

RONALD DAVIS: SQUARES AND DIAMONDS

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554 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

IN HIS DEEPLY REFLEXIVE and insightful catalogue essay for the Butler Institute of American Art's 2002 retrospective, *Ronald Davis: Forty Years of Abstraction*, artist Ronnie Landfield writes, "There is a strong Duchampian aspect to Davis's work... [which] relates to the only charm Duchamp has for me: his sense of humor." Ideological quibbling aside, the essayist's identification of a Duchampian strain in Davis's paintings offers a productive filter through which to approach the continuing development of an art informed by rich but often willfully confounding visual and theoretical complexities.

Jokes played pivotal roles in Duchamp's extension of art's ability to disrupt institutional conventions, expose power relations, embody displacement, and question its own definitions. Neither irresponsible nor gratuitous, his humor (lively in itself) effected a subversive social signification—a capacity that lies half hidden in every jest and at the heart of Ronald Davis's own artistic practice. Much more than the sum of tricks of perception and visual punch lines that Davis shares with the penetrating oddness of the Op Art he at once references and reshapes, the key effects of the artist's subtly nuanced abstract illusionism both embody and extend beyond the comic amusements resident in his powers of deception.

All comedies exploit frustrated expectations—taboos tattered, errors expositied, stereotypes either fallen or fortified—and close the gaps between appearances and reality to galvanize the shock of recognition. As a state of exception, which violates determined norms of prescribed behavior, the joke holds forceful affinities and connections with both trompe l'oeil effects and abstract surfaces—two poles whose collisions inform and individuate Davis's art.

Every punch line identifies a deficit in perceptual acuity, revealing a position in which expectations yield to exceptional particulars. For its part, Davis's illusionism operates via shifts in tonal values, capitalizing on art-historically scripted perspectival assumptions, to disguise flat expanses into bends, folds, slits, and swellings. In effect, he offers a shadow theater devoid of shadows. Crucially, that which remains after we have deconstructed the mechanics of these playful distortions is no less funhouse-inflected: a field of indefinite limits, namely, the abstract.

Like humor, abstract painting refuses the boundaries of standard behavior. Whereas representation enforces a fixed, often monocular, point of view from which we may engage the concepts it organizes, abstraction proves a realm of radicalized disorientation—an expression of form (which is an expression of ethics) corresponding to a social reality scrambled into chaos. Foregrounding our mobility and ontological uncertainties before the literal materiality of predominantly flat surfaces, the abstract ensconces us in liminality and fracture. At once a pictorial surface and tangible object, each of Davis's paintings denies the possibility of projecting ourselves in the placeless places contained in its immaterial depths. Here, laughter shades into sorrow as we begin to perceive our inexorable autonomy from the province of an image that admits our vision only to perplex it.

That an exhibition rife with sanguine colors and such simple shapes as its titular *Squares and Diamonds* could project such pathos is especially disarming. Beyond the works' indeterminate position in the spectrum between illusion and abstraction, this quality owes largely to Davis's embrace of chromatic dissonances of exceptional intensity. Suitably representative

