

# MASTER OF ILLUSION

## Ron Davis bends time, space, and form

The drive from Santa Fe to Arroyo Hondo, the home of Ron and Barbara Davis, is one of the most scenic in New Mexico. The highway winds upward through towering, stratified canyon walls, eventually easing into a long, gentle ascent to the Taos plateau, with Wheeler Peak shimmering in the distance. Here, one can easily feel unmoored. There is all that sky, for one, and that great section of scarred earth with its dizzying drop into the Rio Grande Gorge. The feeling is not unlike the experience of contemplating the bold delineation and mind-bending abstraction of a Ron Davis painting or sculpture.

Imagining this spectacular landscape in terms of Davis's artwork, one is reminded of the complex geometry of the Platonic solids and their association with the four classical elements: earth (the cube or hexahedron), air (the octahedron), water (the icosahedron), and fire (the tetrahedron). The fifth solid, ether—or the human imagination—is associated with the dodecahedron, representing the orderly arrangement of the cosmos, or creation itself.

It is fitting, then, that after spending much of his life in California, Ron Davis eventually chose New Mexico for his home. He purchased the land in 1990 and soon thereafter began a collaboration with architect Dennis Holloway. A longtime admirer of the Navajo hogan, Davis

found within its native geometry similar practical and spiritual applications for his own live/work space. Together, Davis and Holloway evolved a compound comprised of six hogan-style buildings of between five and twelve sides each. The studio and gallery are the largest at eleven and twelve sides respectively. Included in the compound is a store and exhibition space made up of two shipping containers bridged by trusses and framed by adobe. All the doors to the buildings face east—in the traditional way—toward the mountains.

Davis is no stranger to wide open spaces. Born in 1937 in Santa Monica, California, he was raised in Cheyenne, Wyoming, where he eventually attended the University of Wyoming (1955–1956) and later worked as a sheet metal fabricator for several years. In

COURTESY OF RON DAVIS



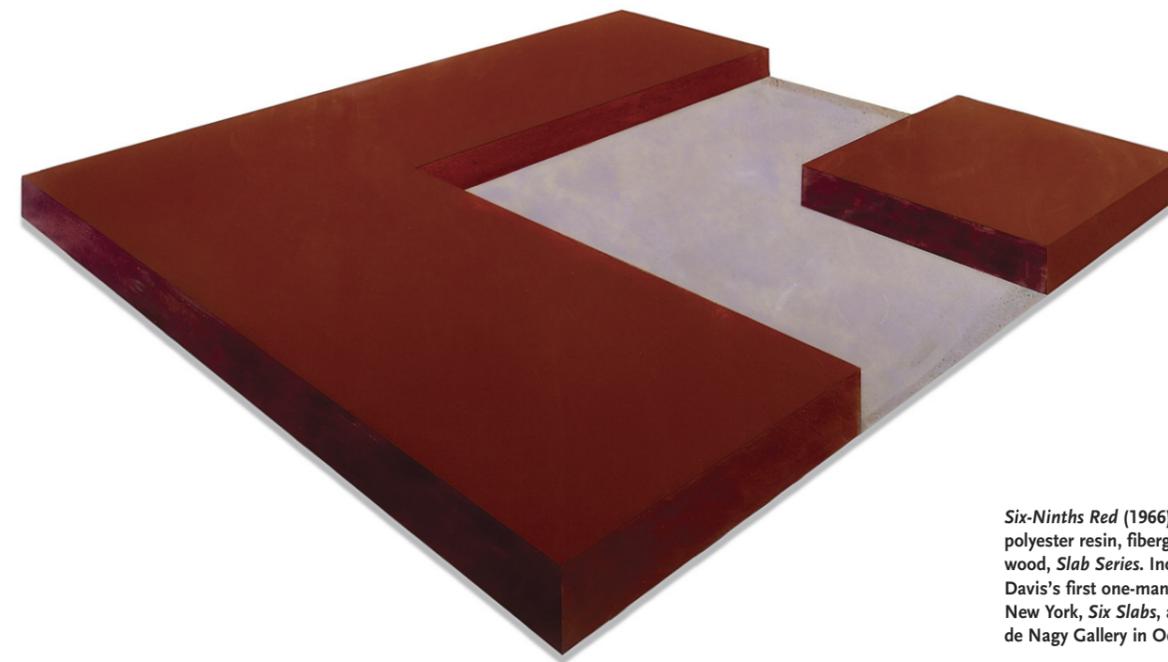
Roll Your Own (Zig-Zag) (1963), acrylic on canvas, *Optical Series*

