





# Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man An Oral History of Noah Davis

By Michael Slenske



**T**his was not supposed to be a eulogy. Though I'd heard Noah Davis was living with a rare form of cancer even before I met the young Seattle-born, Los Angeles-based artist this past January, it didn't strike either of us at the time that his illness would ever prevent us from sitting down for a series of interviews that would inform a profile for this magazine. Tragically, we were wrong. Every time Davis and I would zero in on a time to meet, he would have to undergo another round of chemo or was simply too tired in the wake of it to summon the tack-sharp mental focus and big-picture vision he was known for in the L.A. community and beyond.

My first encounter with Davis was at the Underground Museum—the independent institution he and his wife, artist Karon Davis, had carved out of a former storefront in the historic West Adams neighborhood of L.A. I initially visited the space in the spring of 2014 with artists Jhordan Dahl and Ariana Papademetropoulos. Though Davis didn't have a show up at the time, I was allowed to take a quick spin through his on-site painting studio, where I was stopped in my tracks. On the walls were several arresting examples of his bold figurative and abstract works, which reminded me of Marlene Dumas, Luc Tuymans, and Martin Kippenberger.

Over the past decade, Davis's often autobiographical, surrealist-leaning paintings referenced everything from the Richard Brautigan novel *In Watermelon Sugar* and *The Maury Povich Show* to swing states (in minimalist purple

abstractions) and Pueblo del Rio, the Richard Neutra- and Paul Revere Williams-designed projects in South L.A. They carried the narrative heft of his mentor, painter Henry Taylor, while retaining the firm control (and exploitation) of unexpected color reminiscent of Mark Rothko, his idol. In 2008, his painting of a slumbering young girl, *Basic Training 4*, was shown beside those of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mark Bradford, and David Hammons at the Rubell Family Collection's seminal "30 Americans" survey—which is currently on view at the Detroit Institute of Arts. His works were also exhibited by the Los Angeles galleries Roberts & Tilton, Papillion, and Wilding Cran, and earned a spot in the Studio Museum in Harlem's acclaimed 2012 "Fore" survey.

Though Davis became known—and subsequently pigeonholed by some—as a black figurative painter, he was always pushing himself into new territory with minimalist canvases, assemblage sculpture, and his most ambitious project, the Underground. His goal for the space was simple: Deliver museum-quality art—be it his brother Kahlil Joseph's 15-minute "m.A.A.d" video installation that provides a kaleidoscopic Kendrick Lamar-soundtracked tour of Compton or a nine-screen William Kentridge extravaganza unearthed from the vaults of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) after a decade in storage—to a culturally underserved area of L.A. The model is similar to Theaster Gates's work with Dorchester Projects on the South Side of Chicago and Mark Bradford's Art + Practice in South Central L.A.



In typical Noah Davis fashion, he opened the Underground with an unexpected gesture: the decidedly conceptual exhibition “Imitation of Wealth,” which employed cheap materials to create street simulations of iconic works by Dan Flavin, Jeff Koons, and other famous artists. On the day he passed away at his home in Ojai, California, at the age of 32, MOCA reprised that show, which debuted the museum’s Grand Avenue storefront space (open through February 29, 2016). The museum had previously entered into a three-year partnership with the Underground—beginning with the Kentridge exhibition “Journey to the Moon”—that will ensure Davis’s life and legacy continue to inspire new generations of trailblazers. Here, his family, friends, and fellow artists remember him as only they can.

## EARLY DAYS

**FAITH CHILDS-DAVIS, mother, art teacher:** I taught, so I always had stuff around for him to do, and he gravitated toward art, naturally. That was who he was. He sold his first painting when he was in eighth grade. A parent bought it for, like, \$20. It was a little boy with an image of a lion. I think the assignment was “what is your power animal?”

**KAHLIL JOSEPH, brother, filmmaker, video artist:** My mom was so balanced culturally—we’d go see movies, play sports, go outdoors. During the summer she filled our time with these art projects: mosaics, stippling. I got into photography when I was 12, and she got me into classes with a darkroom. I never thought about who Noah was going to be or what he was going to do. Maybe it was just this blind assumption: He was going to be an artist.

**BEN HAGGERTY (a.k.a. Macklemore), rapper, recording artist, and childhood friend:** Noah came to TOPS [The Option Program at Seward], an alternative public school that focused on creativity in the arts. Up until that point, I was always known as the artist in my class of 60, in terms of drawing ability. When Noah showed up, it was like “*this* dude is an artist,” and I was quickly thrown out of my spot. He was just that guy who was good at life. He never tried to fit in; he just fit in, in this way that was all-inclusive to everyone.

**FAITH CHILDS-DAVIS:** When Noah was a junior in high school, his dad and I got him a studio. It was the back apartment in a house. It wasn’t that great-looking, but it was close to our home in Seattle and we found it really cheap. He had literally been destroying his bedroom with paint, and I kept having to replace the carpets. I was like, “look, you can go destroy some other place.” We would drop him off after school and come back around midnight. I know it sounds kind of crazy now, but he wasn’t the kid who played video games and went out drinking and partying. I remember there was a record store [Easy Street] by us, and he went down there and wanted a job and they were like, “what can you do?” He said, “I can paint.” I guess Marvin Gaye had just come out with an album, and they asked him do some kind of window display. He did this big painting of Marvin Gaye with three cherubs, and it was in the window for a long time. I think Motown later bought it.

## COOPER UNION

**FAITH CHILDS-DAVIS:** When Noah was applying to Cooper Union, he was looking at a lot of Francesco Clemente, and he was doing a lot of watercolor. He got into Cooper with a modern version of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. It was a small accordion book, an urban take on the painting. Cooper Union keeps them, so I haven’t seen it since 1999.

**RHYS GAETANO, of Bruce High Quality Foundation:** I met Noah at Cooper in 2003. He was completely outgoing, didn’t really go to class that much, but all the teachers loved him. But he couldn’t fit into school at all. He actually crashed his car into my car, and his dad sent him out to California. Cooper was really competitive and very different from anything he was used to; he didn’t make work for a little while and wasn’t really happy, but then he met





1984, 2009.  
Oil on canvas,  
48 x 48 in.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:  
2004 (3), 2008.  
Dutch Boy house  
paint on linen,  
60¼ x 60¼ in.

Basic Training 4,  
2008. Oil and  
acrylic on canvas,  
10 x 10 in.

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Karon in L.A. and loosened up a bit. I think California was really good for him. He really found his freedom and voice.

**KARON DAVIS, wife, artist, president of the Underground Museum:** At Cooper he made a great film. It was beautifully shot and well cast. It was just like his paintings. It was a love story about a boy and a girl adventuring through New York. It was never shown—I don't think it will ever be shown. He was also involved with Bruce High Quality, and they did that famous photograph *Raft of the Medusa*, which they re-created in the Hudson River. I think he was very proud of that. He always said he was the silent partner.

## BRUCE HIGH QUALITY FOUNDATION

**RHYS GAETANO:** The first public image that we made was *Raft of the Medusa*, and that's Noah standing in the middle of it. It was sort of a moment when the art world was picking up all these younger artists, we were in Brooklyn trying to move into Manhattan, and this was a photographic re-creation of a painting of these people suffering and dying trying to be seen. They were the people left over, and it was a commentary on art world consumption and this void. The day we made it was my 21st birthday, and he was two weeks older than me.

## LOS ANGELES

**DAGNY CORCORAN, proprietor of Art Catalogues at LACMA:** Noah was my assistant at Art Catalogues in 2005, when my bookstore was at MOCA's Pacific Design Center satellite. He showed up for work the first day wearing a suit, and was so utterly charming and so clearly intelligent that I fell for him right away. He had just dropped out of Cooper Union, and I think this was his first "real" job. It's ironic now that MOCA has finally discovered him, because he was actually working for them 10 years ago and got a really lousy performance evaluation, which set off a huge anti-MOCA rant from him. I think he quit about 10 seconds before they would have fired him.

**KARON DAVIS:** We met 10 years ago. I was in a house with all these girls who went to USC film school, and my best friend at the time met him at the grocery store. She was trying to put together this party/art show, and he mentioned that he was a painter. She says, "Oh, you can be in my show." He says, "I have nowhere to paint." So she says, "You can paint in my living room." I was working long hours at the time and would come home, and he would just be there. We would talk and hang out, and automatically I felt his presence—he's intelligent, charismatic, good-looking—but he was taken at the time, so we remained friends. And then years later we started hanging out again, and then one night he came over and never left. After that, we were together every day.

**DANIEL DESURE, friend, artist, and founder of the creative firm Commonwealth Projects:** In 2007 Noah had this little place in Koreatown, and I remember being blown away by it: paintings everywhere, stacks of them. Shortly after, we got a studio together in Boyle Heights, in this space that artists like Sterling Ruby and Thomas Houseago have gone through. During that time was when I saw him work in this really true way, and that's the time I remember the best. It was incredible because he would crank out paintings for a show so quickly. Other times, I would go there and it would be empty except for 15 sculptures that he'd created in the



1975 (3), 2013.  
Oil on canvas,  
48 x 72 in.

OPPOSITE:  
*The Missing Link 4*,  
2013. Oil on  
canvas, 78 x 86 in.

course of a week. He stayed up for an entire week. I had never seen him dabble in sculpture before. They were kind of like Noah Purifoy, with these amazing compositions, and they were super graphic and each had this incredible quality and felt really thought through.

**KARON DAVIS:** He was fun and silly and loved to laugh. He'd dance around the house and he was always spending time with our son, Moses, and painting with him. He would often sit outside and stare for an hour or so. He was like, "I'm planning, I'm plotting." His brain was always going. He'd read the paper every day front to back: *New York Times*, *L.A. Times*. He was constantly feeding himself information. We were always having dinner parties—he was so giving of his space and his home.

## 30 AMERICANS

**HENRY TAYLOR, artist, friend:** About 12 years ago, I was living in Chinatown on Bernard Street, partying a lot at Jose Pardo's Mountain Bar. I remember seeing Noah alone on a bench outside the place, but at the time I did not know he was an artist. What stands out most in my mind was his style and disposition. I finally met him in Miami with the other artists who were part of the "30 Americans" exhibition. A bunch of us thought it would be a good idea if we all got together and got to know one another, as many of us had never met. By the time I talked the hotel bartender into selling me a case of beer, however, everyone else had decided to attend the Rubell dinner instead. I was furious and called a few of them punks. Noah said, "Man, me and my lady will hang with you." It was this attitude and the fact that his name was the same as my son's allowed me to take an immediate liking to Noah as a person. This may not seem relevant to being a good painter, but I see it differently. That fuck-you attitude is so necessary, especially for a black man. Furthermore, it shows confidence in your abilities not to be dependent, and not to get fucked over. Without the fuck-you attitude, there would be no Underground Museum.

## ON PAINTING

**JACK TILTON, co-owner of Roberts & Tilton, where Davis first exhibited:** His work was slightly mysterious. It was more German in a way. Noah was interested in Neo Rauch, the Leipzig group, Kippenberger, Marlene Dumas. European painting was his thing. At the Underground he did these works right before he died where he was sort of



“We talked about re-positioning the power, bringing the mountain to the people.”

weaving light together. They were dark, but they had this tone like a Tuymans has a tone. He'd weave these dark tones together and make this vibration. The blacks and the grays would sort of vibrate. I don't know how he did it with paint.

**MARK BRADFORD, artist, founder of Art + Practice:** He had some paintings—they were figures in situ, some ballerinas, a woman with brightly colored pants looking backward, and I remember thinking, Oh, those are very nice—when I came over one time and we just talked about being a painter, and he asked me how I set up my space. He really wanted to know what my day-to-day was. *When do you get up? What do you do?* I asked him how long it took him to make a painting. His studio was close to mine. Every morning I would drive by on my way to the studio. I wouldn't stop, but I'd see them locking or unlocking the gates. I'd drive by at night and see it all lit up. A couple times I sent him an e-mail: “Oh, yeah, you were working late last night. I better go back in and work late, too.” We'd laugh. I have that with Henry Taylor, too. They're like my spiritual brothers. The thing I always admired about both of them was that they had no problem with bringing all of their life to the table. They didn't separate the art world life from the family life from the before-I-got-in-the-art-world life. Sometimes it was messy, but it all mixed together.

**BEN HAGGERTY:** I make music and he painted, but we're both people who live life in excess. We're both Geminis, we're both from Seattle, and I felt like he understood the trials and tribulations I was going through, and I understood his. I related to him because there's this tormented side of being a creative person where you're always trying to get better and nothing is ever good enough.

