

JAMES EDWARD DAVIS

A Pioneering Spirit

by John A. Cuthbert

Jim Davis was dedicated to expanding the dimensions of art. Dissatisfied with the "three-dimensional illusions" of tradition, he spent the better part of his life searching for ways to instill motion, change, and time in his work. This search carried him through many styles and mediums and ultimately earned him a place among the pioneers of "light art" and abstract film making.

Born in Clarksburg, West Virginia, in 1901, Davis once attributed his life-long obsession with moving light and color to his experiences growing up in a glass industry center. "I can remember from my earliest childhood days they had these itinerant glassblowers who would set up their little shops and blow glass—ships and birds—

and I would stand there by the hour and watch. That fascination has never left me."¹

He began painting as a child but never considered a career in art ("didn't know one existed,"²) until he enrolled in Princeton University. Floundering initially in the bachelor of science program, his discovery of the Art and Architecture Department, as well as his own talent and inclination, led him to switch fields during his second year. He graduated with honors three years later.

Davis continued his studies at the National Academy of Design in New York City, and subsequently in Europe. He enrolled in a variety of schools in Paris, the most important of which was the Académie Colarossi, where he studied primarily with Andre Lhote. According to his memoirs, his studies "ran the whole artistic gamut, including cubism."³

Davis's earliest sketches, done at the outset of his trip abroad in 1924, exhibit a romantic realism and draftsmanship reminiscent of popular turn of the century American illustrators like Joseph Pennell, whose prints of harbor and urban scenes Davis undoubtedly knew well. Sketches from the ensuing months suggest that Davis explored classical European models as well as impressionist drawing techniques before eventually succumbing to the influence of the prevailing current of cubism.

Within weeks of enrolling in Andre Lhote's class in 1925, Davis began rendering all subject matter in terms of overlapping planes and geometric shapes. A series of European cityscapes as well as a group of charcoal and pastel figural studies, perhaps done under the master's watchful eye, ex-

All illustrations are from the West Virginia University Permanent Art Collection, West Virginia University Libraries.

BELOW: *Looking towards Oral (Harrison County, WV)*, 1943, oil on cardboard, 20 x 30.

RIGHT: *Reflections—Prismatic Filter*, 1963, Kodachrome color transparency.





hibit liberal use of cubist devices, including simplification of form, mild distortion, flattening of perspective, and above all the reduction of both man-made and natural forms to underlying patterns of plane or "facet." Though Davis really only flirted with cubism, this last principle had an enduring effect upon his work. But its source perhaps rested less in the works of the cubists than in Cézanne.

When he returned to America in 1927, Davis worked on a freelance basis in New York City. Then the stock market crash and

Two current exhibitions highlight the work of James Edward Davis: *James E. Davis: Early Graphic Works* will be on display at the Laura Meseros Gallery of the Creative Arts Center, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia, from October 19 to November 17; *James E. Davis, Exhibition 1: Landscape Paintings*, on view at the Clarksburg Public Library in Clarksburg, West Virginia, from November 30 to December 21, provides out a first glimpse of the unknown James E. Davis, the landscape painter.

the Depression turned him to teaching. He taught for several years at a private academy in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, before accepting a position at Princeton in 1936. His summers during this period were spent primarily at his Clarksburg studio, which he dubbed "The Barn."

The majority of drawings dating from the late 1920s place Davis firmly within the group of numerous artists returning from abroad at the time who were awestruck by the latest engineering and construction feats of New York City and the vitality and promise that they embodied. Documenting the reality of this dynamic scene seemed far more important than dissecting and transforming it into static abstract images. Like many returning compatriots, Davis borrowed some of the surface effects of cubism to depict a technological Mecca in which geometric lines, acute angles and shifting planes permeated the environment. In his sketches Davis experimented with defining form and volume through carefully organized planes of shadow rather than outline.

