

## Shrouds and Spirit Catchers: Woven Paintings by Alonzo Davis are Layered with Personal Meaning and Cultural Symbolism

by Victoria L Valentine on January 18, 2023 10:58am



*ALONZO DAVIS, King's Peace Cloth, 1985 (acrylic on woven canvas, 56 x 56 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

*'Alonzo Davis: The Blanket Series' is on view at Parrasch Heijnen gallery in Los Angeles. The artist spoke about the series during oral history interviews with UCLA*

REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., had such a powerful presence, his image, voice, and actions are recognized the world over. Thinking about the civil rights legend who preached nonviolence in his quest for racial justice and human rights, **Alonzo Davis** made “King’s Peace Cloth” (1985), a woven abstract canvas painted in muted mauve and iridescent gold tones of acrylic. The painting speaks to serenity and protection and features the artist’s signature symbol—an arrow pointing up and to the left, indicating his outlook and his politics.

“King’s Peace Cloth was created in 1985, 22 years after the March on Washington where I stood among the thousands of people who walked, flew, or drove to Washington DC to hear Martin Luther King Jr. and 17 years after his death. After much reflection on his impact nationally and internationally I was inspired to make art in his honor,” Davis said on his website. “Symbolically I see King’s Peace Cloth as both shroud and blanket as spirit catcher.”

“**Alonzo Davis: The Blanket Series**” is the artist’s first solo show at Parrasch Heijnen gallery in Los Angeles. Davis is presenting expressive works composed of woven strips of painted paper and canvas, including “King’s Peace Cloth.”

The body of work is informed by a variety of cultures and art forms Davis experienced over the years traveling to Ghana, Nigeria, Haiti, Brazil, New Mexico, Hawaii, and the U.S. South, including quilts, Native American hides, Mexican blankets, and Kente cloth. Early on, the works were rife with graphic symbols and over the years they became more abstracted and color-driven.



*Installation view of Alonzo Davis: Blanket Series, Parrasch Heijnen gallery, Los Angeles (Nov. 12-Dec. 17, 2022). | Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

## parrasch heijnen

PRODUCED BETWEEN 1985 AND 1996, the paintings on view at Parrasch Heijnen were made during a transitional period in Davis's career, in the years leading up to and following the closure of Brockman Gallery, the historic space he co-founded with his brother Dale Brockman Davis in LA's Leimert Park Village in 1967.

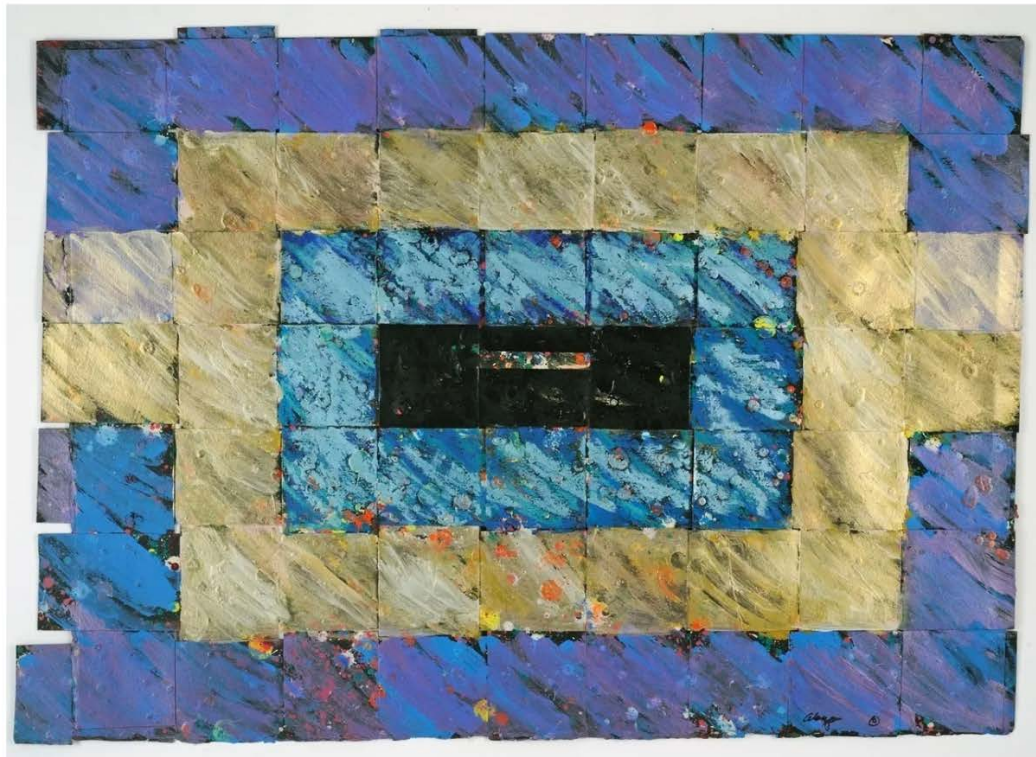
"Though numerous galleries opened in Los Angeles and across the country in the 1960s and 1970s with the aim of advancing the notion of a black art form, the Brockman Gallery—a commercial gallery in the midst of community focused ventures—was unique for the time period," Lizzetta Le Falle-Collins wrote in *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Spring 2012).

