy and humour was both a risk and a necessity; Davis painted at a time of acute racism and systemic violence in the US, where identity was often weaponised as difference through the circulation of images in the media and on newly formed social media platforms.

Noah Davis is initiated by Barbican, London and DAS MINSK, Potsdam where it is on display from 7 September 2024 – 5 January 2025. The exhibition will tour to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, from 8 June – 31 August 2025.

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Notes to Editors

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Press images available online

The image sheet is available on [press room](#). Please contact the press team for high-res images.

Barbican Press Room

All Barbican Centre press releases, news announcements and the Communication team's contact details are listed on our website at <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/>

Press Tickets

All press tickets will need to be booked 48 hours in advance by contacting a member of the Barbican's Visual Arts Press team. Our inbox is monitored Monday to Friday, 10am-6pm. Please let us know if you have any access requirements.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Barbican Art Gallery, Silk Street, London, EC2Y 8DS

www.barbican.org.uk

Tickets

Tickets on sale [here](#).

Exhibition

Noah Davis is at Barbican Art Gallery from 6 February to 11 May 2025 and is curated by Wells Fray-Smith (Curator) and Eleanor Nairne (Curator) with Kitty Gurnos-Davies (Curatorial Assistant). Architectural design is by Freehaus. Graphic design is by A Practice for Everyday Life. The exhibition is initiated by Barbican, London and DAS MINSK, Potsdam where it is on display 7 September 2024 – 5 January 2025. The exhibition will tour to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles 8 June – 31 August 2025.

Book

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue co-published with Prestel and DAS MINSK, featuring original essays by Tina M. Campt, Wells Fray-Smith, Paola Malavassi, Eleanor Nairne, Claudia Rankine, with contributions by Dawoud Bey, T.J. Clarke, Francesco Clemente, Karon Davis, Marlene Dumas, Helen Molesworth and Jason Moran. Designed by A Practice for Everyday Life. Price: £40

Events

Alongside the exhibition, a programme of events inspired by Davis's spirit of creative togetherness and the vision of The Underground Museum comprises a series of talks, musical performances, workshops, exhibition tours, cinema screenings and wellness activities. The full programme is available [here](#).

Barbican Art Gallery

Our visual arts programme embraces art, architecture, design, fashion, photography and film. Many of our exhibitions explore the interconnections between disciplines, periods and cultures, and aim to imagine the world in new ways. Designers, artists and architects are our collaborators in this process.

Our exhibitions are complemented by comprehensively researched catalogues and a full range of public events. In partnership with renowned museums and art galleries, many of our exhibitions travel to reach both national and international audiences.

About the Barbican

The Barbican is a catalyst for creativity, sparking possibilities for artists, audiences, and communities. We showcase the most exciting art from around the world, pushing traditional artistic boundaries to entertain and inspire millions of people, create connections, provoke debate, and reflect the world we live in.

We are an international arts and events centre rooted firmly in our own neighbourhood, collaborating with local communities and putting the City of London on the map as a destination for everybody. Central to our purpose is supporting emerging talent and shaping opportunities that will accelerate the next generation of creatives.

As a not-for-profit, we rely on the generosity of individuals and organisations, including our principal funder the City of London Corporation. Every ticket purchased, donation made, and pound earned supports our arts and learning programme and enables the widest possible range of people to experience the joy of the arts.

Opened in 1982, the Barbican is a unique and audacious building, recognised globally as an architectural icon. As well as our theatres, galleries, concert halls and cinemas, we have a large conservatory with over 1,500 species of plants and trees, a library, conference facilities, public and community spaces, restaurants, bars, and a picturesque lakeside oasis.

We're proud to be the home of the [London Symphony Orchestra](#), and a London base of the [Royal Shakespeare Company](#). We regularly co-commission, produce and showcase the work of our other associates and partners including the [Academy of Ancient Music](#), [BBC Symphony Orchestra](#), [Boy Blue](#), [Cheek by Jowl](#), [Darbar](#), [Doc'n Roll Film Festival](#), [Drum Works](#), [EFG London Jazz Festival](#), [London Palestine Film Festival](#), [Serious](#), and [Trafalgar Theatre Productions](#).

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