

Kai Samuels-Davis

The Shadows

The Shadows, an exhibition of new work by Kai Samuels-Davis. Each of Samuels-Davis's paintings are born of a long creative process. Some take years to complete as he reworks marks and rethinks colors in a struggle for balance and harmony. The constant negotiation of a distinct emotional pitch—a task profoundly impacted by Samuels-Davis's changing life circumstances—also defines his process. As the layers of paint and personal history build, so too does a sense of depth and dimensionality, lending a mystery to the works that precludes simple or linear readings.

Samuels-Davis's style manifests a singular fusion of abstraction and representation. While the figurative elements provide familiar touch points for the viewer, the abstraction creates apertures within the composition that focus it on emotion. The triptych *The Disruption I–III* (2017), for example, eschews the hallmarks of technically exacting naturalism while still portraying what are recognizable as portraits. The three young subjects are fractured and fragmented, rendered in pinks, peaches, oranges, blues, and browns, among other colors, using short, quick marks. Presented against neutral gray-brown backgrounds, the boy and girl featured on the outer panels are distinguished by oblique gazes that appear heavy with contemplation. The girl in the middle, on the other hand, is set against a vivid pink background and locks eyes with the viewer in what could be described as an expression of calm yet direct appeal; however, as with the other two subjects, the exact nature of her thoughts hangs in the balance generated by her forever coalescing and disintegrating features. These and other portraits are not of specific people but rather of feelings. Because we each live complex albeit radically different emotional lives, a portrait of a feeling can be opened up and accessed by more people, allowing it to take on new and multiple meanings that, paradoxically, render it more human than if it were of a particular person.

As with *The Disruption I–III*, all of Samuels-Davis's paintings seem to be in the midst of breaking apart and coming back together; strokes of paint bounce and reflect as if colored rays of light to create a shimmering veil of dematerializing form. In addition to galvanizing the works' emotional drama, this liminal state allows the viewer to enter into a painting and explore its inner workings from different angles, as if it were an exploded cross-section. Within each painting, Samuels-Davis explains, "there are one thousand little abstract paintings—little moments in different worlds, marked by different colors and gestures." He describes the act of moving the medium around as "feeling very unconscious, like a dream." The fluidity of the act defines the process as a whole, as each painting informs the next.

Seen through the lens of art history, Samuels-Davis is part of a diverse and celebrated lineage of artists who have worked in a deconstructed aesthetic for reasons beyond the purely visual. Among this group are the Post-Impressionists, including Paul Cézanne, who abandoned classical techniques of perspective and foreshortening to instead convey form and volume through "constructive brushstrokes," which he used to build up deftly gradated tonal variations. The result

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was dynamic and alive yet solid and robust—not so much an expression of nature but rather his response to it. A similar mechanism is at work in the art of a number of contemporary artists, such as Frank Auerbach, Anne Gale, Alex Kanevsky, and Jenny Saville. So too can it be observed in the paintings of Samuels-Davis, as they prioritize that which is felt rather than seen through networks of individuated, idiosyncratic marks and colors.

Other stylistic hallmarks that distinguish Samuels-Davis's work include a sense of cinematic unfolding, whereby one painting seamlessly gives way to the next—a product of the subtle interrelationships he sets up and his impulse for world-building. The cinematic also finds expression in his fragmented style of mark-making, which compresses multiple frames into one to create an effect similar to that of long-exposure photography. While Futurism and Cubism may have been among the first movements to attempt to describe simultaneity, they often prioritized a linear and graphic style—and for very different ends. For Samuels-Davis, however, simultaneity is a tool for collection. By fragmenting and opening up a subject, he increases its capacity to hold different meanings and possibilities for different people.

Although there is always some element of himself in his painting, Samuels-Davis notes that his current show at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery, titled *The Shadows*, feels even more intentionally personal than previous bodies of work. The recent birth of his daughter prompted him to reflect upon his own childhood, especially upon adolescent angst and doubt, and upon a long-held desire to skip ahead to the next stage in life, when things seemingly become easier or better. Recognizing the fallacy of this mindset, Samuels-Davis is reminded to enjoy life as it is, in the moment and responding to the here and now, rather than pressing pause and waiting for things to change.

This realization, he explains, has saturated his work with even more emotion through a type of unloading, even catharsis. When he was a young boy, for example, he would often draw skulls, spikes, snakes, and blood. Samuels-Davis has since revisited some of this subject matter as a way of reaching back into himself and working through certain experiences. These paintings thus serve as markers of his personal growth, as they acknowledge the past while moving beyond it by offering mature, self-aware expressions of life's assorted trials. This is made no clearer than by *The End* (2017), in which a skull, evoking the Netherlandish tradition of vanitas painting, is presented as an object of reflection and curiosity rather than death and despair. It is the double-edged sword of the memento mori: a reminder of our mortality, but also a recognition of the lives we live in this very moment and the daily process of becoming in which we participate.

Kai Samuels-Davis was born in Catskill, New York, in 1980. He earned his BFA in 2002 from the State University New York, Purchase, followed by his MFA in 2006 from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. He has exhibited across the United States and Europe, and was included in Dolby Chadwick Gallery's 2015 group exhibition *Lightning Strikes*. This will be his third solo exhibition at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery.