

lisa corinne davis

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organized by susan hoeltzel lehman college art gallery

lisa corinne davis: Index



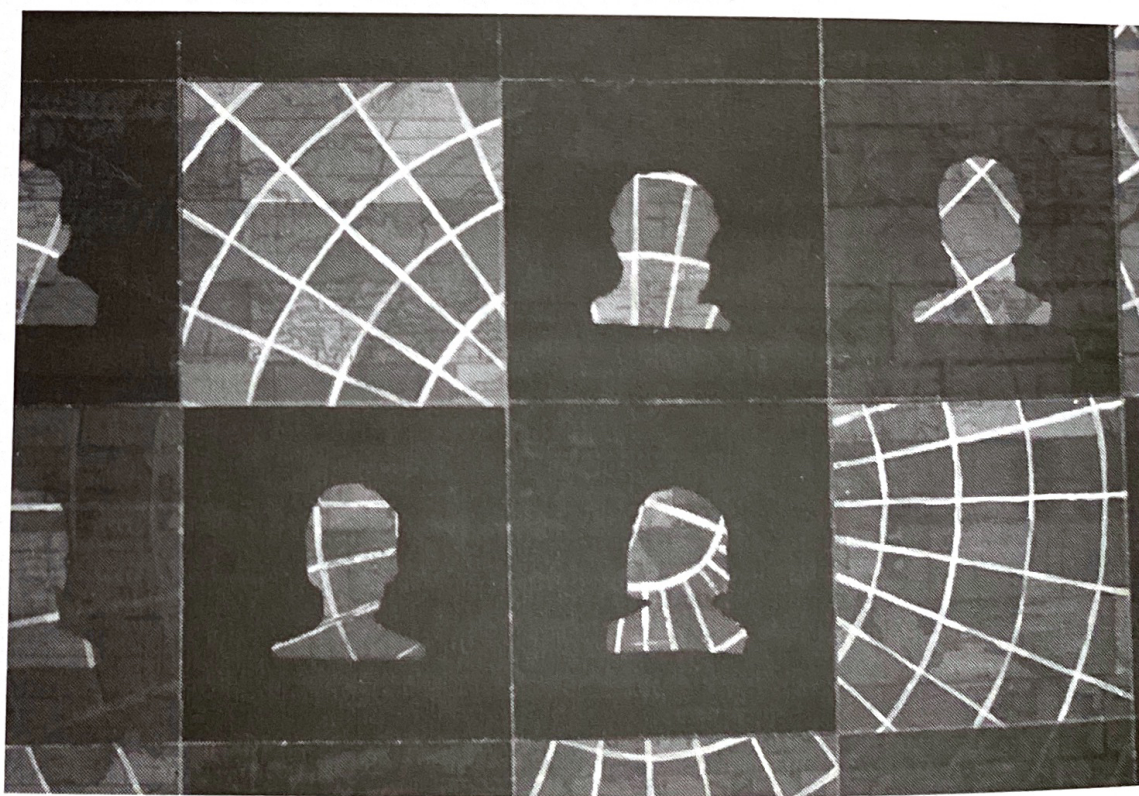
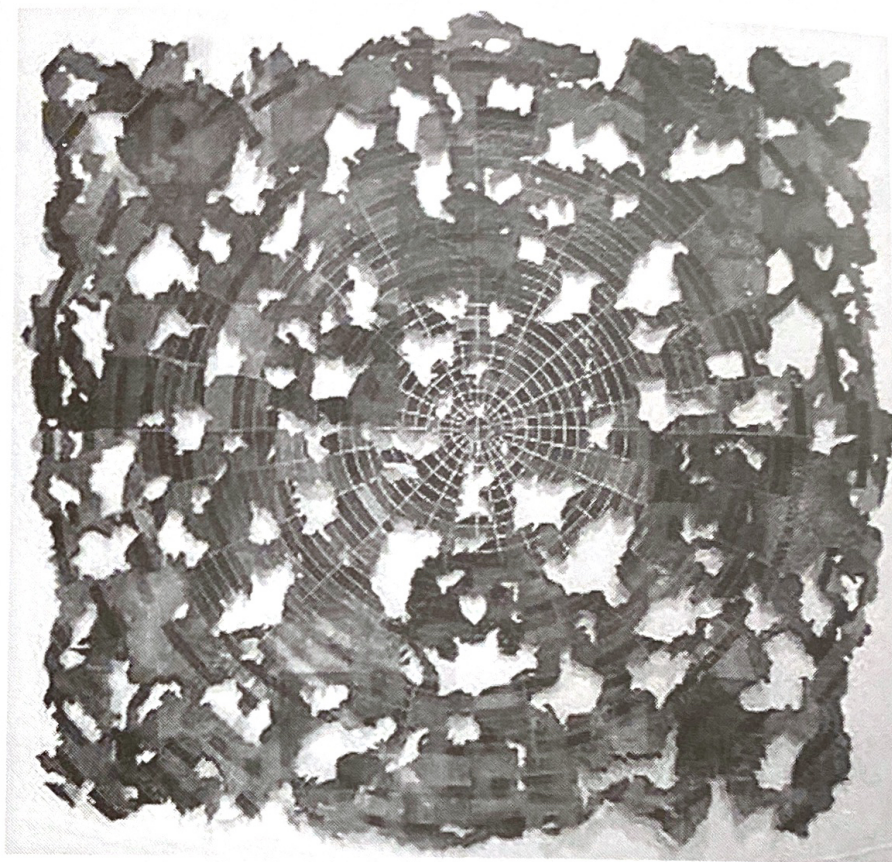
Indirection #8 (detail), 2000

From the beginning of her career Lisa Corinne Davis has probed the complexities of race, culture, and history in mixed media works that might best be described as visual reflections. Existing somewhere between collage, painting and drawing, the works provide a metaphorical reservoir in which form and content merge and meaning seems embedded in the materials themselves. At issue are the assumptions we make on the basis of ethnicity and race and the difficulty of seeing the individual apart from the group. Davis' work provides an inquiry into the nature of how others know us.

Beginning with the self-portraits of the *Heritage* series (1986-94) that explore a personal identity, Davis' work has evolved from the autobiographical to an examination of the individual in the context of collective society. In the *Heritage* series Davis' features are layered with objects and with images, primarily of women, signifying a distinct culture—Alice in Wonderland, African sculpture, Renaissance paintings. These provide cultural icons and literary and art historical personae, to be referenced and explored in relation to the self. Their open-ended presentation encourages the viewer to work out the relationship between the two. Graphite veils the ink portraits. Found materials, such as bones, black-eyed peas and

hair, reinforce the visual imagery and convey a metaphoric content. In this series materials and imagery are constructed layer upon layer, like archeological strata, through which the viewer delves. It is a methodology that continues to evolve in Davis' work. In an artist statement from this period in which Davis describes herself as an African-American woman of mixed heritage, she questions the "labels and fictions" that posit "the notion of cultural purity" as an "artificial simplicity." Given the geographic mobility of contemporary society and, for that matter, the migrations that have always been a part of human history, it is hard to argue that culture and race are fixed entities. In the *Heritage* works, Davis asserts the primacy of the individual and explores identity as an intricate fusion of cultural, historical, and biographical circumstances.

Moving from the autobiographical to a consideration of the broader issues of stereotyping and labeling with *Essential Traits* (1995-1998), Davis began to develop a new visual vocabulary of symbols and structure. In this series an underlying grid provides the organizational principle for work, which is an increasingly complex weave of ideas, materials, and imagery. Collage is the basic technique, and paper is the primary material—including the pages of books, maps, tracing paper, hand-made Abacca paper, papier maché, Xerox paper, and



Top – *Indirection* #5, 1999
 Bottom – *Index* #2 (detail), 2000



Essential Traits #7 (detail), 1996

vellum. In *Essential Traits No. 7*, Davis uses the pages of an old American history text, placed end to end in a vertical scroll-like format. The pages are stained with ink and mounted on canvas. In this work Davis edits both text and image. With black ink and white colored pencil, she adds portraits of those omitted from history and scratches out and replaces passages of this outdated Eurocentric text that once provided a historical canon. The subtle and understated visual form of this work tempers a more radical intent.

Portraits of individual people, which Davis finds in an array of newspapers including the foreign press, are built up to create a mass in which both the group and the individual are visible (as in *Essential Traits #8*). In some works these photo-based images are traced and translated into line drawings conveying a distinct individual; in others they become cutout as a silhouette, a negative space, an anonymous every man or empty vessel on which to project ideas about the group. They are uniform—cut from templates—democratized and made equal. The stories of their daily lives surround them on the pages of newspapers.

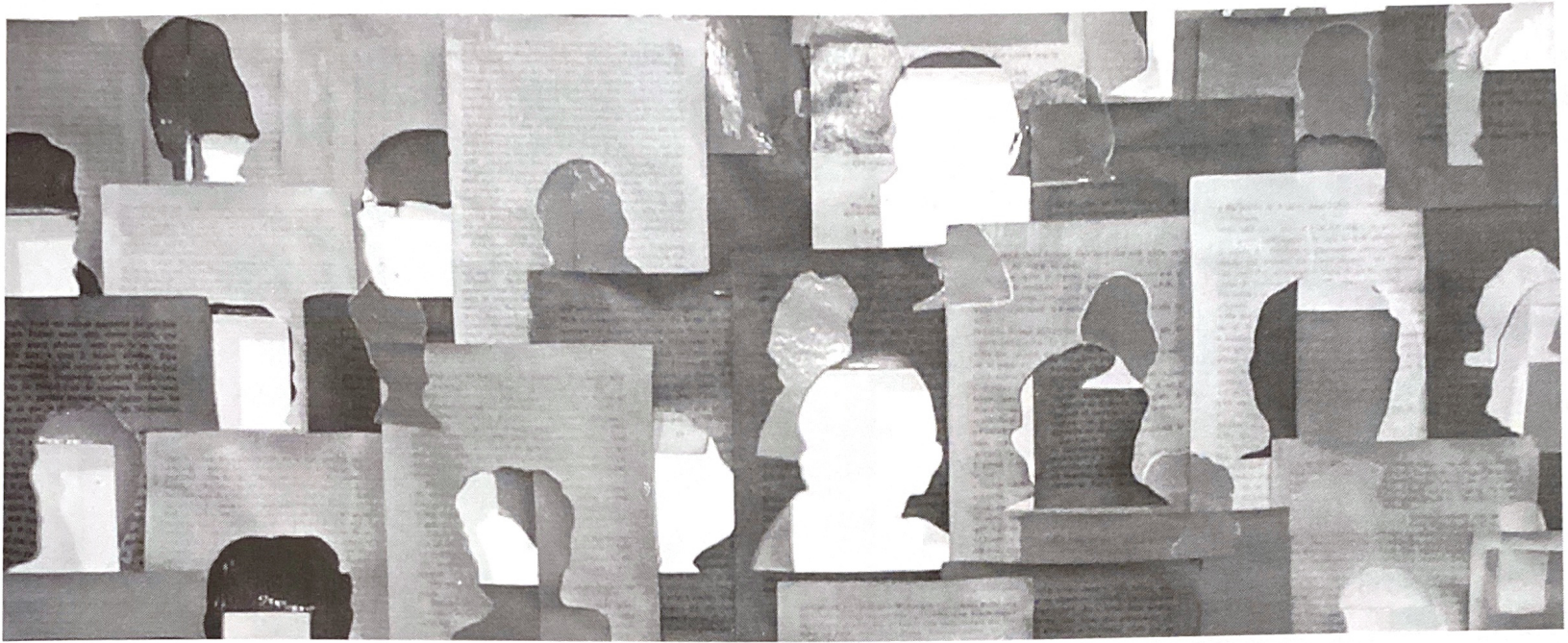
Materials are mined for their suggestive references—vellum becomes a metaphor for skin, papier maché pulp made from foreign language newspapers alludes to ethnic

diversity, and collaged maps refer to the origins and migrations of people throughout the world. Davis' palette, mostly warm earth tones—terracottas, ochres, and umbers—evoke variations of skin color. As physical objects, these large, mixed media works often hang like tapestries with rich textural surfaces. The translucence of the vellum, tracing paper and acrylic washes, as well as the penetrated, negative spaces, invite the viewer to dig through the layers to content below.

In more recent works, the *Indirection* and *Index* series, Davis further codifies the structure of information, pushing the work to greater abstraction both of imagery and of ideas. She works with the logic of a poet rather than demographer, setting up categories, collecting data, coding information, and creating pseudo graphs and charts in a highly personal idiom. Maps are sometimes overlaid with topographical indications or radiating latitude and longitude lines that also read as targets. Lines plot the course of rivers, railroad tracks, and roads. Parts of the world are juxtaposed incongruously, suggesting a psychological affinity rather than a literal position. Bright fluorescent colors, used along with more naturalistic skin tones, still reference "skin" by making it clear that it is an arbitrary system from which one draws no real information about the individual. Sections of



Essential Traits #11, 1997



top – *Index #6 (detail)*, 2001
 bottom – *Essential Traits #11 (detail)*, 1997

the work are organized by color and seem to track the groups. Works, such as *Index #5*, which rely in large part on paint, seem to derive much of their structure and design from collage technique.

Davis focuses in many of the works on those aspects of the individual that might identify the person as part of a group—skin color, language, and geographic origin. In *Index #4*, she uses fingerprints, a highly individual physical characteristic, yet one that is impossible to reduce to those categories. In this work, thousands of fingerprints transferred onto small, painted pieces of vellum are pieced together like a quilt. Sections are bracketed in bright fluorescent colors suggesting groupings that alternately read as graphs. In another work,

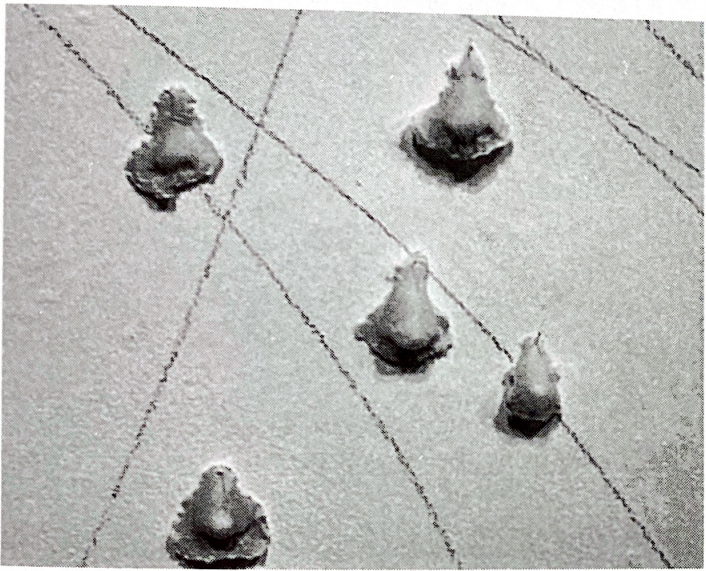
David, Jonathan, Sally, Reiner . . ., a large-scale installation, hundreds of noses cast from friends are scattered across the gallery wall. Made of handmade paper, the noses are shaped by draping the wet paper over the plastic mold created from the cast. Along the sides, surnames refer to the subject, and lines connect to corresponding noses. In this work the noses, while demonstrating subtle variations, are difficult to identify. In fact it is the names that suggest the most about the individual. In *Index #6*, pages of novels in foreign languages—French, Polish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Thai among them—are painted in beige, pinks, magenta, yellows, and browns. Each page has a cut silhouette, suggesting a personal narrative and an individual life. The pages overlap, altering and creating a mix of colors within the outline of the silhouettes. It is an overall pattern in which the individuals, inseparable from the group, are woven into an interconnecting fabric.