**KAHLIL JOSEPH:** You can fake almost anything else—music, conceptual art, which Noah exposed in a way with “Imitation of Wealth”—but you can't fake a painting. With Noah, it was never a one-liner. I think he thought painters were the highest form of artist. He really respected

Rothko, Henry Taylor, Kerry James Marshall. Kara Walker wrote him a letter when he was at Cooper, which was amazing because she was huge and he was nobody at the time. It's a really beautiful letter. It was like *Letters to a Young Poet*. He loved and respected Kara. That really informed his personality as a young artist.

**FAITH CHILDS-DAVIS:** I've never said this, but I think painting was a way for Noah to process what was going on with him emotionally and politically. He was happy to be a black painter and loved black people and painting them and being one, but you get put in a box and that's what people want: They want to see the same black figurative work. Noah traveled, he had lots of different experiences, and that's how the Underground became what it was—a vessel for him being something bigger than just a black painter.

**HENRY TAYLOR:** I have learned more from Noah than from any other artist I know. I saw a gold painting of his at a collector's house and it was so beautiful, and when I found out it was inspired by his admiration for and investigation of Yves Klein, I just thought, he's voracious in his appetite and quest for expanding. I've seen him pull back and eliminate the figure and allude to the work of Rothko and still maintain his palette with as much gusto as he did when he went from abstraction to his later figurative work. Noah just kept pushing.

## UNDERGROUND MUSEUM

**KAHLIL JOSEPH:** I think Noah started to experience the paradox where the art world is the place where supposedly anything is possible but where people will also try to corral you into making just one thing. I think Underground was a huge “fuck you” to the galleries, and from then on he wasn't going to bow to anyone.

**KARON DAVIS:** We wouldn't promote all the shows in the space, so sometimes the people on the street had access to a Noah Davis show and the art community had no idea. I remember I came in one day and he had the “Imitation of Wealth” show up and he was like, “should we open the doors?” And that's how it opened.

**THEASTER GATES, artist, friend, founder of Chicago's Stony Island Arts Bank.** In February 2016, the Bank will show Davis's “1975” paintings, based on photographs taken from a roll of found film his mother shot that year in Chicago of herself and Davis's late father, Kevin: A lot of Noah's curiosities were with the structure of things and the dynamics between people. He wanted to understand how our programs flowed, how money worked, who the leadership was that would allow me to continue to have enough time to make art. He had hard questions, ambitious ideas, idealism, and appetite, almost as if there were no boundaries. When I finally came to L.A. and Noah showed me what he was doing, he presented it in the context of all the other things that were starting to jump off in the neighborhoods nearby.

**FAITH CHILDS-DAVIS:** His father was a lawyer and had a very strong sense of social justice. For Noah, the Underground was sort of a nod to his father. After his dad died, there was a real need and desire to do something outside his personal sphere.

**BEN HAGGERTY:** Noah was one of the most generous people I've ever met. I think he got that from his family—they're just generous humans to the core. Once you

Karon, Noah, and  
Moses Davis at  
Noah Purifoy  
Foundation, 2011.

OPPOSITE:  
*Pueblo del Rio:  
Conductor*, 2014.  
Oil on canvas,  
69 x 76 in.







*Bibliophile*, 2015.  
House paint and acrylic on wood,  
6½ x 10 ft.

OPPOSITE:  
Installation view  
of *Storefront:  
Imitation of  
Wealth*, 2015–16,  
at MOCA.

start seeing who has access to art and who's making it and who doesn't have access to art and who isn't making it, you start seeing programs in private schools flourish, and you see those programs in public schools getting cut. If you're Noah, you want to do something about it. He did and wanted to do so much more; he was on his way to doing so much more.

**MARK BRADFORD:** We were kind of doing the same thing at the same time. People say it's giving back, but I don't think it's about giving back. I think it's about sharing, sharing what you've learned. We clearly saw there were local communities—mainly black and Latino—that had very little access to contemporary art or museum culture and we thought about our own upbringing and when we saw our first painting, and a lot of that was on school trips. We talked about repositioning the power, bringing the mountain to the people in a way. He wanted to share what he'd learned, what art meant to him, with the guy on the corner. He didn't see it as elitist, and if it was elitist, it was elitist for all.

