

# An Iconic Artistic Life: Dale Davis and His Work

by

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Dale Davis is one of the most venerated members of the African American artistic community in Southern California. To many people, his stellar reputation is based primarily on his groundbreaking accomplishments as a gallery owner and co-founder with his brother Alonzo Davis of the famed Brockman Gallery from 1967 to 1989. For others, his long and distinguished teaching at Dorsey High School established him as one of the most exceptional artistic mentors of young people in the city. Those accomplishments are central to his overall professional record, and they are vital to a comprehensive appreciation of his contributions to African American art in Southern California. A detailed account of those aspects of his life and work is central to an understanding of Davis's stature and is appropriately detailed in this article.

The most exceptional and enduring feature of Dale Davis's work is his prolific and consistent commitment to visual arts production. Above all else, he has been an outstanding practicing artist for many decades, compiling a record that few artists of any race or ethnicity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century can seriously match. The few art historians working in the field have been cognizant of his artistic quality for a long time. As early as 1971, Samella Lewis included Davis in volume 2 of her groundbreaking *Black Artists on Art*, written with Ruth Waddy. In that volume, Davis expressed a vision that, with some sophisticated modifications and developments over the years, reflects his deepest perspective as an African American artist: "It is sometimes out of the rejected that beauty and creativity springs. My art represents what can be done with the things that some people consider worthless. ... I have tried to create things of beauty to which we can all relate."

Born in 1946 in Tuskegee, Alabama, he grew up in a comparatively privileged and sheltered black environment of the Tuskegee Institute. As children of educators, the Davis brothers had experiences denied most members of the African American community in the segregated South of the early 1950s. They were exposed to a wide range of people, including educated African Americans and dignitaries from throughout the United States and foreign lands. The intellectual and cultural ideas that they experienced clearly took root and had a deeper impact in informing their subsequent careers as effective and respected visual artists and educators.

At the same time, they were keenly aware of the South's Jim Crow discrimination against African Americans through personal observations in Tuskegee and through visits with family members in Alabama and North Carolina. That consciousness in their formative years likewise had a powerful effect on their mature artwork and on their respective efforts as educators. They understood perfectly that the same racial discrimination that was directed against their people in the "Old South" was also a huge factor in preventing African American visual artists from entry and participation into mainstream cultural institutions throughout the country.

Dale Davis and his brother moved with their mother to Los Angeles in 1956 after their parents' marriage ended. The boys were exposed to a much greater diversity of people than they had in the South. The brothers interacted with blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asians—vastly different from the insular all-black environment of Tuskegee, Alabama. When Dale entered the University of Southern California, he was taught little about Africa and African Americans, a very typical educational reality at the time at all levels of education from elementary school through colleges and universities. But his childhood background gave him the knowledge and appreciation of his heritage, establishing the foundation for the teaching, gallery, and artistic work he would do throughout his adult life.

In 1966, Alonzo and Dale Davis embarked on a now legendary road trip across the United States and Canada. Along the way, they visited colleges and universities as well as prominent African American artists and galleries owners. They also participated in civil rights actions of the era, all of which reinforced their will to work against the prevailing racism of the era; especially those directed against African American artists. This consciousness soon led them to open the Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park, a 1.19-square mile residential neighborhood in south Los Angeles, California, considered the center of African American culture in Los Angeles.

Brockman Gallery has a storied history in African American art in Los Angeles. Its history has been widely told and documented, especially in 2011 in two major exhibitions during the J. Paul Getty Pacific Standard Time Initiative; the "Now Dig This " at the Hammer Museum at UCLA and "Places of Validation" at the California African American Museum, both having extensive materials about Brockman, as well as artworks from Alonzo and Dale Davis.

The Brockman Gallery was named after the brothers' grandmother Della Brockman (Dale's middle name) and was established as a private profit-making enterprise in 1967. Alonzo Davis was teaching at Manual Arts High School and Dale Davis was completing his degree in art at USC. They received assistance and support from two local progressive white art dealers, Ben Horowitz of the Heritage Gallery and Joan Ankrum of the Ankrum Gallery. They also received considerable support from Bill Pajaud, then the curator of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance African American Collection and himself a venerated figure in Los Angeles African American art.

Opening with shows of their own work, the Davis brothers went on to showcase the efforts of black artists in Los Angeles and elsewhere, organizing at least ten exhibitions a year, raising public awareness, and inviting critical discourse about West Coast African American artists. A unique component of Brockman's programming was organizing exhibitions in other venues in an effort to promote black artistic visibility in a mainstream Los Angeles setting. Through its activities, the gallery gained national visibility and respect, particularly in African American communities.