This exhibition provides a look at the evolution of the work of Lisa Corinne Davis over the course of sixteen years and through the four major series. It is a window onto the career of an important artist as it unfolds.

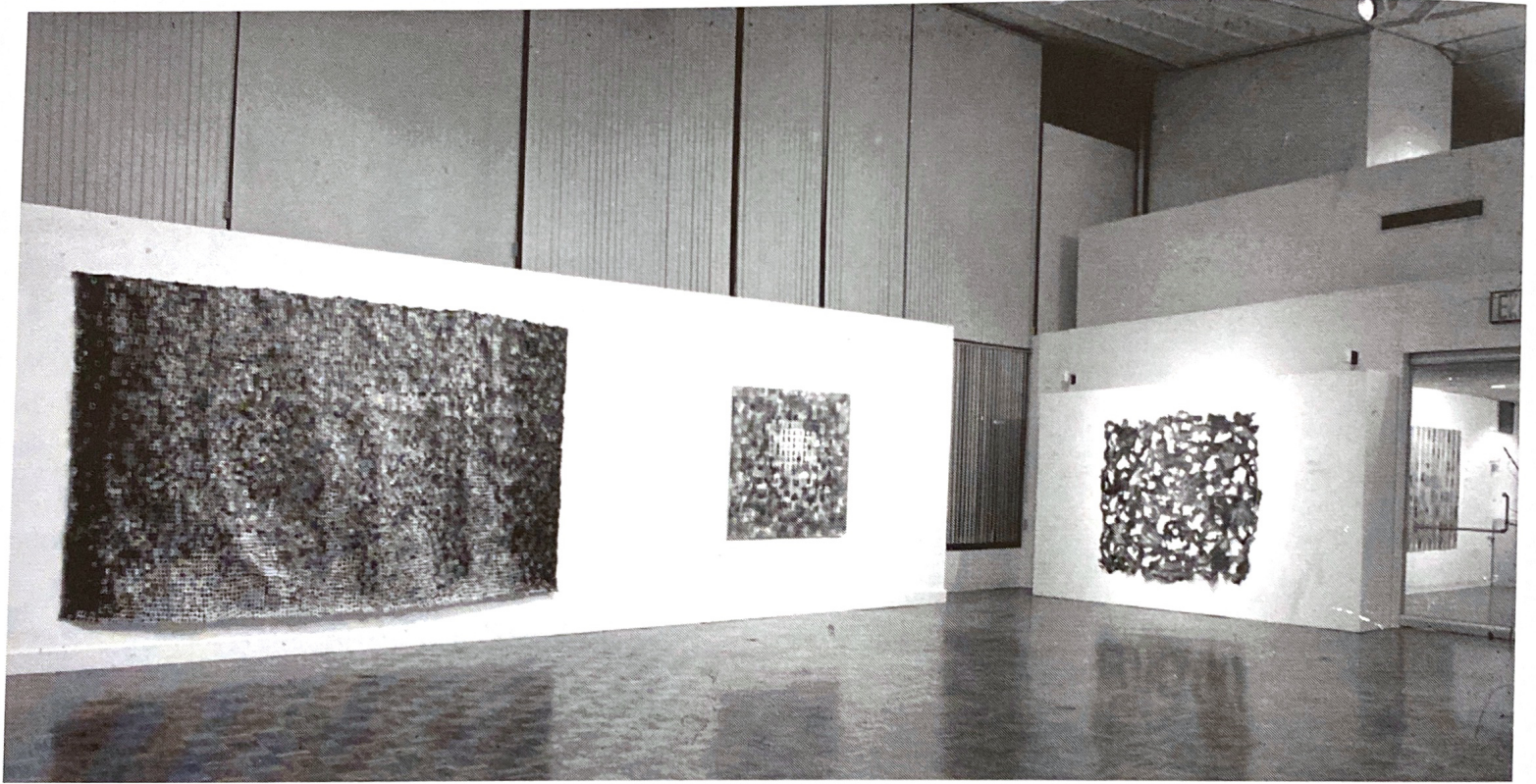
—Susan Hoeltzel



Index #4 (detail), 2000



top – Installation view – David, Johnathan, Sally, Reiner..., 2001
bottom - Detail