## ILLNESS

**HELEN MOLESWORTH, chief curator of MOCA and board member of the Underground Museum:** I can't say that I ever really accepted the truth about how sick he was. Karon was filled with hope, and Noah was filled with life, and we were all on board. There's a part of me that knew he was dying and knew we should work fast, but then there was a part of me that was waiting for him to get better. I don't know how to say it other than that magical thinking is very powerful, especially

when you have someone that young who is that amazing and that sick. You don't give up on somebody like that.

**MARK BRADFORD:** To the very end Noah said, "I got this cancer. I'm dying." And he just threw that into the mix. He mixed that right into the MOCA collaboration, the shows, the baby. He was just one big old jambalaya. Very transparent. Noah put it all out there, and I like that. I never heard anybody say, "Oh, poor Noah," because Noah never carried himself like that. Never.

## LAST DAYS

**BEN HAGGERTY:** I talked to him on his birthday and he was in great spirits. He had been out of the hospital for a few days and was going to paint. That was the crazy thing to me: If I was in as much physical pain as he was and just out of the hospital, I can't imagine being like, "I'm going to make a song today." With Noah, that was just default. He never stopped.

**KARON DAVIS:** I have a video of Noah and our son, Moses, painting in the studio the day he got out of chemo. I was like, "This man is incredible." That was his happy place; painting was a spiritual experience for him. He got up at 4 A.M. one morning after the last round of chemo and I got up at 6:00 because our son got up then, and there was this painting in the garage. He said, "I just did it." Sometimes it would take him a year to finish a painting and sometimes he would make a painting in two hours. It was this beautiful painting of a man lying in the grass, and it was like he was painting himself free and healthy and perfect. That was the last painting he made.

## CURATOR

**HELEN MOLESWORTH:** He was incredibly funny and really smart, so our meetings had a lot of laughter. He was using MOCA's permanent collection, putting objects together, in interesting ways that I would never have done, so for me it was really exciting. He had an artist's relationship to art history and was very irreverent, so he was capable of using humor as a tool to shake off old ideas. He would say, "I got a great idea for a show last night. We'll call it 'Water and Power' and show Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* and Olafur Eliasson's *Rainbow Room* with James Turrell." That's what it was like to work with Noah Davis on a show. He'd say that and I'd be like, "Wow, OK." There was a lot of spark with Noah; nothing was deliberate or labored, it was a lot of spark.

## LEGACY

**THEASTER GATES:** There is a rise in thoughtful, independent, artist-run spaces. But there are not enough models, and the Underground will offer one of the most elegant and simply sophisticated types. I hope that artists all over the country support its efforts so that the activity that happens at the space has deep impact. While I don't think about legacy in conventional ways, I do think that Noah's impulse was a right one, and whether the space continues to grow or moves in other directions, the reverberation is already evident.

**HELEN MOLESWORTH:** The partnership with MOCA is real and viable, and we have a great road map from Noah of exhibitions he wanted to do, and we are all committed to seeing that out. There's the potential for that kind of partnership to be really interesting. What does museum expansion mean? Do we have to go out and build a new building or can we perhaps have other ways of using our collections and other ways of collaborating with institutions? I think the Underground will have a real legacy in that regard.

**KARON DAVIS:** For years Noah was trying to find a new property for us as a family. He really wanted to get out of the city and at one point talked about New Mexico. He'd never been, and I had never been. I think it was about being around that beauty and the light. So Ojai was the happy medium that was close to the museum, close to family. There's wisteria—purple was his favorite color—and an orchard, and we could learn to grow our own food and be around the hawks and gophers and be away from the concrete jungle. It's like something he painted, absolutely beautiful. We moved July 24, in hopes that a change of venue could help him. It's a very healing place. We thought there would be a little more time, but the cancer was just too aggressive. But he was at peace when he got here. He was able to relax and paint and play with his son.

He left me with some big shoes to fill and a large legacy to uphold, and I intend to do that. He left the blueprint, and there are a lot of notes and spreadsheets. I would lock myself in the hospital room and we would talk about all these plans. We had talked about expanding Underground to bring some of those kids from the city out here for weekend workshops with artists. It might not happen tomorrow, but it might happen 5 or 10 years from now. He was always working, even in the hospital. He'd say, "This is what needs to happen 10 years from now." He was proud of himself at the end: "Look what I did." MP

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