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NOAH DAVIS'S *ISIS* IN THREE ACTS



Noah Davis, *ISIS*, 2009. Oil and acrylic on linen, 48 x 48 inches, 121.9 x 121.9 cm.
© The Estate of Noah Davis. Courtesy The Estate of Noah Davis and David Zwirner.

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ACT I

I return to artist Noah Davis after several months that lapsed from the last time I wrote about him, as I encounter his painting *Isis* projected on a screen upon entering an art writing class in Salzburg Fortress. The program I am taking part in would last for two weeks and each morning thirty minutes would be dedicated to writing about this painting. It is a training in observing, of entwining one's own presence with that of a work of art, of finding silent dialogue between the two. In those moments of transformation, of embodying the positions of the one who observes, feels, and analyses, one can exercise some authority or restrain, or can meaningfully negotiate between these positions—to be incisive yet generous, not to be too overbearing or too timid. Rarely, at least in art history—the 'proper' science of art that emerged from the Western need to classify and order—can one allow oneself to be too emotional. Art writing provides many avenues to channel feelings, but rarely do they lead to personal reflections in art historical texts. Science and emotions—how to weigh in on something that feels personal and yet is removed from the immediacy of one's presence in the world? How can an art historian travel these registers, and yet be objective and allow for this objectivity that science requires, established through the burdening of art with evaluative weight, with concepts, methods, and approaches, to dominate while preserving the positionality regarding one's own circumstances? How to intertwine the two so that both offer what they may? And could this 'what may be' be reinscribed into something bigger, more permanent than transitory thoughts and feelings? How to write about art from a personal pain, and where this could lead?

Upon seeing *Isis*, an uncanny feeling of returning to the beginning of our encounter, many months ago, resurfaces. Much time and work elapsed in-between to account for a conscious and deliberate relationship. It is more of an undertone, like those undertones in *Isis*. A persistent whitish grayness behind the solid yellow and smudges of green and blue that define its flicker world. Making and unmaking; a temptation to create and to destroy are intertwined here in a consuming presence. Starting with oneself and moving towards art can contort and twist the insides in unexpected manners. The colours and feelings jump at each other, wrestle, and wound. It is much of this in writing about art, and keeping it close, while wounding happens elsewhere. It is a constant exercise of being observant, and recalling observations when required. A constant alertness that drains, and makes and unmakes one's inner structures.

Noah Davis (1983-2015) started his artistic journey at Cooper Union School of Art in New York, and later moved to Los Angeles where he continued discovering the art canon and Black topics. In exploring the legacy of Western art and combining it with the Black experience, Davis wanted to change “the way people view art, the way they buy art, the way they make art.”² He painted with assured gesture that at

² Noah Davis, from the quote published on the webpage of the Underground Museum, Accessed 18 Feb 2026, <https://theunderground.museum/about/>.

moments seemed to falter to the will of the paint, allowing for smudges and streaks to remain prominent in his painterly field. An ongoing negotiation between different forces. An interest in Black everyday life is the prominent feature of his work, but he did not hold to this strictly. His vision and approach to art surpassed the notion of the mere illustrator to that of a visionary who sought impact and change beyond institutional limits. “I believe that concealing too much in theory is problematic and that art can function in everyday life. I strive for an artistic legacy that not only transcends blackness but confluences and impacts all cultures,” he remarked, nearing the end of his life.³

Salzburg fortress, also known as Fortress Hohensalzburg, is blindingly white this morning; it almost hurts your eyes to look at its imposing walls. I remember Claudia Rankine and her words, unexpectedly, but fittingly for this moment. This scorching whiteness and Davis’s adventures through the oppressing whiteness of art history bring to mind Rankine’s poetic exclamation about white walls that “white in.”

White portraits on white walls signal ownership of all,
even as white walls white in.⁴

It is difficult to think outside of it, of this white canon of art history, of learned methodologies, theories, and approaches, and so one can exercise what happens at the juncture. The inner and the outer, learnt and felt.

It is August, the summer of scorching heat in the city, and the breeze on one of the lesser Alpine peaks where the Fortress is situated offers some relief. I drift away from the painting, but I don’t feel like revisiting, exploring in detail what this work may or may not give, what emotions it may stir, what attitudes it may provoke. A sense of sadness lingered while I wrote a review feature of the late Davis’s exhibition at DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam, Germany. The pain of knowing about a life lost, an artistic expression stifled, a socialist understanding of the role of art in revolutionary transformation cut short in its reach. The feelings that got mixed up with personal circumstances, also marked by a loss. To which grounds to attach this work?