Installation view



Index #7 (detail), 2001

Our early 21st century moment seems a time when the question of creative originality exemplifies, either pessimistically a hopeless dead-end or, optimistically the perfect peak of the mountain in a Sisyphean tale. The latter marks a place in creativity as part of an artistic cycle, an ad infinitum game, where creative advancements always eventually lead to a space pregnant with new opportunity. While computer technology churns out new goods on a daily basis to feed the corporate appetite for fresh consumers on a global scale, contemporary art has adorned itself in the cloak of repetition. And this is not necessarily a bad thing. Existential faith in the individual impulse still represents fertile space for the freshest and the newest in originality, in the literal sense, as in never been seen, never been heard, and never been felt, until that moment.

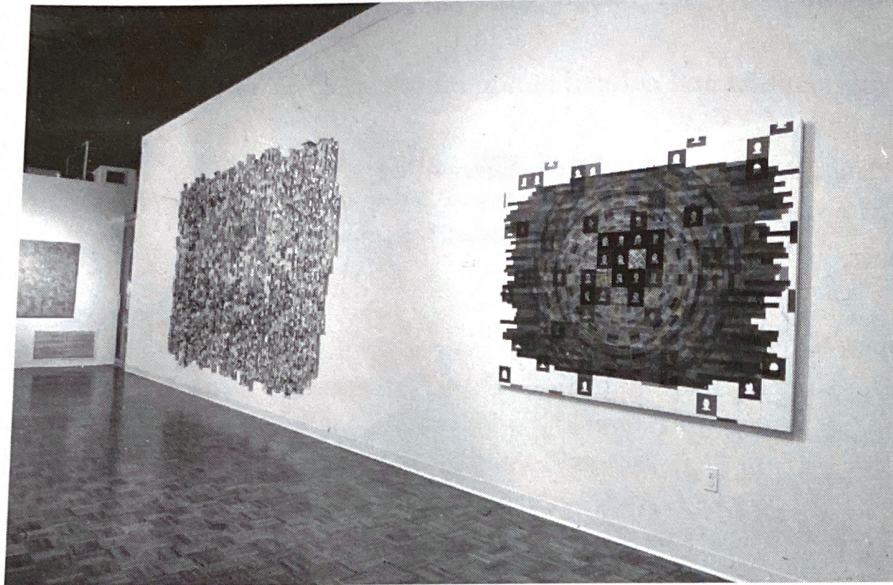
In the recent paintings of Lisa Corinne Davis you get the sense that she is working with a very personal vocabulary to make sense of an impersonal though historic present in painting, rooted in repetition. In painting, the deployment of the grid is one of the most basic and simultaneously significant attributes of twentieth century modernism. The grid, open yet closed, structured but free, formulaic though often unscientific, and divisional though unifying, is representative of a blank slate, possessing "several structural properties which make it inherently

susceptible to vanguard appropriation," as Rosalind Krauss noted in the early 1980s. Davis believes in the grid, has faith in the grid. Her paintings are about meaning, more than the gestural figure ground relationships of much earlier examples, for instance Robert Ryman or Agnes Martin. It is a process of abstraction in which the artist is perpetually defining herself through a specific vocabulary of forms that have found a home in the space of the grid. Though formally refined and well constructed (her paintings look built to last), her attitude to abstract painting and refinement is not merely formal. It is expressive, that is to say that, she is giving you something to think about, to feel, to ascertain with all your perceptive capabilities. While she laboriously layers the surface of her paintings with information in the form of maps, book pages in various languages, and unidentifiable silhouettes, this found material is often obscured in the finishing. Yet, the trace remains.