Throughout its existence, the Brockman Gallery functioned as a commercial gallery, selling numerous prints, paintings, and sculptures from such local black artistic luminaries as Charles White, John Riddle, Varnette Honeywood, Marion Epting, Artis Lane, Bill Pajaud, John Outterbridge, Betye Saar, Tim Washington, Phoebe Beasley, and many others. It also exhibited (and sold) nationally known African American artists, including John Biggers, Romare Bearden, John Scott, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, among others. Brockman did not confine its activities to black artists alone; it also exhibited the works of Judy Baca, Willie Herron, Kent Twitchell, Arnold Mesches, and several others from white, Latino, and Asian American communities.

But like many small businesses particularly in the arts, its financial returns were sporadic. Still, the gallery's impact far transcended its limited economic success. In 1973, Alonzo and Dale Davis established Brockman Productions, a nonprofit organization that attracted funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs department, and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a federal training program that provided public service employment to those with low incomes and the long term unemployed as well as summer jobs to low income high school students. Thus, infusion of grant funds alleviated some of Brockman's financial pressures, allowing it to host the community art exhibition, Art in the Park, concerts, and various mural projects.

The legacy of Brockman Gallery is profound, demonstrating how the social activism of the post-Watts era catalyzed a deeper intellectual consciousness about African American art and solidified the growing solidarity and networking among Los Angeles area African American artists. Brockman attracted visitors and artists from other racial and ethnic communities, promoting multiculturalism long before the term entered public and academic discourse.

As John Outterbridge perceptively noted in 2008, the Brockman Gallery was “[t]he museum before the museum,” referring to the later creation of the California African American Museum. Dale Davis and his brother Alonzo deserve extraordinary credit for this monumental achievement.

His long teaching career at Dorsey High School in south Los Angeles is another facet of Dale Davis’s overall effectiveness and impact in his artistic career. Throughout his time at Dorsey, he mentored hundreds of students in the arts, some of whom went on to creative careers in their own right. He taught his students sculpture, printmaking, jewelry, three-dimensional design, and ceramics during his Dorsey tenure. Equally important, by providing skills and encouragement to the young women and men in this predominantly African American school, Davis assisted many to find their voices in whatever area they chose to pursue, whether in the arts or elsewhere. And he also inculcated in many of them the curiosity to cultivate an awareness of the arts in their own environments, a consciousness that has been at the center of his personal work as an artist throughout his life.

His personal artistic production, however, propelled Dale Davis into the front rank of contemporary artists in Southern California. Throughout his many decades of visual productivity, he has produced ceramics, jewelry, assemblages, and masks, all of which reflect and express the deepest values of his personal African American background, heritage, and experience. His broad diversity of themes and forms has established him as a unique presence in the African American artistic community in the Los Angeles region, and in the U.S., generally.

Like many creative colleagues of all racial and ethnic backgrounds of the era, Dale Davis was profoundly affected by the war in Vietnam. Eventually becoming a conscientious objector during that conflict, he turned to art to express the depths of his feelings and concerns. He used his artwork to comment on the carnage ravishing in Southeast that was dividing the U.S. population as savagely as much as any time since the Civil War.



“Viet Nam War Games”  
(Figure 1)

Inside Davis's work is "Viet Nam War Games" (Figure 1), a clay and metal effort where the constituent elements look intentionally like bullets and bombs. These signify the weapons that brought death and destruction to hundreds of thousands of human beings, far more Vietnamese civilians than Americans military personnel. Above all, this work reflects the humanist vision that has pervaded Davis's art throughout his career. Like many others of his generation who lived through the carnage of that time, he offered a visual comment that reflected his anguish and regrettably, has stunning relevance in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This effort and others also established Davis at the time as a major figure in contemporary ceramic art, one dimension of his exemplary artistic versatility.

For many years, Davis's compelling assemblages addressing the spectacular musical heritage of African Americans, especially jazz, have appeared in many museum and gallery exhibitions, to considerable critical acclaim. Davis's assemblages often address the spectacular musical heritage of African Americans, especially jazz. His works draw assemblages that often address the spectacular musical heritage of African Americans, especially jazz, and the Baka people of West Africa, hence, an example of one of many African American artist looking to Africa for creative inspiration.

His Jazz Series highlight skiffle instruments, which are instruments like jugs, jars, washboards, thimbles, tin cans, galvanized buckets, conch shells, and other "home-made" instruments, a visual approach that follows in the tradition of Los Angeles African American assemblage artists like Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, Betye Saar, and others who used found objects to create powerful artworks in imaginative form, especially after the Watts rebellion of 1965. Dale Davis takes "recovering the rubble" to new levels of creative excellence. His mixed media efforts are exclusively visual, encouraging viewers themselves to imagine the sounds that might emerge from Davis's assembled instruments, which he constructs and arranges from cardboard, copper foil, wooden chair parts, palm frond branches, and other materials.