Brockman worked with and showed works by 120-plus artists during its more than two-decade run. Many of the artists are highly regarded today, including John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, Doyle Lane, Samella Lewis, Noah Purifoy, Mildred Thompson, Ruth Waddy, and Charles White, along with living artists who continue to practice currently, such as David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Suzanne Jackson, Betye Saar, and Timothy Washington.

Davis earned his BFA and MFA degrees from Otis Art Institute and taught art at Manual Arts High School and Crenshaw High School while operating the gallery. In 1987, a few years before Brockman closed, Davis accepted an appointment in Northern California, as interim director of the public art program in Sacramento. A residency at the East-West Cultural Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, followed.

After Brockman was shuttered in 1990, Davis served as dean of academic affairs and vice president at the San Antonio Art Institute in Texas (1991-92) and later became director of graduate studies at the Memphis College of Art in Tennessee (1993-2002). During this time frame (1985-96), Davis was working on the selections featured at Parrasch Heijnen.

“*Symbolically I see King’s Peace Cloth as both shroud and blanket as spirit catcher.*” — Alonzo Davis



ALONZO DAVIS, "Outside-In," 1992 (acrylic on woven paper, 21-1/2 x 30 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen

THE BLANKET SERIES is an expansive body of work comprised of more than 100 pieces. Throughout his career, Davis has worked in a series format at the suggestion of Charles White (1918-1979), his instructor at Otis Art Institute, where he earned an MFA in printmaking and design in 1973. Davis has said White thought he needed to bring focus to his practice and working in series would allow him to exhaust a particular idea or concept.

A painting from the Blanket Series is in the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM). “Rock Steady” (1992) was donated to SLAM by African American collectors Ron and Monique Ollie in 2017, part of a gift of 81 abstract works by Black artists.

The museum’s collection notes describe the painting: “Constructed of interwoven paper strips, Rock Steady combines the bright colors and braided texture of southwestern textiles with the splatters and drips of expressive painting. Alonzo Davis created this work while he was dean of the San Antonio Art Institute during the early 1990s.”

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AN ARTIST, EDUCATOR, GALLERIST, and advocate, Davis was born in Tuskegee, Ala. In 1955, he moved with his mother and brother to Los Angeles, after his parents divorced. He was in his early teens. More recently, the artist has been based in Hyattsville, Md., since 2002. In November, he gifted his archives to the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Davis began working with Parrasch Heijnen in 2021. Ten paintings are featured in the current exhibition, including “King’s Peace Cloth,” “Outside-In” (1992), “Crescent Moon Over Memphis” (1993), and “Copper Flash” (1989).

In addition, the gallery showed works from the Blanket Series at a couple of art fairs last fall—The Art Show (Nov. 3-6) organized by the Art Dealers Association of America at the Park Avenue Armory in New York and NADA Miami (Nov. 30-Dec. 3), presented by the New Art Dealers Alliance during Miami Art Week.

In 1990 and 1991, Davis participated in a series of interviews with UCLA Library’s Center for Oral History Research. During the conversations conducted by Karen Anne Mason he provided some insights about the Blanket Series, how it came about, his symbolic references, and methods for constructing the works:

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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Copper Flash," 1989 (acrylic on woven paper, 30 x 36 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

**Davis launched the Blanket Series four decades ago. Referencing quilt patterns and Kente cloth designs, the series is his most extensive body of work.**

April 23, 1991: In 1980 I got involved with a printmaker I had known for a long time named Ron Adams, and I did a lithograph right after the death of an aunt [Clara Brockman] in Birmingham, Alabama. That print that I did was sort of an image of a floating cloth, or a floating piece of cloth with a fabric texture, quality, with a lot of symbols in it. I called it the Blanket series and Homage to Aunt Clara. That set a whole other direction for me. I started looking at some other things that had ethnic reference, but they were more related to quilts and patterns and clotheslines and textures and things that I would see from my travels.

The Blanket series evolved from the print to paintings that were stretched out like hides, not on stretcher bars, to strips of narrow strip paintings that were pretty much in the format, not the imagery but the format, of kente cloth, which I had seen in the northern Ghana, that the men would weave. That was real fascinating to me. So I started doing these little strips of canvas as paintings, and eventually that evolved into woven kinds of pieces. I started doing woven paper and woven canvas as paintings. This is the longest series or body of work that I've been involved with. It's interesting, and it doesn't seem to end. I still seem to be with it.

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**A variety of cultures and the extensive travels of Davis have influenced the Blanket Series.**

April 23, 1991: I also feel like the Blanket series is influenced by images from the Southwest, Native American hides, Mexican blankets, clotheslines from the South, fabric and folk art that I would see in Brazil and Haiti and in other travels. Then there were a few pieces that dealt with where I was at emotionally in terms of relationships that came out of that series. I did a series of sort of drypoint etchings that I printed as a line print and then painted them as individual pieces, so they had the same image but they were all one of a kind based on the fact that each one was painted and treated differently. There were probably fifteen or twenty of those prints that I did. Again, this Blanket series involved, in the early stages, a lot more symbols than what I'm using now. I used the symbol of a watermelon, the sun symbol that you see on the flag in the state of New Mexico. I used some paper airplanes painted in, a symbol for infinity, as well as arrows.

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*Installation view of Alonzo Davis: Blanket Series, Parrasch Heijnen gallery, Los Angeles (Nov. 12-Dec. 17, 2022). | Courtesy Alonzo Davis and Parrasch Heijnen*

**For Davis, arrows are symbolic on multiple levels.**

April 22, 1991: The arrow became a real important symbol because it transcended ancient and contemporary times. It showed itself in caves, and it shows itself in everyday life. Beyond the physical importance of the arrow, it also became a philosophical symbol in that it represents direction. We're all faced with taking and making decisions based on directions that we want to follow in our lives. And it represents, in a sense, a fork in the road. So it represents decision making, deciding which way to go. Then I also used it to indicate positive and negative, up being positive, down being negative. A lot of the arrows in my work are up and to the left, which is indicative of a political attitude as well.

April 23, 1991: I've used the arrow as a symbol, as almost— It's almost become a signature in my work, so a lot of my friends and associates have come to expect that. There was a period of time where I almost felt obligated to throw it in somewhere so that it would appear to have my signature.