I want to think about it through Davis’s prism of art as a force for social change, as a direct participant in shaping our social reality, as a practice with meaning beyond the institution. However, a recall to memory how knowledge is produced, and what it may serve, hamper this academic attempt. It is a rigor of this approach that seems flimsy and flawed, a chip in a universe of what art does. Sociologist Jana Bacevic writes about epistemic positioning, starting from the hard fact that certain academic practices reproduce and amplify social inequalities. She continues with a typology of epistemic positioning, noting that this positioning is “often used as a practice of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Claudia Rankine, “Sound and Fury,” Verse Daily, Accessed 18 Feb 2026, <https://www.versedaily.org/2021/soundandfury.shtml>.

devaluation (original emphasis).”⁵ I think of my position and what this writing aims and offers, how it could be read and what intimacies it allows, both regarding the artwork and myself. In this veering between the two, a process congeals, away from a scientific paper filled with references, with clear methodology and gravitas of doing science. Instead, I distill one approach, and one moment, and see it through while navigating the personal. I go through three acts of thinking and feeling, where old and new meet and dialogue. What knowledge, if any, does this produce or reproduce?

I write about *Isis* from the acts of observing and knowing, that seem at moments intertwined, like in Act II, or completely personal, like in Act III. It is both a process of setting oneself inside and aside from certain structures of knowledge, from taking a firm epistemological stance, and instead offering a text that drifts, and offers instabilities, and moments of contact with the familiar and the unfamiliar, things that are in plain sight and those that linger below the surface.

With the muted yellow wings, the girl, and the unsightly backyard, the painting follows Davis’s visual language of combining everyday motifs with his recognizable understated treatment—quiet colours, lack of detailed characterization, and a palette that seems to be in the process of becoming, like a matter emerging out of some primordial mush, not yet fully formed. The same goes for writing. The process of viewing and close inspection falters before *Isis*. Everything is there, at the forefront, yet forms emerge and dissolve before our eyes. The painting resists resolution and perhaps this is Davis’s legacy—an insistence on art as a living, unstable force that interrupts, compelling us to see differently.

ACT II

There is a tendency in art history to attach forms to their historical predecessors. To find links in shapes, intentions, and concepts, as if forging a bridge between the past and the present. Creating a comforting continuation, an assured grasp of time and the human place in it. The science of iconography reigned supreme over meaning, allowing for images to exist in a constant loop with other images, time periods, understandings, sensibilities. It uncovered a trove of hidden symbolism, interpreting form and content within a complex nexus of personal and public attitudes, and the feelings of a time, in the most general sense.

I look at Noah Davis’s *Isis*, and think of the father of modern iconography, Erwin Panofsky, and what he would say about it. It is an unusual attachment of old to new, of what is now a part of history of art history and the emerging world that requires new methods and approaches. However, I go through Panofsky’s layers, one by one, peeling Noah’s painting from primary to secondary subject matter, leading to its deeper levels and intrinsic meaning. I set off each part with Panofsky’s quote.

⁵ Jana Bacevic, “Epistemic Injustice and Epistemic Positioning: towards an Intersectional Political Economy,” *Current Sociology* 71(6): 1122-40.

Pre-iconographic

*The world of pure forms thus recognized as carriers of primary or natural meanings may be called the world of artistic motifs. An enumeration of these motifs would be a pre-iconographical description of the work of art.*⁶

The painting comprises a look into the artist's backyard, where his wife, Karon Davis, stands in a yellow leotard, arms bent at the elbows to hold a yellow drapery, forming an impression of wings. The colour pools and spreads on the ground, around her feet, rises to the textile in her hands, and pales over her bodice. This unusual and yet evocative scene is full of contrasts and both sharp and soft transitions between registers. The centrality of the figure with its yellow aureole, however, speaks of its iconographical importance. It subtly takes hold of the space, as if she will for sure soar, and leave the limits of the canvas.

It is a description of the work that makes it seem more relatable, more of the everyday, although its execution, its formation into a dream-like and porous world betrays attempts at realism. It is of the everyday, and yet it eludes this everydayness. Its form carries this everydayness as a temporary badge, a marking of change. And so the first layer leaves much wanted, much to explain. It is a gauze that seeks context, concept, a theory to be fully removed. But who is to do this removal? The arrogance of the seer.