“Exuberance” (Figure 2)

“Exuberance” (Figure 2) is an exemplary example from this series. Its superb composition contains, among other elements, a real saxophone, flute, and a reconstructed washboard on a blue ply board background. These are outstanding tributes to the black musical heritage that has deeply enriched American cultural life. The washboard is especially significant, because beyond its profound musical impact, it has long signified in the toil of millions of anonymous black women in America. “Exuberance” therefore adds Dale Davis to an impressive list of African American artists paying tribute to women’s insufficiently acknowledged contributions to African American life and history. And like many of Davis’s artworks, “Exuberance” has multiple meanings, not the least of which is a deeper political statement that demands serious thought from its audiences about issues of profound historical and social significance.





“Horn Section” (Figure 3),

Another engaging musical-themed is the 40” x 50” x8’ assemblage titled “Horn Section” (Figure 3) that combines genuine silver, copper, and brass instruments that Davis imaginatively constructed into an artistic whole. This work also links him to African sources of African American musical creativity. This strikingly effective tribute to that tradition reveals how African American music and art have enriched American culture for centuries. Moreover, like many of Dale Davis’s musical artworks, when an instrument is playable, it can be removed from the composition and actually played on the spot. That potentially transforms the work into an interactive effort that encourages the mutual participation of musicians and the audience.

His use of actual horns in this artwork underscores the seriousness and the impact of the work. Viewers with an abstract notion of the black musical heritage often pay closer and more affectionate attention to his works when they encounter the actual instruments, and thus, the aesthetic arrangement intensifies the overall message. That two of the instruments transcend the formal boundaries of the rectangular enclosure is likewise significant which highlights how black musicians in Africa and the Diaspora constantly transcend their boundaries and their socially prescribed limitations to articulate a metaphor for the African American population as a whole.



In this work, the horns are literally outside the box, a signifier of their outsider status that nevertheless propel them to extraordinary measures of cultural, intellectual, and political creativity and achievement. “Horn Section,” accordingly, conveys a deeper social message even without the more overt content of many other artworks found throughout the history of African American art for well over 150 years.

Another of Davis’s remarkable series is his “Soul and Coal Cars.” Once again, he uses found objects and combines them with fabricated parts, molding them into effective and dramatic three-dimensional efforts. As he indicates in his notes about the series, the train units appear able to be linked together like real trains and seem capable along the display modules on which they are mounted.

In using trains as the focus for this politically charged series, Davis again joins a major tradition of African American artistic production as railroads have played a huge role in American black history. During the enslavement era, the metaphor of the Underground Railroad was used in the heroic and successful attempts to assist the enslaved in fleeing bondage in the South to freedom in the North and in many cases to Canada.. And also, in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, trains were the actual physical vehicles of transportation for African American during the “Great Migration,” when millions fled the oppression of the Jim Crow South to the major urban centers of the North and the West in the U.S.

Artists including Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence regularly used images of trains in their collages and paintings. Their works have been enormously influential to younger African American artist over the years. They have understood the historical power of trains to African Americans and their significance as artistic symbols when they used them to make visual statements of broad social and political impact. Davis used his train assemblages effectively for that objective.

“Coal Car #1” (Figure 4) is a train car that addresses the issue of hydraulic fracturing, a highly controversial technique of drilling and extracting oil and natural gas at high pressure that has hugely negative environmental, health, and safety consequences. Responsible environmental scientists conclude that during this process, methane gas and toxic chemicals will contaminate nearby groundwater, with potentially catastrophic results.



“Coal Car #1” (Figure 4)

Davis’s artwork is the cultural counterpart to the efforts of environmental activists who seek to counter the “benefits” of those corporations whose primary interests are nothing more than short term profits, in total disregard, and even contempt for longer term human health and safety. As a critical artwork, “Coal Car #1” impels viewers to question some of the most significant contemporary issues of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. And in this, the artist perform an exceptionally valuable instructional service (following a career as a professional educator) by catalyzing his viewers to investigate the hydraulic fracking issue for themselves; hence, vitally important in a democracy because the topic cannot be left to politicians, corporations, and even environmental activists alone. And in so doing, Davis adds a strong voice to a much larger tradition of socially conscious art, a tradition that incorporates and transcends the history of African American art.

Davis also used the train series to comment on a closely related issue, the problem of aggressive mining of rare minerals and metals that is occurring in South Africa and other newly liberated African nations. Many of the leaders of these countries, like American corporations, are seduced by the lure of quick development and economic return, without due consideration of the human consequences to their often struggling populations. Once again, Dale Davis issues a troubling artistic warning about an issue that too few American audiences understand, but an issue they should seriously confront in an era of major global interconnectedness.



“Dioxin” (Figure 5)

In one of his most unnerving but effective artworks, Davis addressed the pollution of the contemporary environment. Stark and unromantic, “Dioxin” (Figure 5) is a three-dimensional work that calls brutal attention to the group of chemically-related compounds that pollute the environment with devastating implications for the food supply and consequently for human health, including cancer, and damage to the reproductive and immune systems.

As the work suggests, with its multiple barrels lying on its bed of gravel, spilling its deadly contents, dioxin is pervasive. It emerges from numerous sources, including water incineration, chemical and pesticide manufacturing, and many other industrial sources. In recent years, dioxin toxicity caused the environmental catastrophes at Love Canal, a neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, and in other sites throughout the world. Thus, the artwork is a vivid warning: like all environmental hazards, greater public awareness is crucial, and the government and its regulatory agencies are central to this effort. And at the same time, the arts can be a powerful cultural component of a broader strategy of public consciousness and awareness. Dale Davis’s visual works on environmental dangers join a growing body of socially committed artists who understand that they must play a role in this process. And in so doing, he has added distinction to this long history of visual activism and added a compelling theme to the large body of social criticism in African American expressive culture generally.

Closer to home, Dale Davis has directed his critical artwork to more immediate social concerns. Growing up, Davis and his friends were regulars on homemade basketball courts; it was there that friendships were made and solidified. As he notes, kids merely had to “show up” and participation in the game as a part of an entire process of moving from childhood to young adulthood. Games were played at all times of the day, even at late hours at night. Because the courts were often improvised, shots were sometimes extremely difficult because tree limbs and other impediments were serious barriers to scoring. But the children and adolescents were quite creative and inventive, devising point schemes for merely hitting the rim if there were major impediments to making actual baskets.



“Midnight Basketball/Corner Shot” (Figure 6)

Reflecting on his youthful experience, Davis created a work entitled “Midnight Basketball/Corner Shot” (Figure 6). On one level, it is a charming expression of his personal experience on an improvised basketball court, replete with an amateur hoop and backboard. That alone would constitute a solid addition to his overall artistic production. But this piece has a deeper political meaning, propelling it into a much higher realm of artistic social value.

In 1996, residents of Los Angeles voted on a proposition dealing with the funding of after school programs focusing on tutoring in core subjects and providing intramural sports programming. Opponents called the proposition funding for “midnight basketball,” a thinly veiled racist campaign that succeeded when the proposition failed. Not all opponents, to be sure, reflected the racist attitude that “midnight basketball” was a gift to inner city African American youth, but this appeal clearly affected enough voters to defeat an educationally important ballot measure. Davis’s artwork is a stark reminder of the deeper value of youthful creativity and imagination and a protest against the foolish notion that intramural sports funding was somehow a frivolous expenditure for Los Angeles taxpayers. As a longtime educator as well as an artist, Davis was especially well positioned to offer this incisive visual critique.



“Sappo -The Brazilian Gambler” (Figure 7)

One of Dale Davis's most intriguing artistic creations, from 1995, emerged from his trip to Brazil, titled "Sappo -The Brazilian Gambler" (Figure 7) which summarizes the artist's overall artistic and life vision that has informed his entire activities since his move from Tuskegee to Los Angeles. This 8" x 30" x 10" ceramic/acrylic/mixed media effort is a whimsical construction featuring a ceramic creature with a prolonged tongue starching out to a glass container with a bumblebee.

For Davis, the work signifies the need to take risks, to "enter and stay in the game." This is a crucial message that he has sought, with considerable success to implement in his own life. Defying the odds, he decided, with his brother Alonzo, to open a gallery specializing in a marginalized community of visual artists. He opted for an artistic career of his own, in an art world that undervalued—and still undervalues—the efforts of people of color. As an educator, he encouraged rather than discouraged his students to pursue their passions and to implement their creative impulses. In short, he chose to be in the fray, and to avoid the sidelines. "Sappo" signifies that will, a challenge, especially for young people, to eschew the impulse for excessive caution and take charge of their own lives. Then, and only then, can they build lives of autonomy and fulfillment.

Retired from teaching but neither from art nor from life, Dale Davis works regularly from his home studio in South Los Angeles. Exhibiting regularly and prolifically, he continues to produce works with admirable skill, reaching appreciative audiences within and beyond the African American community. Constantly thinking about his work, he sometimes arises in the middle of the night with new ideas about art that he feels need immediate exploration. Because he is at home, he can create whenever the spirit moves him to do so, and thus, the legacy to the community has been profound.

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