**In 1988, during a fellowship at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, the works got larger and Davis began sewing them.**

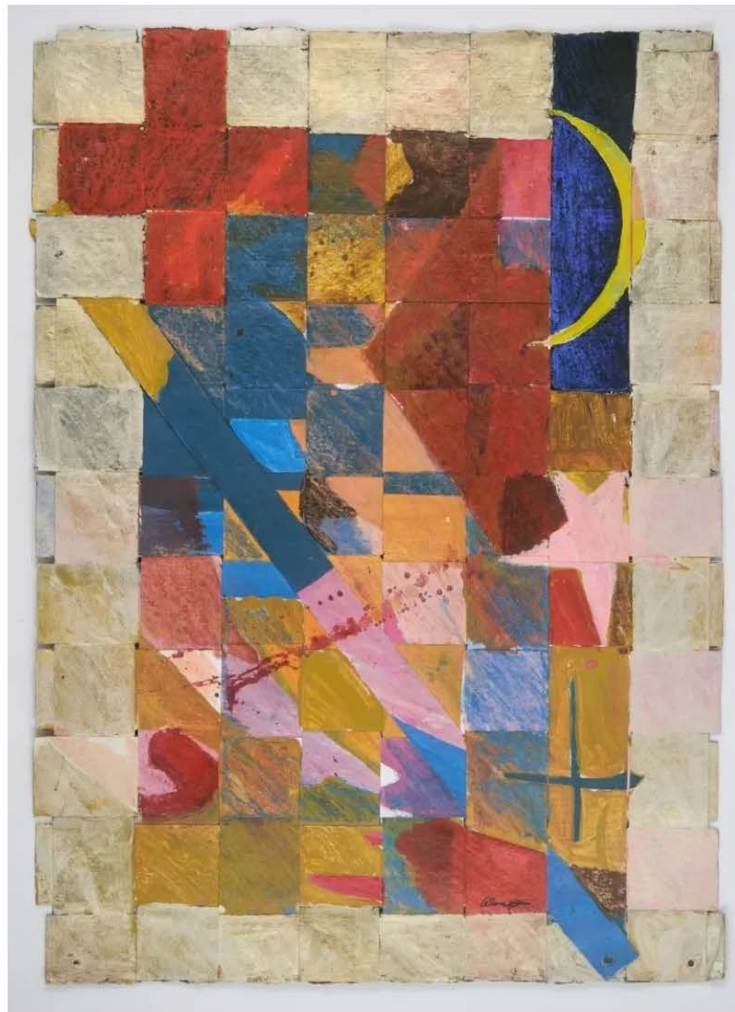
April 23, 1991: I tended to work on the Blanket series with much larger formats on canvas and paper. This was where the canvas started becoming sewn as opposed to glued together. I did pieces that reflected a certain sensitivity to my experience of being in Hawaii. I think one was called the Royal Navigator, which dealt with the water and the sea. There was another one called Cloak for King Kamehameha. Then there was another one called Hibiscus Winds, another Mango Lover. And these were all reflective of an influence of being in that part of the world, the planet, or— In a way, it didn't feel like the United States, even though it was. I really enjoyed the cultural diversity of the islands and the mix of people and interacting with people from Asian-Pacific backgrounds. And I did one that looked like a kimono in a way as well. So they were six, seven feet by four, five feet.

**Visiting Dorland Mountain Arts Colony in Riverside County, Calif., Davis wrote about the influence of family in the Blanket Series.**

April 23, 1991: I spent probably two to three months in an artist retreat space finishing the Pyramid series, actually, and beginning this new series of pieces from the Blanket influence. I have a quote here that I wrote regarding this: "The Blanket series represents a discovery of self through family relationships, old communal traditions, allegiances to maternal lineage. Discovery of self through fatherhood brought a resolution and culmination of the Pyramid series" —that's sort of a comment on my daughter [Paloma Allen-Davis] coming into the world around that time—"and expresses the self beyond self, natural order, cosmic awareness, universal oneness, and an attunement with a higher order."



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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Crescent Moon Over Memphis," 1993 (acrylic on woven paper, 35-1/2 x 25-1/2 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

The Blanket Series includes paintings on canvas, paintings on paper, prints, and even inspired murals. In 1980, Davis painted a mural on side of the Watts Towers Arts Center Campus building in honor of his friend and fellow artist John Outterbridge (1933-2020), who directed the center from 1975 to 1992. Installed on the 110 South Freeway at 3rd Street, "Eye on '84," commemorated the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

After 40 years, "Homage to John Outterbridge" at Watts Towers had faded severely. Davis raised the funds necessary to repair it, enlisting a new generation of artists to do the work. When the restoration was finished in October 2021, he posted a message about it on his website: "We are pleased to announce that it's vibrant colors, adinkra symbols and playfully cosmic spirit of the artwork have been restored."

