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EAST CITY ART REVIEWS—20 YEARS IN MARYLAND: ALONZO DAVIS AT BLACKROCK CENTER FOR THE ARTS

By [Claudia Rousseau, Ph.D.](#) on August 12, 2022



Alonzo Davis with curator Tomora Wright at the Kay Gallery, BlackRock Center for the Arts, July 23, 2022. Photo by Claudia Rousseau for East City Art.

An extensive retrospective of the art of Alonzo Davis continues on view at the BlackRock Center for the Arts in Germantown through this month. The exhibition features a large body of works in various media from the past twenty years, that is, since the artist's move to Hyattsville, MD in 2002 following his tenure as Dean of the Memphis College of Art. Davis is a prolific artist, and now, with a career of five decades behind him, the variety and yet clear developmental trajectory of his work of the past two provides a special focus on the themes, shapes, patterns and affinities that inform this later phase of his practice. Speaking at his recent artist's talk in the spacious Kay Gallery, Davis himself remarked on this, saying that the exhibit revealed the "thread" running through this work that he "didn't know was there." In this context, a nod should go to curator Tomora Wright who worked closely with the artist to achieve this excellent outcome.

Over the years, Davis' work has been inspired by his extensive travels. The colorful and richly decorative art for which he is known has been informed by worldwide artistic traditions. Life patterns, and the ways that indigenous peoples from regions as far apart as the Southwestern United States (especially New Mexico), West Africa, Brazil and Haiti have expressed themselves in material culture have had, and continue to exert their influence on his work in varying measure. He has written that his thirty-year history in Southern California also had "an impact" while "the colors and rhythms of the Pacific Rim continue to infiltrate" their way into his imagination.^[1]

Indeed, though raised near Tuskegee University, where his father was a professor of psychology and his mother a librarian, he moved with his family to Los Angeles in his early teens. His youth in California included completion of an MFA at Otis Art Institute where he worked under artist Charles White. White would prove to be a seminal influence by encouraging experimentation in a wide variety of mediums, and advising Davis to work in series to "exhaust the thought." These methods have remained important for Davis, who often will work on multiple series over a number of years.



Installation view of *20 Years in Maryland: Alonzo Davis*. Right: From the *Power Poles Series*, mixed media on bamboo, 8' h each, 2002-2022; far left: *Leaf Near Beijing, China Residency Series*, acrylic on canvas, 2008. Photo credit: Mike Redmond.

A good example of this tendency is his *Power Poles* series. Begun in 2002, when bamboo began to be an important material for him, they are still being made. Davis relates that while in Ghana he witnessed a ritual funeral procession with men carrying poles like these that deeply impressed him with its solemn power.^[2] This was the stimulus for his series of tall, burnished bamboo *Power Poles* which now exist in many color schemes and patterns. In the BlackRock exhibit, the colors are subtle blues and greens, and they stand in the center of the gallery like guardians.



Alonzo Davis, *Turquoise Trail*, bamboo with mixed media, 72” x 39” x 8”, 2005. Photo credit: Mike Redmond.

The exhibit is, in fact, well organized and covers many different kinds of objects. Included are a number of Davis’ bamboo constructions that the artist has characterized as “paintings in the round.” These come in all sizes, and from various moments in the covered two decade period. Among the earliest in the show is the horizontally oriented *Turquoise Trail* (2005), a title that conjures Davis’ long involvement with Native American culture and history. The elegant construction of burnished bamboo is wrapped with bits of acrylic on canvas and painted with other media. A v-pattern in turquoise blue moving to a darker blue is visible at its heart. Among the diagonals, placed at intervals that suggest a triangle form, is one turquoise wand. The composition of this and other constructions of this type appear to have a geometric underpinning which may account for the sense of balance and stability they have. Their colors and the natural materials are not only alluring, but they encourage viewer imagination of the world they seem to evoke and suggest in their titles.

Triangles and pyramids are among the group of Davis’ recurrent images, and they can be seen in various forms in this exhibit. Two very recent works stand out here for their large size and their forceful visual impact. Part of his *Pyramid Series*, these are from a group called *Suspended Pyramid*. Each has a bamboo triangular frame wrapped in places with painted canvas. Literally suspended inside the frame at each corner is a canvas triangle. #3 in the series is a brilliant yellow. *Suspended Pyramid 5/10* shimmers with deep tones of purple with blue highlights.