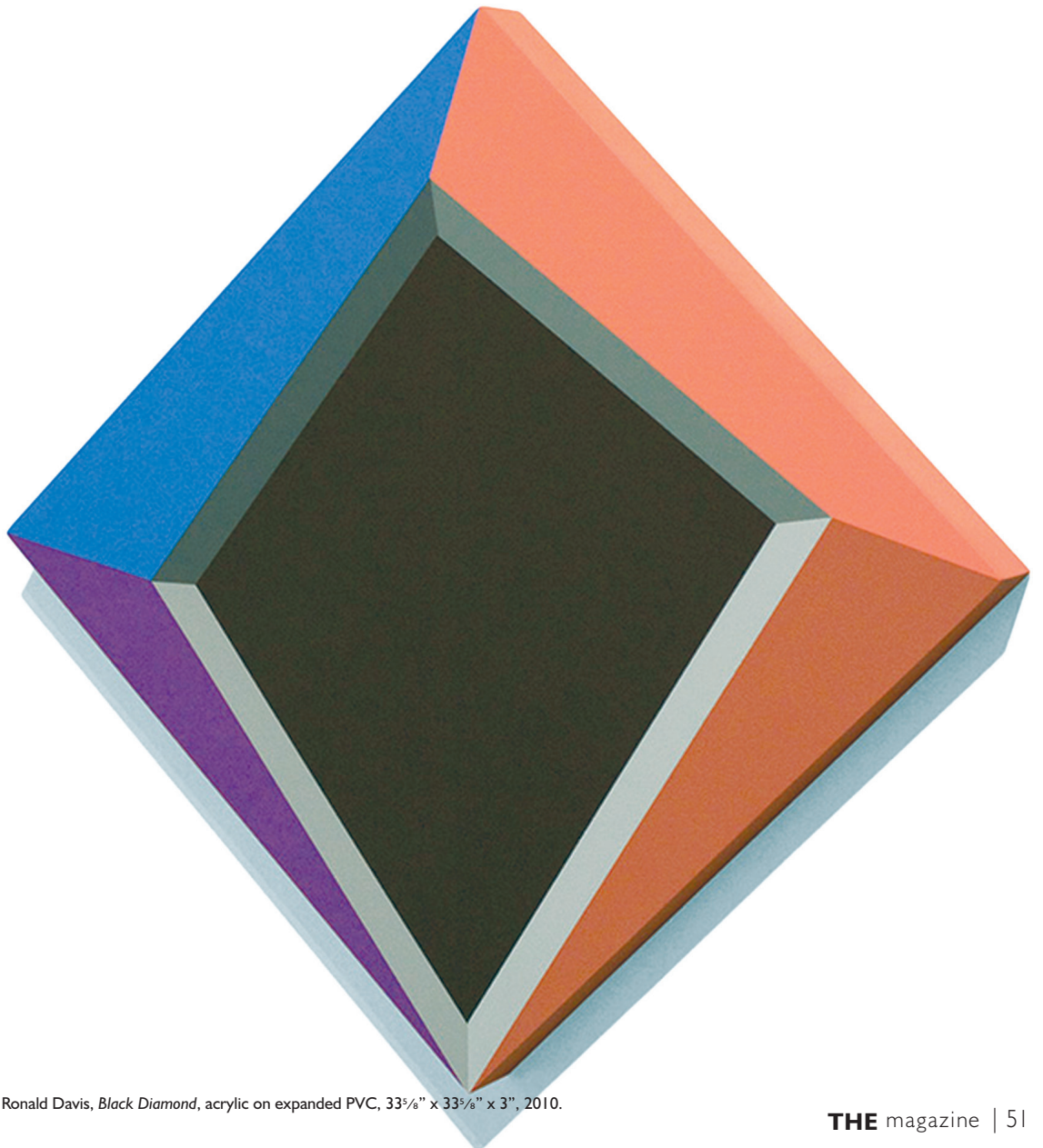
of the artist's predisposition to contrasts of complements, in *Red Bevel Square*, yellow abuts green, and a scalene shard of blue wedges against an orange negative of itself. The exception to the rule: In *Red and Violet Bent Corner Square*, the artist demonstrates nuances as precise as his exploration of glaring tensions. Constructed entirely of red's analogous color group, a skein of carmine appears to peel back—exposing a violet corner seeming to recede towards the wall—while a swatch of eggplant masquerades as the same red gathered upon itself in a dogeared fold. In Davis's art, compelling misconceptions can be triggered with an astounding economy of means.

But it is not his color alone that contributes emotional discomfort. Renowned for his exploration of the latent artistic possibilities of unorthodox materials, Davis's use of acrylic on expanded PVC triggers the sadness of plastic's shopworn ubiquity. In his 1957 essay "Plastic," Roland Barthes laments that the material retains "a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of nature." Clearly, choice of ground effects a decisive impact on the attributes of the colors that overlie it; as Barthes proposes, "of yellow, red and green, [plastic] keeps only the aggressive quality, and uses them as mere names, being able to display only the concepts of colors." This derealization of chromatic experience is a chief contributor to

the surreal distantiating that manifests one of the most unnerving and unusual optical characteristics of Davis's art.

In other hands, squares and diamonds often suggest a tired repetition of Modernist tropes. Even Malevich's *Black Square*, which once iconized Modernism's break with traditions of representation, registers today as little more than a dim memorial to utopian yearnings. Transcending the well-trodden history of minimalist formats, Davis may make self-aware nods to the past in such pieces as *Black Diamond*, but as the work's title suggests, he also turns such references on their side. The painting's seemingly innocuous pastel palette (fuchsia, redwood, light coral, and lavender) implies depth of field, mimics the effects of directional lighting, and warps the sense of symmetry supplied by its support. Upending blackness as a universal experience, Davis employs color to underscore the particularity of each and every encounter with the non-color. Here, his extreme defamiliarization of one of the twentieth century's most emblematic and iconoclastic artistic gestures proves that "the zero point of painting" can be repurposed to further, and perhaps wilder, aims. Davis's re-motivation of Modernist tropes towards representational ends may strike one as laughably absurd, but it proves Landfield right. Duchamp would be proud.

—ALEX ROSS



Ronald Davis, *Black Diamond*, acrylic on expanded PVC, 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 3", 2010.