

BROADWAY

MIAMI
New Times

Rob Davis' Hyperrealist Works Encourage a Sense of Cross-Cultural Connection

"The Way" features nine new original works, all inspired by Rob Davis' childhood.

By Carolina del Busto

November 2, 2022



Photo courtesy of Nina Johnson

BROADWAY

Artist Rob Davis sits in the corner of a room surrounded by his watercolor works hanging on the four walls. He wipes his palms against his knees as he adjusts in his seat. The Brooklyn-based artist is in town for the opening of his latest solo show, "The Way," at **Nina Johnson Gallery**.

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, Davis grew up in a lower-middle-class home in the 1970s. As a young kid, he worked with his father on construction sites framing houses. Davis did this line of work for many years before attending art school in his early twenties. "I just sort of got a little bored [working construction] and was curious about the world," he says.

He enrolled in a local community college and started to take classes like philosophy and psychology before filling his roster with art classes. Eventually, he graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

"The thing about my painting education is I never took a traditional figure-painting or figure-drawing class," says the hyperrealist painter with a chuckle. The artist attributes much of his skills to those early years working with his father, admitting his upbringing continuously inspires his works.

"The reason I paint the way I do, the way I make images, is because there is an honesty and straightforwardness about it. And it's a way of sort of communicating with my people, in a sense," Davis adds.

BROADWAY



Photo courtesy of Nina Johnson

Over the last five years, Davis has been working on a reflective project that involves him mining his childhood. He gave himself some parameters — between 1975 and 1978 — because, according to psychology, those are the most formative years of a child's life. Between the ages of 5 and 8, one develops their magical thinking.

"I was sort of constructing this self-portrait out of multiple images. I was recreating myself in that time period," Davis says, lifting his right hand to move a strand of hair that has fallen on his face. "What I found in doing that is that it was also able to work for other people as well. [The pieces] are about things that have been, had been, and now. That reflecting in the past brings us back to this 'now' space."

"The Way" features nine new original works, all inspired by Davis' childhood. While the works are uniquely personal to the painter, they each have inherent universal traits. The pieces invite the viewer into the space, allowing them to create personal connections.

By purposely capturing these uninhabited moments — whether it be a set of unoccupied lawn chairs, a bare bed, a singular rotary phone hanging on a wall, or an empty living room — Davis creates a scene that he invites the audience to inhabit. At the same time, his images inspire quiet reflection and might even conjure up a sense of longing.

Out of the nine artworks, only one features a person. However, she is entirely anonymous, wearing a hat and oversized sunglasses.

BROADWAY



Photo courtesy of Nina Johnson

Davis admits he struggled with including the piece in the exhibition. "It felt a little odd-man-out to me at the time," he says.

"Recently, I had an aunt pass away, and [this piece] was a bit of a stand-in for her, kind of anecdotal. And so I was struggling with having it in the show because what I found is I was making a body of work where there's a lot of empty architecture," he explains. "The empty beds, the empty chairs, the empty living room. It becomes about this longing or this missing of the individuals."

Despite being the only human figure in the entire collection on display, the lady with sunglasses is ambiguous enough she can be any one of our aunts or even a stand-in for the viewer. This, of course, was Davis' intention. "That's kind of the best you can hope for as an artist, is that someone has some relationship or connection to the work that you've made."

Two matching lawn chairs sit plainly in a field of grass. Behind the yellow, orange, and green striped seats is a sprawling grand oak tree, its branches giving shade to the frame. The blades of grass almost appear to be in motion. As you creep closer to the image hanging on a concrete wall, you'll notice subtle brush strokes. It's as if the painting comes to life in a whole new way.

BROADWAY



Photo courtesy of Nina Johnson

While all the hanging images are stunning, gallerist Nina Johnson gravitates toward this set of lonely lawn chairs.

As she walks toward the painting, she explains, "This one, for me, feels like a very particular place within a place. It also feels very Southern. And then it's also so painterly as you get up on top of the grass and sort of relish in that in the shadows."

The painting also reminds her of a recent road trip she took driving through the South, where she encountered similar scenes and similar trees. Every time she sees the painting, she's reminded of that family vacation. "That's a lot of Davis' work, how we compile images to create a sense of self."