Davis' most recent series of paintings, *Index*, take these elements of a personal index as structural referents. They define the painting as do the precise lines going vertically and horizontally across the surface of the canvas. There is also a cultural trace in the form of the found texts and maps, and in the diversity of the silhouettes of various people though they remain only as great as the sum of their parts. Randomly placed,



Essential Traits #10 (detail), 1997



Installation view

these bits of information offer little in the way of allegory but the dense, all-over field, in turn, exerts a pronounced emphasis on the minutiae of individual differences. Her palette, though constantly being refined, over the past few years, is marked by the accumulation of Fall colors (yellow oxide, burnt sienna, and orange). The systemic and heavy layering of tracing paper, found paper, drawing and paint is never taken to the purity of total abstraction leaving them to evoke abstract imagery as a referential aspect of daily life. And although a system is being deployed, from a distance there is the warmth of her chosen colors and the sense of a decisively beautiful painting.

Through the process of working with a repetitive central form, Davis is confronting the dilemma of much recent abstraction by taking her own path, avoiding the burden of modernist purity and the equally limiting postmodern tropes of content specificity to make highly original paintings.

—Franklin Sirmans

exhibition checklist

(Black) Heritage Search #26, 1991, linoleum cut print with oil pastel and colored pencil on paper, 12 3/4" x 12 3/4"

(Black) Heritage Search #33, 1991, linoleum cut print with graphite and colored pencil on paper, 13" x 12 3/4"

Essential Traits #7, 1996, ink and colored pencil on old American history book (on canvas), 61 1/2" x 51 1/2"

Essential Traits #10, 1997, ink and colored pencil on paper, 72" x 48"

Essential Traits #11, 1997, ink and colored pencil on paper, 60" x 48"

Indirection #5, 1999, acrylic and colored pencil on handmade paper, 70" x 72"

Indirection #8, 2000, acrylic and paper on canvas, 54 3/4" x 54 3/4"

Index #2, 2000, acrylic and paper on canvas, 55" x 70"

Index #4, 2000, acrylic and ink on vellum, 91" x 143"

Index #5, 2001, ink, tracing paper and acrylic on canvas, 64" x 94"

Index #6, 2001, acrylic on book pages, 98" x 161"

Index #7, 2001, ink, tracing paper and acrylic on canvas, 49" x 49"

David, Jonathan, Sally, Reiner . . . , 2001, Abacca paper, 96" x 480"

lisa corinne davis

Born Baltimore, MD.
Lives and works in New York City

Education

1980-1983 MFA, Hunter College, New York
1978-1980 BFA, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York
1976-1978 Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

Solo Exhibitions

2001 *Index*, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY
2000 *Ontologies*, June Kelly Gallery, New York
1998 *Chartings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York
Lisa Corinne Davis: *Indirection*, Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ
1997 *Essential Traits*, Longwood Gallery, Bronx Council for the Arts, New York
1994 Dell Pryor Galleries, Detroit, MI
Transparent Brown, Halsey Gallery, School of the Arts, College of Charleston, SC
Layered, Municipal Gallery, Atlanta, GA
Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, VA
1993 *Mixed Media*, Print Club, Philadelphia, PA

Group Exhibitions

2001 *Buying Time*, New York Foundation for the Arts, New York NY
2000 *Book Art 12: Artist's Books from the Library and Research Center*,
National Museum of Women in the Arts, Wash., D.C.
1999 *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America*, organized by Dr. Gail Stavitsky, chief curator,
The Montclair Art Museum, NJ; catalogue, traveling exhibition
1998 *Black New York Artists of the 20th Century: Selections from the*
Schomburg Center Collections, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York
1997 *Generations*, A.I.R. 25th Anniversary, A.I.R. Gallery, New York
The Sense of Touch, Ceres Gallery, New York
1996 *Artist in the Marketplace Benefit Exhibition*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY
Prints, Dell Pryor Galleries, Detroit, MI
Allegory and Identity, Visceglia Art Center, Cadwell College, Cadwell, NJ
With All Deliberate Speed: Revisiting Race and Education, Aljira,
A Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ
1995 *Dieu Donne Papermill*, New York

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A Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ
1995 Dieu Donne Papermill, New York

Group Exhibitions (cont'd.)

- 1994 *Resisting Categories, Finding Common Ground, City Without Walls*, Newark, New Jersey
Art In General, New York
Gallery Annex, New York
Identity and Culture, African-American Heritage Exhibition, Barrett
House Galleries, Poughkeepsie, New York
- 1993 *Artist's Books*, curated by Tom Butters, Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
AIM Artists, curated by Lydia Yee and Marisol Nieves, The Bronx
Museum of the Arts, New York
Child's Play, curated by Holly Block, Art in General, New York
Nancy Bowen, Rosann Berry and Lisa Corinne Davis, curated by Rosann Berry,
Organization of Independent Artists, New York
Emerging Artists, curated by Corinne Jennings, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York
Granary Books, New York
- 1992 *Utopia/Distopia*, curated by Kathleen Edwards, Print Club, Philadelphia, PA
Pyramid Atlantic Workshop, Washington DC
Okeanos Gallery, Berkeley, CA
- 1991 Artist's Space, New York
- 1990 Artist's Space, New York
- 1988 Ridge Street Gallery, New York
- 1987 Ridge Street Gallery, New York
- 1986 The Schenectady Museum, Broughton Gallery, Schenectady, New York
United States Capital Building, Washington, DC
- 1984 Inroads Gallery, New York

Honors and Awards

- 2000 New York Foundation for the Arts, Artists' Fellowship
Printmaking Council of New Jersey, Master Printer Residency
- 1997 New York Foundation for the Arts, Artists' Fellowship
Dieu Donne Papermill, Workspace Program
- 1996 Bronx Council for the Arts, Project Room
- 1995-1996 National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artist Fellowship
- 1992 Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, Regional Fellowship
- 1979 Haskell Travel Fellowship, Pratt Institute

Bibliography

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Nieves, Marisol & Yee, Lydia, "Artist in the Marketplace," *Thirteenth Annual Exhibition Catalogue*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, 1993
Tallman, Susan, "Utopia/Dystopia," *The 67th Annual Competition: Prints Catalog*, The Print Club, Philadelphia, PA, 1992

Reviews

- Dan Bischoff, "Issues of Racial Identity," *The Sunday Star-Ledger*, September 20, 1998
Johnson, Ken, *The New York Times*, Friday, May 15, 1998
Goodnough, Abby, "Personal Responses to a Page in History," *The New York Times*; June 1996
Drake, Nicholas, "'Transparent Brown' requires some thought," *The Post and Courier*, November 1994
Colby, Joy Hankanson, "'QuietBrown' asserts itself in rich shadings of culture," *The Detroit News*, October 1994
Cullum, Jerry, "'Layered' shows complex quest for identity, individuality," *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution*, August 1994
Shine, James G., "Art Beat," *Daily Freeman*, January 1994
Stack, Sarah, "review/art," *taconic newspapers*, January 1994
Schetzel, Florence, "Enjoy!," *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 1994
Sozanski, Edward J., "Galleries," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 1993
Rice, Robin, "Foggy Bottoms," *Philadelphia City Paper*, November 1993

Art Book Publications

- 1992 *Birthmark*, art by Lisa Corinne Davis, poems by Simon Perchik (Flockophobic Press, One Hudson Street, New York)
1990 *The Red Coat*, linocuts by Lisa Corinne Davis, text by Jean McGarry (Flockophobic Press, One Hudson Street, New York)

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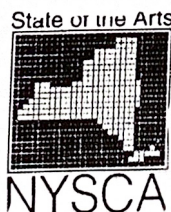
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