Throughout these years Davis produced a steady stream of paintings as well

as sketches in oil, watercolor, and pastel, some figural, some abstract, and landscapes depicting his surroundings. This work is colorful, vigorous, and prolific. Davis had begun his career as a painter, and despite his forays into mobilies, reflections and film, he continued to paint, seemingly for his own recreation, throughout his life. His special affinity for landscape painting is evidenced by the prolific body of landscape works which survive today.

From the time of his European studies until late in his career, Davis's landscapes serve literally as a road map to his lifelong travels. Well represented within that body are works depicting the artist's native West Virginia, which Davis "discovered" upon his return to Clarksburg in the early 1930s: ". . . I'd been chasing all over Europe going to Brittany and Provence and every place, looking for—and here was the most beautiful landscape I'd ever seen. . . . This was something I could thrive on."⁷

Of the many influences reflected in Davis's work, none is more evident than that of fellow American landscapist John Marin. Davis first encountered Marin's



LEFT: *Figure Composition*, 1927, pastel on paper, 19 x 24 1/2.

BELOW LEFT: *Hoofers*, 1929, oil on composition board, 14 1/2 x 24 1/2.



work at Stieglitz's 291 Gallery shortly after his return from Europe. He was immediately impressed with how "American it seemed" when compared to the purely imitative work ("cubist, European and so forth"⁸) of other American artists.

In fact, Marin's art represented a syn-

thesis of divergent styles and influences, American and European, old and new. Marin was as indebted to American watercolor tradition as he was to the works of the Stieglitz circle and of the French pioneers, with whom Marin exhibited in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth

century. While Marin's work was generally representational, his underlying goal was decidedly modern: to capture the essential energy of a subject rather than its direct physical appearance. Perhaps this goal, along with Marin's reduction of a scene to barest essentials, most appealed to Davis.

Davis's landscapes are indeed alive with energy and motion, to the point of appearing chaotic in many cases. Like Marin, Davis relied heavily upon the dynamism of the diagonal line to achieve this effect. His paintings are, in fact, vigorous line drawings in which intersecting straight and jagged lines serve both representational and abstract purposes. Bold, broad brushstrokes provide color for primary patterns and objects. Capturing the essence of the scene, and not the detail, was clearly the artist's goal.

Davis's landscape works, unlike Marin's, are remarkably homogeneous. This fact supports the notion that his painting was mainly recreational. Innovation was the hallmark of his work with light and motion; landscape painting was likely a pleasant, rejuvenating respite, a "regression,"⁹ he often called it.

Despite the dynamic quality of Davis's work in two dimensions, the artist became increasingly obsessed with getting his work "to move" and decreasingly satisfied with his ability to do so. During the mid 1930s he began experimenting with new materials and techniques to achieve movement. Armed with a small Kodak Brownie camera, he began photographing moving figures at a slow film speed to capture the progress of their movements. The blurred, semi-transparent results were then interpreted as a series of abstract line drawings, which he referred to as "paths of motion."

In order to intensify the illusion of space in this work, Davis began experimenting with plastic, both as a ground and an overlay. Quite by accident he noticed one day that sunlight passing through a piece of acetate had cast a reflection upon his wall which was remarkably similar to his "path of motion" images. Enthralled with the effect, and with the principles behind it, he began incorporating light in his art work.



ABOVE: *American Architecture*, 1932, pencil on paper, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 12.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1930, pencil on paper, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$.

BELOW RIGHT: *Forythia, Princeton Campus*, 1958, watercolor on paper, 20 x 15.

