

Francis Davison, *D-15*, 1971, Collage, 99 x 93cm [detail]



3812 gallery
London | Hong Kong

Francis Davison

Born in 1919, Francis Davison was one of four children adopted by George and Joan Davison, millionaires by way of the Eastman Kodak Company. He lived with them in Cannes, until he was sent to England in 1932, to attend St George's boarding school in Essex, where he met Patrick Heron, who was to become a lifelong friend. Davison studied English and Anthropology at St Catherine's, Cambridge, and was a conscientious objector during the Second World War. In 1946, after a brief marriage that lasted only a year, Davison relocated to St Ives, where he was introduced by Heron to Margaret Mellis, who became his partner after an extended period of tentative friendship. Davison, Mellis, and her son Telfer (Mellis' son by her ex-husband, Adrian Stokes), moved first to London in 1947, and then to Cap d'Antibes, where they lived in Davison's ramshackle family chateau. It was here that the artist began painting and drawing the surrounding landscape (although he later destroyed much of this work). In 1948, Mellis and Davison married in Nice, and honeymooned in Venice. During this time, Heron tried without success to interest art dealers in the work of his friend. Indeed, Davison struggled to win much recognition for his work, and was never given a solo exhibition by any of the commercial London galleries until much later.

After returning to England in 1950, Davison and Mellis moved to Church Farm Cottage at Syleham, Suffolk, where they devoted themselves to farming, with the egg market being their main source of income in the following years, supplemented by intermittent sales of their work; in this same year, Davison was shown alongside Oskar Kokoschka, Merlyn Evans and Prunella Clough in a group exhibition at St George's Gallery. In 1952, Davison gave up painting and started making collages, initially using a stark palette of browns and greys, dictated by the materials that he had to hand. He used Essex board, overlaying paper to create dense colour and reduced shapes. Never cutting, only tearing, he was constrained by the rectangular board that he used until 1963. Once he abandoned the Essex boards, more freedom was afforded to his collages, which became more experimental and ambitious in technique and scale. Indeed, the early quadrilaterals assumed with time a ragged, near-square shape, which subsequently became more complex through the multiplicity of ways in which Davison tore and reassembled scrap papers, used envelopes or torn paper, which he constantly reinvented through slight manipulations of edges and outlines. He refused to give titles to the collages, believing that the pieces should speak for themselves. In the 1960s, he introduced brighter colours into his work, playing with their intensity through layering.

In 1975, Davison and Mellis moved from Syleham to Southwold, and towards the end of this decade, Davison started to receive wider recognition for his work. For example, in 1979, William Packer included him in the first British Art Show, a major touring exhibition of 112 artists, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain. In 1983 he was given a solo exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London. Very little sold, and critics were bemused by his refusal to provide any information about the collages. It did, however, influence a young Damien Hirst, who was "blown away" by the exhibition. Since his death in 1984, there have been four solo shows at the Redfern, including a retrospective in 1986, for which Heron wrote the catalogue essay. In 1989 Davison was included in the Arts Council's touring show, *The Experience of Painting*. In 2007, he was the subject of a well-received retrospective at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge.

About

- 1919 Born
- 1932 Sent to England from Cannes to attend St George's School, Essex
- 1944-5 Married to Brenda Roberts
- 1945 Moved to London, then Cap d'Antibes, with Margaret Mellis and her son, Telfer Stokes
- 1950 Moved with Mellis back to Suffolk
- 1955 Paper collages entered into mixed exhibition at Roland, Browse and Deblanco, London
- 1979 Selected by William Packer for 'The First British Art Show', an Arts Council touring exhibition of the UK
- 1983 Solo exhibition of collages at the Hayward Gallery, London
- 1986 Posthumous retrospective at the Redfern Gallery, London



Solo Exhibitions

- 1981 Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield
- 1982 MOMA, Oxford
- 1983 *Francis Davison: Paper Collages*, Hayward Gallery, London
- 1986 *Francis Davison, 1919-1984: a retrospective*, Redfern Gallery, London
- 1988 *Francis Davison, 1919-1984, Works with Green*, Redfern Gallery, London
- 1996 Aldeburgh Festival Exhibition, Peter Pears Gallery, Aldeburgh
- 2003 *Francis Davison: Paintings and Collages, 1948-83*, Austin/Desmond, London
- 2006 *Francis Davison: Early Paintings, Late Collages,, Austin/Desmond, London*
- 2007-08 *Francis Davison: Collages and early works*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
- 2010 *Francis Davison: 1919-1984*, Goldmark Gallery, Uppingham
- 2012 *Francis Davison: Collages*, Austin/Desmond, London
- 2017 *Francis Davison: Collages*, Redfern Gallery, London

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1969 *John Moores 7*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1976 *John Moores 10*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1973 *The Five Show*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
- 1979 *The First British Art Show*, Arts Council of Great Britain touring show of UK
- 1989 *The Experience of Painting: Eight Modern Artists*, South Bank Centre, London
- 1992 *Margaret Mellis and Francis Davison*, Gainsborough's House, Sudbury
- 1996 *Marget Mellis and Francis Davison*, Bede Gallery, London
- 2002 *Aspects of Modern British and Irish Art*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London

Collections

Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge
National Library of Australia, Canberra
Museums Sheffield
Tate
Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Francis Davison, C-149, 1970, Collage, 147 x 112cm