Alonzo Davis, *Suspended Pyramid 5/10* (Pyramid Series), canvas, bamboo, mixed media, 52” x 61 x 3”, 2022. Photo credit: Mike Redmond.

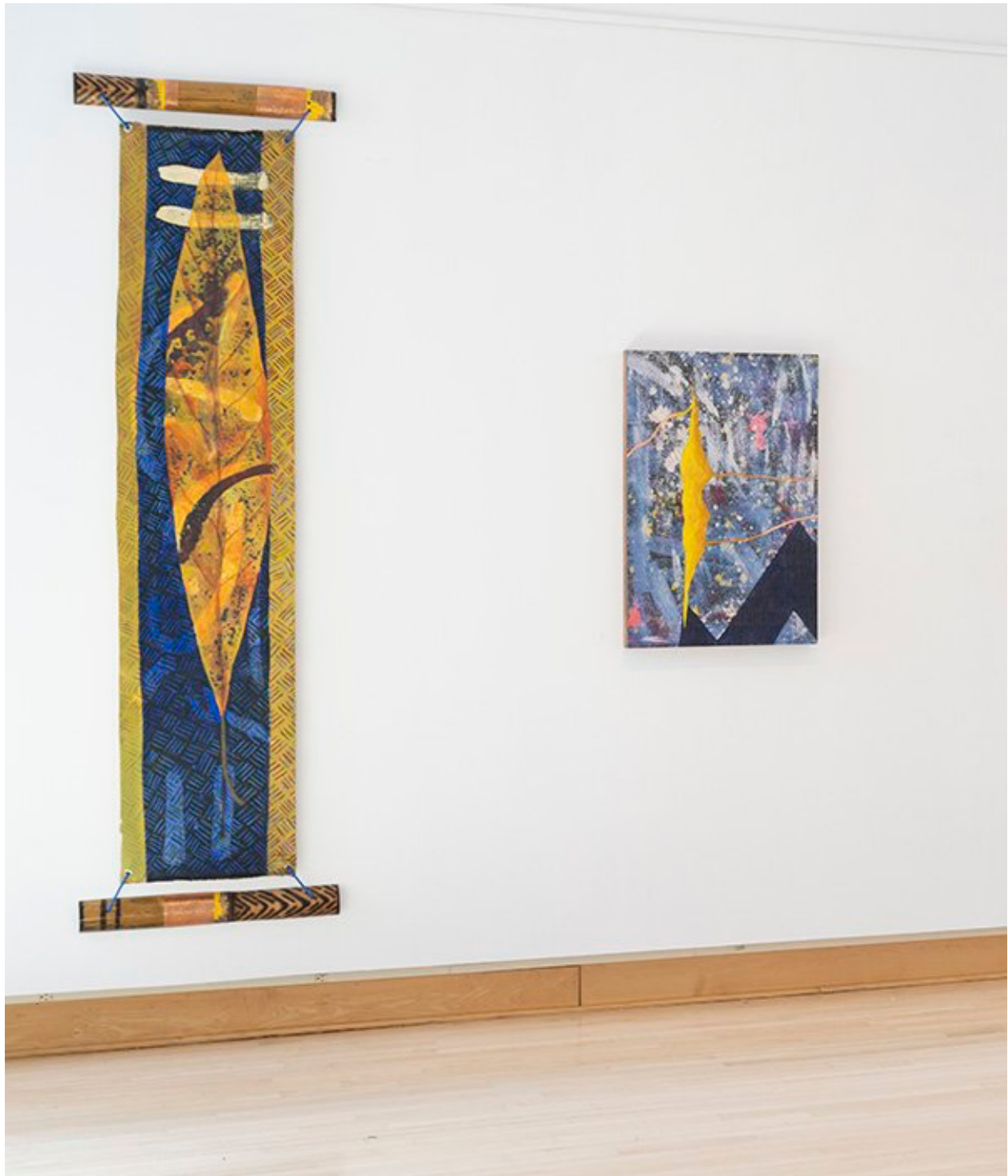
In his talk, Davis related the story behind the chalk-like squiggles in the background of the triangle. When he was a student at Pepperdine College in California, he took an art history survey course and, given an indifferent instructor, he absolutely detested it. It was so bad that he decided that he had no use for European art, period. After his graduation, “a lady,” he said, had a ticket to Europe that she couldn’t use, so she gave it to Davis. With a Europass he traveled all over the continent, seeing older art there with new eyes. In those days, art books usually only had a few color plates. Seeing great art *in situ* was a transformational experience, encouraging the artist to continue to travel to take in, firsthand, all the richness of worldwide culture. Looking at the canvas in *Suspended Pyramid 5*, the purple band on the lower edge suggests traveling over the water, perhaps with a plane or boat form above it. Behind is the name of that “lady” who gave him the ticket written over and over again so many decades after her act of generosity.



Alonzo Davis, *From There to Here; Immigration #III*, Navigation Series, bamboo with mixed media and LED light, 120” x 96”, 2015. Photo credit: Mike Redmond. Davis calls works like these his use of “high tech-low tech” together.

From There to Here: Immigration #III, like all the recurring boat forms and references to sailing in this and other series, is a metaphor for Davis’ concern for immigrants from all over the world, but is not limited to that reference. Nevertheless, the work does point to the artist’s profound and long-standing commitment to social justice issues of all kinds, including environmental problems and arbitrary police killings of African Americans in this country. A specific project referencing this last, in a much more direct and dramatic way, is represented in the BlackRock exhibit with *Social Justice Project Ballistic Vests* (2017) and a documentary photo from the performance piece *Another Police Victim* (2018).^[3]

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Installation view of *20 Years in Maryland*: Alonzo Davis: Left, *Yellow Leaf Emperor*, acrylic on canvas with bamboo, 85" x 46", 2008; Right, *Enlightened Pass #10*, mixed media, collage on paper and cradleboard. Photo credit: Mike Redmond.

A few works in the show recall Davis' residency in Beijing in 2008. At the time, artist **Amy Sherald** was also there, and she assisted Davis in his studio at the Tang Xian Art Center.

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Reminiscent of Chinese scrolls, *Leaf Near Beijing* and *Yellow Leaf Emperor* are painted acrylic on canvas in complementary colors; the first ninety-three inches long in red with a green leaf form, and the second eight-five inches long in blue and yellow suspended from bamboo slats.^[4] These elegant works, with their natural leaf forms point to contemplation of the smallest, even the most insignificant things, such as a fallen leaf, suggesting an Asian philosophical ambience. Interestingly, seven years later, Davis painted the series *Enlightened Pass*, mixed media paintings with collaged forms. At *BlackRock Enlightened Pass #10* is placed to the right of *Yellow Leaf Emperor*, its brilliant yellow form abstractly echoing its natural predecessor.



Alonzo Davis, *Higher Ground/Sky Ladders Series #6*, Mexican pine with mixed media and cloth, each ladder 84" x 24" x 2", 2011. Photo credit: Mike Redmond.

Installed to suggest moving outward, one of Davis' *Higher Ground/Sky Ladder Series* is grouped on the wall near the doors. In his talk, Davis talked about them in simple terms. "They're about higher goals," he said, "about direction, taking steps outward in

life." They were made with sturdy Mexican pine wood, and the copper threads wound around them in places was used because it is a "spiritual, healing material." Davis is aware of Martin Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996) which the artist also mentioned.^[5] A perfect close to the exhibition, it brings together all the artist's influences and concerns, all pointing to a way forward.

20 Years in Maryland: Alonzo Davis, April 30 – August 28, 2022, Kay Gallery, BlackRock Center for the Arts, 12901 Town Commons Dr, Germantown, MD 20874, 11-6 Monday-Friday; Saturday 12-4, Sunday 10:30 – 2:30, 301-528-2260. <https://www.blackrockcenter.org/visual-arts>

Caption for banner image: Alonzo Davis, *Traveling Pyramids*, encaustic and other mixed media, 14" x 20" x 4", 2022. Photo Mike Redmond.

^[1] Artist's statement to his Spring 2019 exhibition *NOMAD: The Art of Alonzo Davis* at NVCC Alexandria campus. See East City Art Reviews: *NOMAD: The Art of Alonzo Davis* | East City Art.

^[2] From the artist's talk, 7/23/22.

^[3] This work can be seen in the installation photo above near the back wall.

^[4] *Leaf Near Beijing* is visible in the first installation photo.

^[5] Puryear's own comments about his work are instructive. <https://art21.org/read/martin-puryear-abstraction-and-ladder-for-booker-t-washington/>