"Alonzo Davis: The Blanket Series" is the artist's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles since 1984. The show remains on view at Parrasch Heijnen in Boyle Heights through Jan. 21. **CT**

FIND MORE [about Alonzo Davis](#) on his website

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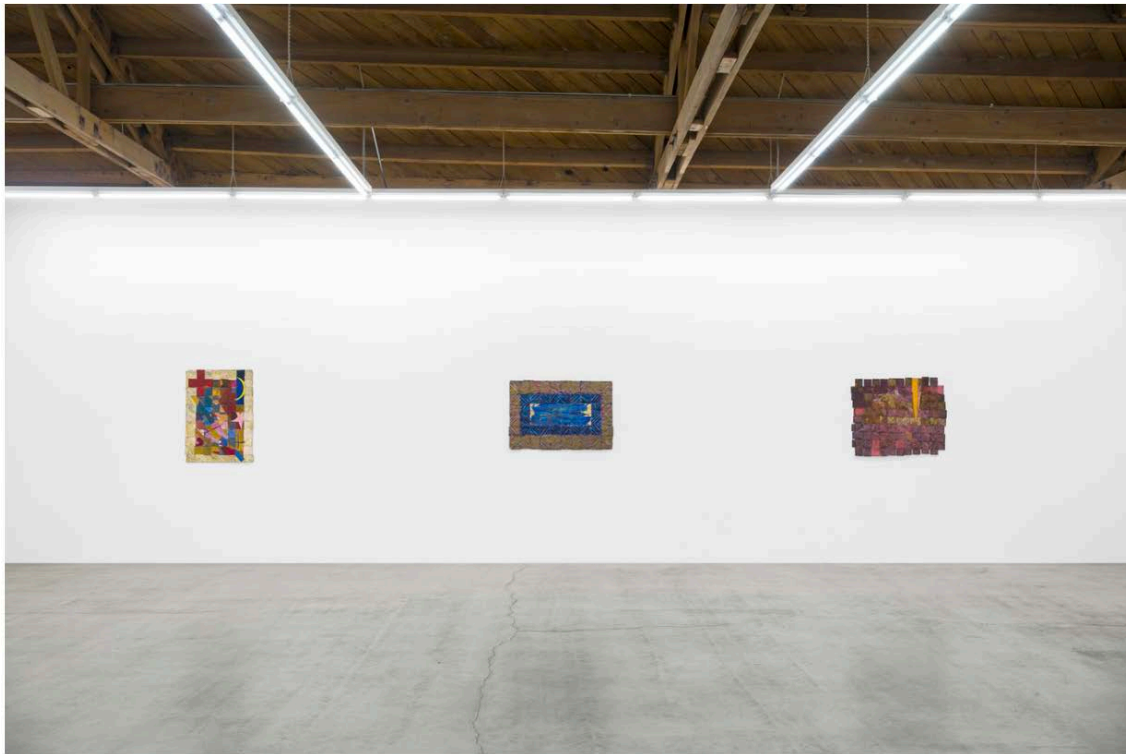


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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Floatation Reflection," 1996 (acrylic on woven paper strips, 27 x 40-1/2 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Pyramid Room," 1992 (acrylic on woven paper, 30 x 22 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

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FIND MORE about Davis's life and work through 1991, via his [oral history interviews with UCLA](#)

FIND MORE about the [Alonzo Davis Collection](#), 75 linear feet of archives the artist gifted to the David C. Driskell Center



*ALONZO DAVIS, "Twilight," 1986 (acrylic on woven canvas, 55 x 67 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Rosewood Time," 1992 (acrylic on woven paper, 30 x 30 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*



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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Celebration with Melon," 1986 (acrylic on woven canvas, 82 x 54 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*

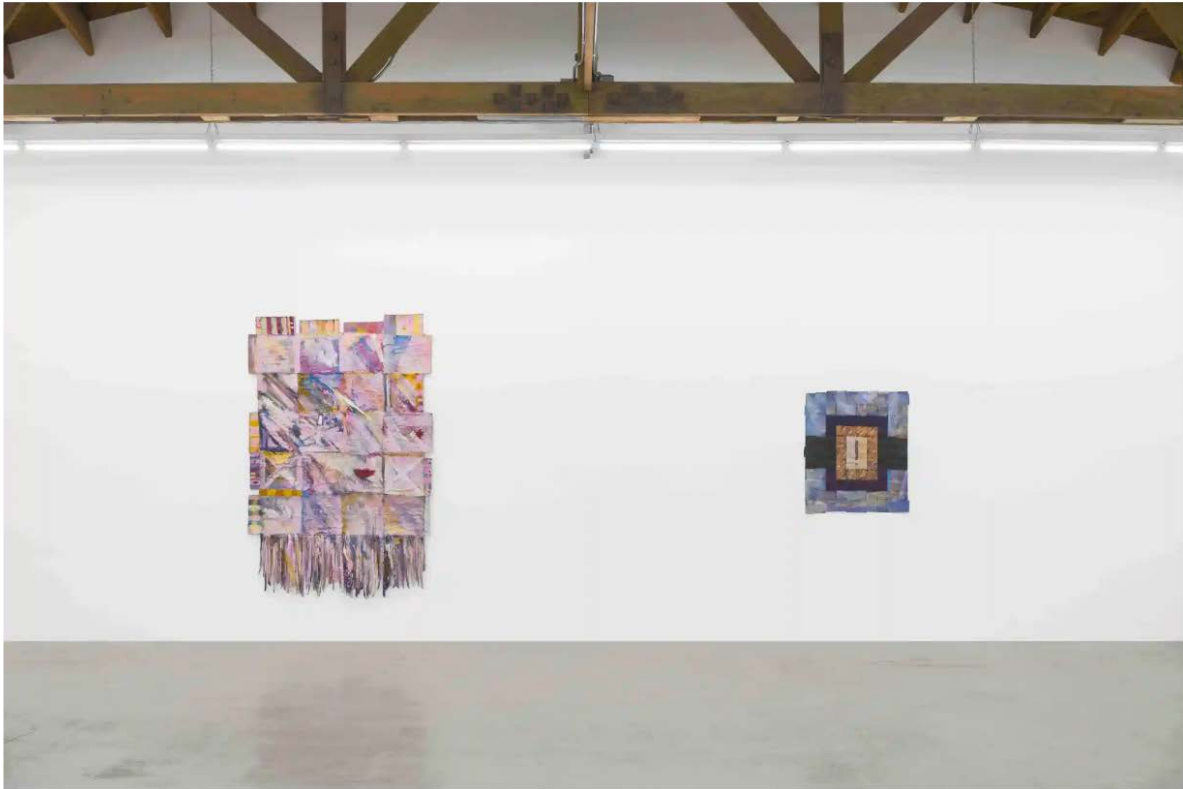
FIND MORE about Alonzo Davis, Dale Brockman Davis, and Brockman Gallery from an [in-depth article authored by Lizzetta Le Falle-Collins](#) published in Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art (Spring 2012) and later featured on KCET's website in collaboration with NKA

FIND MORE the Brockman Gallery Archive was [acquired by the Los Angeles Public Library](#) in 2019

#### **BOOKSHELF**

The work of Alonzo Davis is featured in the exhibition catalogs "[Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980](#)" and "[L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints.](#)" From Columbia Art Historian Kellie Jones, "[South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s](#)" also mentions Davis and Brockman Gallery.

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*ALONZO DAVIS, "Exclaim," 1992 (acrylic on woven paper, 36 x 30-1/2 inches). | © Alonzo Davis, Courtesy Alonzo Davis and parrasch heijnen*