“A Painting’s Just Gotta Look Better than the Wallpaper,” his essay for the 40-work retrospective *Ronald Davis: Abstractions 1962–2002* at the Butler Institute of Art in Youngstown, Ohio, Davis wrote: “I really had no aspiration to be an artist. It was my third choice. I wanted to be a racer [racecar driver] . . . [but] I realized I might get killed doing this. That would have been okay at the time, but racing is a rich man’s sport, and I couldn’t afford it. So I switched to painting. Later I found out that being an artist is much more dangerous—and just as expensive.”

Davis enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute in 1960—which he describes as “therapy”—at the same time deferring conscription in the military. Attending the Art Institute from 1960 to 1964, he fell under the influence of the protean muscular abstract paintings of Clyfford Still and the Bay Area figurative works of David Park and Richard Diebenkorn. As a young artist, Davis felt he didn’t have anything to express, nor the commitment to do so. “There were issues,” he wrote in his essay, “of abstract content and style problems.” His main concern “was how to make a picture, not how to look at one.”



Opening of Ron Davis’s first one-man show at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles in October 1965. On the wall is *Big Blue* from the *Monochromatic Shaped* series (1965), Liquatex acrylic on canvas. Wilder is shown at left, kissing a visitor. Davis is in the middle with glasses and mustache.



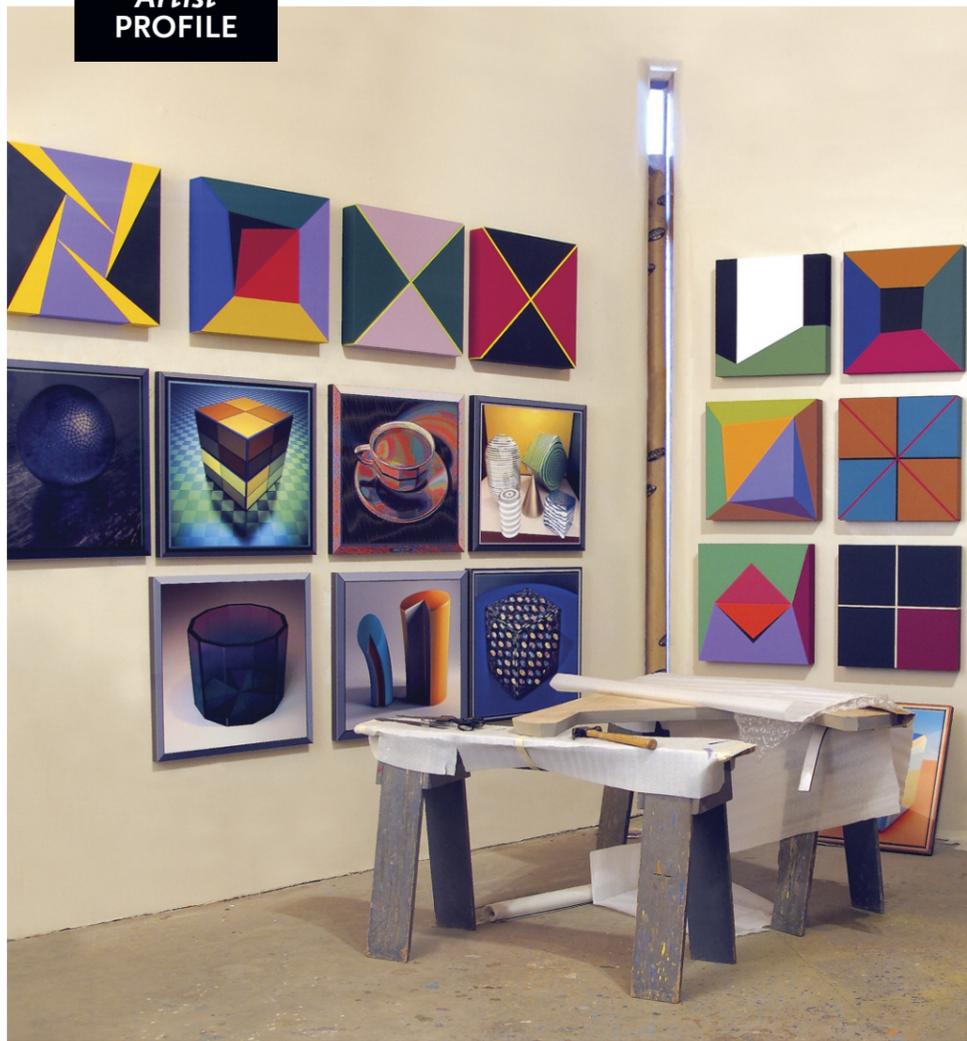
*Six-Ninths Red* (1966), molded polyester resin, fiberglass, and wood, *Slab Series*. Included in Davis’s first one-man show in New York, *Six Slabs*, at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in October 1966.