Soon he was illuminating painted layers of acetate which were superimposed in a convex fashion over a white background. He found the sense of depth and the interplay of shadow and reflection to give a most satisfying result. Another breakthrough occurred at a moment when he was shifting the direction of his light source. He noticed that when the light moved, so did the painting—the shapes, the colors—"It really was like a religious experience!" he once commented.⁴

Finding it easier to move his artwork than his light source, he began creating three-dimensional works in plastic and Plexiglas that, when suspended and set in motion, sent light reflections and refractions dancing in all directions. He devised a method of projecting these "light interceptors" onto a translucent screen and began giving public demonstrations for friends, colleagues, and eventually museums. Some found the exhibitions confusing. Others found them fascinating. After a private showing in 1946, Frank Lloyd Wright commented: "This is the answer to everything—it makes everything else obsolete. This is the direction in which we all must follow."⁵

Davis, however, was still troubled by several problems. A foremost concern was the fugitive nature of his work. As a painter

he was used to creating tangible records of his creative efforts; now he had evolved somehow into a performer. In addition to being exhausting, his performances left too many variables to chance.

He had been documenting his "light art" images through still photography for some time before a friend suggested film might be more appropriate. In film Davis found an important solution: In addition to forming an enduring and easily exhibited statement, film enabled him, through creative camera work and skillful editing, to gain a level of control which removed much of the random nature from his work.

He made his first film in 1946. Three years later he was recognized with an award at the international Festival of Experimental Films in Belgium. Other films and awards followed in the ensuing years.

While Davis occasionally wove distorted images from nature into his films to draw "analogies" between the real world and the abstract, he continued to work primarily with colored light reflections produced by his mobiles. His short films, averaging about ten minutes in length, were often accompanied by original music,

sometimes composed and arranged by his Princeton colleague, composer Frank Lewin. Davis felt strongly that there was a natural affinity between art and music and often drew parallels between the two when describing the rationale of his work:⁶

...Like the musician, who doesn't use the sounds of nature but invented sounds, produced by various instruments, I use invented forms of color which I produce artificially with bright-





JIM DAVIS, FILM MAKER

Jim Davis made 113 films between 1946 and 1974.¹⁰ Due to a variety of reasons ranging from commercial to personal, only a quarter of these works were publically viewed during Davis's lifetime.

Despite limited public exposure, however, Davis's pioneering efforts were well known and highly influential to a handful of younger film-makers. One member of this group was Stan Brakhage, who became one of the central figures in American avant garde film making. Brakhage dedicated his 1974 film *The Text of Light* "to Jim Davis who showed me the first spark of refracted film light" and often expressed gratitude to the elder film maker for being permitted to "share his world of vision."

Davis described this "world of vision" at length in a manifesto which appeared in *Films in Review*, December 1953.¹¹ Styling cinema as "The Only Dynamic Art," Davis expounded upon the motivations and goals behind his work. The following abstract is drawn from that article.



THE ONLY DYNAMIC ART

...The motion picture camera opens up a vast new subject matter—the unexplored world of visual movement. Now, for the first time in history, an artist can express reality dynamically instead of statically. In the artist's increasing perception of the role of motion in nature and the universe... future historians will discern our day's major contribution to the development of the visual arts.

Invented forms are abstractions, and the serious artist uses them to suggest the causative processes of nature, not the concrete objects which are their results. These processes of nature are dynamic, and to be expressed adequately must be shown in motion....

...When watching my films it is a mistake to search for hidden meanings, or to try to identify shapes with familiar concrete objects.... My purpose is to stimulate interest in hitherto unperceived aspects of the physical universe, in hitherto unrecognized potentialities in the human imagination, and not to explain them.

...In photographing nature I have concentrated upon aspects of it which are so obvious and commonplace they are usually unnoticed. As, for example, the reflection and refraction of light from and in moving objects. The artist who concerns himself with nature's unperceived natural phenomena need not travel so faraway places. All he needs is an open eye and a certain serenity, a freedom from his own concerns, and, above all, release from the anthropomorphic compulsion. He also needs light, and a motion picture camera. So incredible are the forms and movements

of nature that, when they are shown on the screen, they are often confused with the inventions of the abstract artist. Needless to say, they should not be.

In addition to recording unnoticed aspects of uncontrolled nature, I also make abstract films. But these derive from my nature films. For I am at some pains to study the principles underlying those phenomena of nature which visually can be so astonishing, and after I have mastered these scientific principles, I try to apply them when I create wholly invented forms and movements.

I recently made a film that is pure fantasy. In it I did not record nature accurately, nor present new, invented forms and movements. Instead, I distorted nature's forms. Specifically, I dis-



torted the forms of the human body to such a degree that they are almost unrecognizable. The effect is quite nightmarish. In making this film I did exactly what the surrealist and other modern painters do—i.e., I irrationally distorted nature's forms in accordance with the dictates of the whims, obsessions, rationalizations, delusions, and compulsions of my subconscious mind....

ly colored plastics. I set them in motion, play light upon them and film what happens. Obviously I am not trying to present facts or tell a story. I am trying to stir the creative imagination....

Despite his own inclination, Davis digressed twice into the "semidocumentary" area during his early years as a film maker. During a visit to Frank Lloyd Wright in Arizona in 1950, the architect insisted that Davis make a film on Wright's famous "Taliesin" buildings near Madison, Wisconsin, and Phoenix, Arizona. Davis reluctantly complied. Wright was reportedly thrilled with the results, Davis was not. The following year, Joan Marin, who was also a great admirer of Davis's work, extended a similar invitation. While insisting again that he was not a documentary film maker, Davis eventually made two films about Marin. Like the Taliesin films, they are now considered to be important historical documents.

Davis's abstract film-making career received a boost in 1954 when his film, *Analogie No. 1*, received awards at both the First National Film Assembly in Chicago and the International Film Festival in Salerno, Italy. In response to this growing recognition, he received a \$10,000 award from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Arts in Chicago in 1957. In addition to a host of private collectors, the Museum of Modern Art, the United States Department of State, and other museums and institutions throughout the country purchased copies of his works, which were distributed by A-F Films and Radin Films in New York City.

Davis continued to make films for many more years before retiring to watch with amusement as a younger generation of artists and entrepreneurs parodied his achievements with everything from psychedelic light shows to staining colored light on aluminum Christmas trees. By the time of his death in 1974, his work, and the work of other "light artists," had become

deeply engrained in modern society. He had often stated that he was only on the threshold of a new age in which light and time would join color and form on the artist's palette. He lived long enough to see that prediction come true.

¹ Quoted in Cleve Gray, "Rediscovery: Jim Davis," *Art in America*, Nov.-Dec. 1967, p. 69.

² "An Interview with Jim Davis." Oral history interview by Paul Cummings on behalf of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, August 10, 1971.

³ Quoted in "Like a Three Ring Circus All in One Ring" by Doris E. Brown, *The Sunday Home News*, New Brunswick, NJ, April 7, 1968.

⁴ "An Interview with Jim Davis."

⁵ Davis Biography. Unpublished compilation of biographical materials about Davis, compiled by Davis with notes by James E. Guiber, West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University Libraries.

⁶ James E. Davis, Radin Films Catalog, New York, 1970.

⁷ "An Interview with Jim Davis."

⁸ "An Interview with Jim Davis."

⁹ Quoted in "Unusual Artist Finds Modern Art 'Regressive,'" *Princeton Packet*, Princeton, NJ, June 17, 1964.



¹⁰ A checklist of Davis's films may be found in *Jim Davis: The Flow of Energy*. Edited with an Introduction by Robert A. Haller. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1992.

¹¹ Jim Davis, "The Only Dynamic Art," *Films in Review*, December 1953.



RIGHT: *Light Interceptor*, c. 1950. Plexiglas, height approximately 14 inches.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Transparency*, c. 1945, oil on acetate, 20 x 14.

LEFT: *Reflection*, 1964. Kodacolor transparency, from the film *Fathomless*.

FAR LEFT: *Plastic Design*, c. 1960, height approximately 10 inches.

ABOVE FAR LEFT: Jim Davis, 1971, photograph by Jay Patis.