Themes and Concepts

*...when we loosely speak of 'subject matter as opposed to form' we chiefly mean the sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter, viz. the world of specific themes or concepts manifested in images, stories and allegories, as opposed to the sphere of primary or natural subject matter manifested in artistic motifs.*⁷

In 2010, Noah Davis created a series of paintings inspired by the Isis and Osiris myth. Following the murder and dismemberment of her husband Osiris at the hands of his brother Seth, his wife Isis gathered his parts and briefly resurrected him, long enough for her to conceive their son Horus. Isis is often represented with a solar disc or wings.

From the painting's title the connection between the myth and the painting is hard to avoid. Karon is here taking the form of the ancient goddess, whose yellow wings hold the power of healing. It is the domestic setting and intimacy of the backyard that allow the image to cross the purely symbolic and enter the realm of the everyday, revealing magic in the ordinariness. It exists between the two, and is therefore challenging. Its title disturbs the nominality of gesture, while, in turn, the

⁶ Ervin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1972), 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

gesture responds with ambiguity. It is and it is not a myth that stirs the visual, and it leaves as much as it erases the traces of both. Again, the dribs and mushes of colour set it off.

The Egyptian myth is the one of resurrection and protection, love lost and briefly found. It evokes the continuous struggles between different forces that tore at this world, and the hope that glows golden. The yellow as well would do. A tinted, decayed yellow that is often found around, in details, objects, and other things of our environments. It could be as well attached to a person, a beacon of hope.

Synthesis

*The discovery and interpretation of these 'symbolical' values (which are generally unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the object of what we may call iconography in a deeper sense: of a method of interpretation which arises as a synthesis rather than as an analysis.*⁸

Thinking about the form and content of the work within Panofsky's model, *ISIS* draws on iconographic traditions while destabilizing them through the painting's unexpected setting. The quotidian of the image rejects art hierarchies and symbolic values attached to it, demonstrating the inherent language of intimacy in *ISIS* that synthesizes history and the present, showing both the permanence of mythic narratives and the contingencies of lived experience.

The Black subject and the artist's intentions synthesize an artistic incursion into how art is known and cuts its branch of expectability to sift through the marginalized and non-present (not absent, in a sense of a vacant place where a subject should have been, but in a sense of not being included in the presence as such, being present through one's own erasure), like Rankine's white portraits that signify presence, while the non-present whites them in. Allowing for this non-present to take its place in the present and to visualize its presence, Davis actualized an art historical rehaul, participated in it, and presented an expansive understanding of the role of art in a continuous struggle for equality. A vision that takes account, emerges in a form that is still forming, and takes its place among the representational hierarchies that it tries to level. It is both a personal and a collective hope in change, in the possibility of existing, and announcing one's presence. A confluence of intentions that impacts all cultures.

⁸ Ibid, 8.

ACT III

I read somewhere that your face is reflected in the window, next to a woman you loved. I look at the image again and again, and I cannot see it. It is a small reproduction; I don't have the means to go and see your work in person, if it is shown anywhere at all now. I read about your Underground Museum and what you wanted to do with it—how you wanted to bring cultural outlets to places that hadn't had any, the shows you planned to mount. I think about this loss.

The girl in *Isis* stares at me directly. Even on this small screen I notice her piercing eyes, her stern expression, her lips tightly pressed together. But I don't see you. How the loss erases. Even the tree does not cross over that window that supposedly shows you. It does not try to find you, does not sense you there. It is just a dark, depressing square, a possibility of an existence long gone. The branches stop at the window's frame, dissolve into waves of dusty greys that trickle down, disappear, as you did. The green only humbly touches its top, anointing it, this emptiness of form where you are.

I think about loss. About 300 billion stars that make our Milky Way. And yet, for us, nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape. I think of the white of the house, of milk, of the girl's cheek, flashed against the day. I think about cancer, yours, about all cancers, and I wonder on which of these billion stars you settled. Where are you among them? Are you waiting for this girl there, somewhere?

She spreads her wings, but she cannot take off. That is our curse here.

I think about loss and how it settles in corners, in the nooks of our thoughts, in our inner structures, gnawing at our foundations. Each moment, second, hour, a chip falls off. It lingers until it's dust. Dusted. Leaving space for another. It's like rain: slow and steady disintegration, disappearance, one drop after another upon touching a surface, any surface. Like that tree you painted, the corners of your painting drip and smear. Perhaps something new will appear there.

I look again at the window. You are not there. Not yet. I think about loss—how it stretches you, pokes at you, kicks you, and caresses you. Because there is also an unspoken tenderness to it: to knowing about this never-again, to accepting this condition. ▣

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