TOP: COURTESY OF RON DAVIS; BOTTOM: STEPHEN PACE

Fred Martin, president of the Art Institute at that time, commented that Davis was “a pain in the ass, but a worthwhile one.” During his tenure at the school, Davis began painting as an Abstract Expressionist. Rather than emulate, his strategy became “to do a Mondrian in the style of Jackson Pollock and a Pollock in the style of Mondrian.”

Davis’s work took on a harder, more geometric edge around 1963, perhaps because of the influence of Frank Stella, and he began to explore various optical illusions garnered from sources as diverse as Persian miniatures, early Christian mosaics, Paul Klee, late Kandinsky, scientific illustration, and commercial art. He even began to exhibit locally and in 1963 received first place in the painting and drawing annual at California’s Richmond Art Center, juried by Tony DeLap.

At the time, the Richmond Art Center was under the energetic direction of Rudy Turk, whose relationship with visionary art dealer Nicholas Wilder would become important in the development of Davis’s career. After a semester or two of law school, Nicholas Wilder knew he no longer wanted to be a lawyer and instead began studying art history. Wilder also instituted a contemporary exhibition program at the



Davis's home and studio in Arroyo Hondo. Above left: Acrylic paintings on PVC and other media (2009–2010). Above right: Davis inside his Hondo Spirit Hogan, made from wood (pine), dye, and spar varnish, and installed on the Hondo Mesa, Arroyo Hondo, New Mexico in 1991.

Lanyon Gallery in the Old Stanford Barn, exhibiting artists Tom Holland, Robert Hudson, John McCracken, Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, Agnes Martin, and the first show of Bruce Nauman's cast body parts in fiberglass and rubber. Wilder saw Ron Davis's work at the Richmond Art Center drawing and painting annual and arranged a studio visit in the spring of 1964, inviting Davis to be in the Summer Invitational group show at the Lanyon Gallery with his piece *Roll Your Own (Zig-Zag)*.

Based on this success, in 1964 Nicholas Wilder put together a limited partnership of Stanford friends, and with \$6,000 they headed for Los Angeles to secure a space for a new gallery. On April 1, 1965, the Nicholas Wilder Gallery opened with a show of Edward Avedisian. Davis subsequently moved to Los Angeles, and in October 1965 received his first one-man show at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery. The show featured the *Monochromatic Shaped* series, one-color isometric panels with a one-point perspective plane, extending the concept of painting as object to painting as illusion of the plane in space—quite literally, “on the wall.”

In 1966 Davis began what is regarded as one of the most astonishing runs in American painting. He spent six years working on his famous *Slab Series*, resulting in 11 paintings that incorporate two-point perspective into a nine-square grid. Polyester resins, pigments, and dyes were substituted for traditional paints, while fiberglass cloths and mats replaced canvas. Davis had to work quickly; the liquid resin cured and hardened in its wax mold within 30 minutes.

Next came 29 large geometric forms—the famous dodecagons, two of which, *Black Tear* and *Vector*, were featured in the Getty Research Institute's 2011 exhibition, *Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in LA Painting and Sculpture, 1945–1980*. In her essay, “Ronald Davis: Objects and Illusions” in the exhibition catalog for *Ronald Davis Dodecagons: 1968–1969*, art historian Barbara Rose called the dodecagons “a series of powerful hallucinatory contradictions,” a synthesis of spatial illusion with geometric volume and sophisticated color.

In a review in the June 28, 1968, issue,



Ron Davis's studio with *Dupin Cycloid* (2009), pixel dust on ceramic tile and a lacquer box, on the floor. Below: *Black Tear* (1969), at left, and *Vector* (1968) at the Getty Research Institute's 2011 exhibition, *Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in LA Painting and Sculpture, 1945-1980*.

*Time* magazine said of these constructs: "What makes the dodecagon distinctively different is that it is shown as though seen from far, far above. The effect is achieved by using a bird's eye perspective, a method that relies on the vanishing of three points instead of one." Although, as the review points out, three-point perspective was known, it was rarely used before the 20th century. But airplanes and skyscrapers helped change all that. Davis's work captures that mid-air feeling: Looking at a dodecagon is much like having the ground fall away from beneath one's feet.

By 1972, ensconced in his Frank Gehry-designed, 5,000-square-foot Malibu studio near Zuma Beach, Davis was living the life of a successful artist. "I showed a lot, sold a lot, and consumed a lot," he says. But by the late 1980s he'd had enough, and he left the freeways of Los Angeles for the quieter surroundings of Northern New Mexico.

"Ultimately, my success was really my personal failure, my original goal being to be a starving artist," he writes again in his essay. "Dealing with success has been so much harder than making paintings. If I've made any contribution at all, it is that counter to the glacial movement of serious 20th-century painting since Cézanne towards flatness, I reintroduced the theorems of



Ron Davis with *Nine-Ninths Aqua* (1966), molded polyester resin, fiberglass, and wood, *Slab Series*

three-dimensional Renaissance mathematical perspective into my made objects—my constructions. This is my legacy, my contribution to the art history books. With this, I stumbled into a style of painting that can excavate walls, shift the point of view of a Looker in a post-Einsteinian relativity within the context of a terrifying, existential, overpopulated nuclear world, where the observed is . . . relative to the Looker."

Like Marcel Duchamp, Davis reintroduced the illusion of objects into painting. "The objects themselves remained abstract and non-referential, although that's usually up to the surrealist viewer. The struggle between object and the pictorial remains central to my work." Hence, none of the labels that usually describe non-representational art—Pop, Op, or Abstract Expressionist—apply. Instead, Davis's work enters the realm of what Rose early on named Abstract Illusionism, whose subject is color, optics, space, and two- and three-dimensional form.

His recent work continues to push the envelope of form and space: giclée on enhanced matte paper prints; sculptural boxes and objects made by the fusion of pixel dust (literally, the dust that collects on a computer screen) to a variety of brushed aluminum shapes; and bright acrylics applied to 20-inch-square pieces of expanded PVC whose colors and shapes vibrate and shift in relationship to both each other and the viewer's eye. The paintings mark a major structural departure from previous work, where Davis relied on traditional drafting and illustration methods to create the illusions and depictions of three-dimensional objects. Now, using computer programs such as RenderMan, form-Z, and CINEMA 4D, Davis sketches out the shapes and shadows in these programs, projects the images onto his choice of surface, and applies paint accordingly.

In 1941 Duchamp released *Boîte-en-valise* (*Box in a Valise*) as a "portable museum" that allowed him to carry around miniature facsimiles of his life's work in a traveling box. Is it too much to ask that, perhaps, we can look forward to a Davis-inspired valise, issued on the occasion of the artist's 90th birthday and the promised retrospective at the Harwood in June 2027? What a present—for all of us—that would be. ✨



BOTTOM: COURTESY OF RON DAVIS