

parrasch heijnen

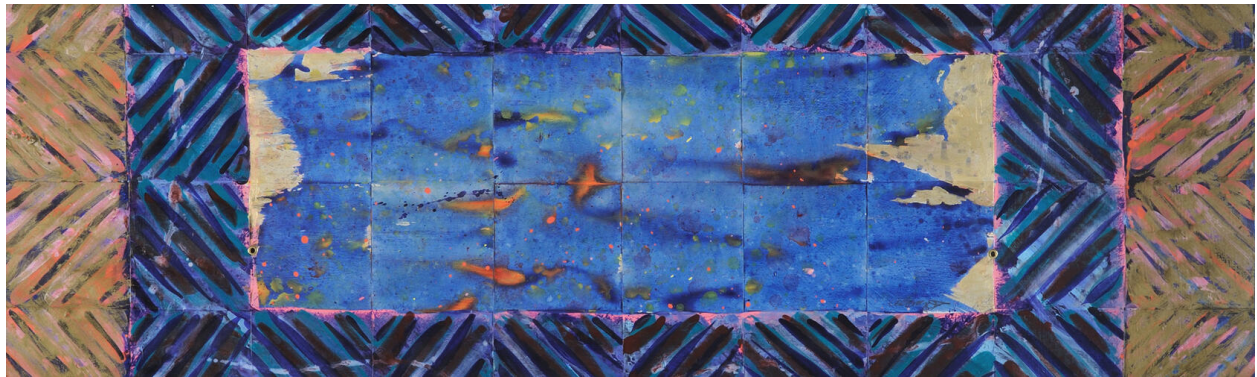
# FRIEZE

## Alonzo Davis's Woven Blankets Provide Spiritual Comfort

In his first solo show in Los Angeles since 1984, at Parrasch Heijnen, the artist shows paper and canvas works that draw from global influences

J

BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 08 DEC 22



If you had dipped even a toe in the Black art world of 1970s and '80s Los Angeles, you would have known the Brockman Gallery. Opened in 1967 by artist brothers Alonzo and Dale Davis, it occupied a storefront in Leimert Park, a middle-class enclave in South Los Angeles, and showed mainly Black artists. (Non-profit Art + Practice now runs its public programmes in the space.) Canonical figures exhibited there, including David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy and Betye Saar, making the Brockman Gallery easily as important – and arguably more interesting – than the world-famous Ferus Gallery, even though it remains little known outside its community. In 1987 Alonzo Davis stepped away from the gallery – and from Los Angeles – to concentrate on his art practice. Given his contribution to the city, it's shocking that this is his first solo exhibition in LA since 1984.

parrasch heijnen

'Alonzo Davis: Blanket Series' at Parrasch Heijnen is an eye-opener for those like me, who knew more about Davis's work in support of other artists than as an artist himself. Gratifyingly, it's also proof that despite his long work as a gallerist, he wasn't – still isn't – interested in following in anyone else's footsteps. His global influences run wider and deeper than that.



Alonzo Davis, *Celebration with Melon*, 1986, acrylic on woven canvas, 2 × 1.4 m. Courtesy: the artist and Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles

parrasch heijnen

The wall-based works in the exhibition were all made between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. Evading categorization either as paintings, collages or sculptures, they were made by weaving strips of painted paper or canvas. As the works became larger – as with the tasselled and roughly painted *Celebration with Melon* (1986) – so too did the width of the strips. Despite the series's name, none approaches the usefulness of a blanket, though they recall quilts. With one exception, they are all loosely woven – sometimes the white wall peeks through – and unfixed at their edges. Comfort, here, is spiritual, not physical.



Alonzo Davis, *King's Peace Cloth*, 1985, acrylic on woven canvas, 1.4 × 1.4 m. Courtesy: the artist and Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles



parrasch heijnen

One of the earliest pieces, *King's Peace Cloth* (1985), was made in tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom Davis heard deliver his 'I have a dream' speech in 1963. Its title suggests a shroud, a symbolic covering for the body after death. Gleaming with subtly modulated washes of gold acrylic paint, it is nevertheless a poor object: at their edges, the canvas strips fray, and, pinned by its top corners, the square panel sags and wrinkles, like an animal skin hung up to dry. Compare this piece with *Black X* (1992), in which the canvas strips are sewn and hemmed at their edges. Metal eyelets are punched into its corners. It has the kind of butch surety one might expect from a camping tarp, and feels sewn-up expressively as well as literally. Its solidity serves to highlight the (seeming) ephemerality that helps other works here take flight.



Alonzo Davis, *Black X*, 1992, acrylic on woven canvas, 94 × 98 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles

parrasch heijnen

As someone who spent much of his early life pricing and selling systemically undervalued art works (and failing to sell them, by many accounts), Davis must be highly sensitive to the vagaries of value. Historically, works on paper are less prized than paintings on canvas, not because of their relative aesthetic merits, but because of the greater longevity of the canvas itself. Davis's woven pieces allude in their form and sometimes in their patterns to objects that, despite their material fragility, are spiritually and culturally powerful: quilts from the American South, Native American blankets, rugs, ceremonial garments and so on. In doing so, he challenges the connections between materiality and value that underpin much Euro-American fine art.



Alonzo Davis, *Rosewood Time*, acrylic on woven paper, 76 × 76 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles

parrasch heijnen

Most successful are the pieces in which Davis celebrates material frivolity. The works shimmer with fistfuls of glitter, pearlescent paint, spatters of blues, reds, pinks and purples, and jazzily patterned borders. It's thrilling, and humbling, to watch Davis finding gravity and substance in such unlikely places.

***'Alonzo Davis: The Blanket Series'*** is on view at Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles, until 17 December.

Main image: Alonzo Davis, *Floatation Reflection*, 1996, acrylic on woven paper strips, 69 × 69 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles