

DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

Kai Samuels-Davis

The Clearing

Dolby Chadwick Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of new paintings by Kai Samuels-Davis, on view this September. Samuels-Davis creates abstract, fragmented paintings of people, landscapes, and objects, building up entire worlds with each body of work. His subjects oscillate and flicker, inviting viewers to move in and out of the splintered forms, expressive gestures, and emotions they shake loose.

The atmosphere of his paintings is deeply contemplative, with earlier groupings verging on the melancholic. This particular affective cadence was heightened by Samuels-Davis's color palette, which was previously dominated by muted, desaturated mauves and earth tones. The works in *The Clearing*, however, demonstrate a recent shift toward more fantastical colors such as bright blues, violets, pinks, and yellows that suffuse the paintings with vibrancy and vitality. In *Visions* (2021), for example, a strong pink glow illuminates the female figure's brown skin, highlighting her left temple and the side of her neck. Although her head is tilted toward her chest and her eyes are downcast, the emotive buoyancy created by the interplay of light and color lifts her up, both literally and figuratively.

Accompanying this shift in color is a turn toward naturalism, which Samuels-Davis explains was wholly unintentional: "In my head, I actually want the paintings to go the other way, to be more abstract." But coercing the paintings to align with expectations or conscious desires, he observes, eventually leads to work that feels forced, controlled, and unnatural. Instead, he gives himself over to his inner guide and instinct for what the paintings "want to be." The resulting body of work has emerged less fragmented and more direct, exhibiting a newfound energy and clarity.

These changes can be explained through an autobiographical lens. After all, Samuels-Davis considers the paintings to be a form of self-portraiture, reflecting whatever is in his head at a given moment. This past year has been a period of intense personal growth for the artist, who notes that his persistent angst has given way to more focus and a deeper appreciation for all that is in his life. The biggest catalyst for this change has been the long hours he's spent in the woods around his home in rural Inverness, California, clearing trails and dreaming up different outdoor projects. These activities helped get him into the best physical shape of his life—which boosted his energy in the studio—and taught him patience, since clearing 40-foot trees by himself with just a chainsaw cannot be rushed. This immersive experience in nature has also accorded him a fuller appreciation for the land and the seasons, underscoring a desire to be fully present in the moment. Life has opened up and, in his words, "a fog has lifted."

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This transformation has translated into the paintings not only as color (symbolizing “seeing the world in a new light”) and as a pull toward greater realism, but also as a quest for simplicity. These are still the same paintings as before, albeit now in their raw state, without layers of distortion and fragmentation to cover and conceal. When out clearing trails, Samuels-Davis notes that it can be difficult to look at those areas that are still busy with brush and dead tree limbs; areas that have been cleared, however, are much more relaxing and satisfying to take in, with the beauty and contours of the landscape exposed and singing. The same is true for the paintings, which have become more accessible and open to connection and interpretation. In keeping with this emphasis on peeling back and paring down, Samuels-Davis has started breaking the handles off his brushes, which are traditionally designed to be quite long. This has allowed him to get even closer to the paint, almost as if he were sculpting, and to locate the natural movement of his wrist and hand—his entire body, even.

Landscapes and objects (flower arrangements predominate in this show) accompany his portraits of people to give them a more fleshed-out, fully realized world to inhabit. As *The Clearing* speaks to processes of transition and awakening, it made sense for Samuels-Davis to include paintings of the Northern California fires that he and his family experienced. The threat posed by the fires and the upending of life they brought about played a critical role in his year of growth. To foreground the autobiographical angle of these events, his “fire” paintings present views he witnessed firsthand, either from his home or locations nearby. There is the big fire raging in Healdsburg to the north, as seen from across Tomales Bay and represented as a smoky horizon bisected by a stunning streak of pink in one and roiling, prismatic plumes of smoke in another. Another view is of their own local fire, raging red and hot in the opposite direction on the southern side of the hill behind them. “It felt like the world was burning around us,” Samuels-Davis recalls. Despite the loss and utter devastation fire brings, it also leaves in its wake the opportunity for regeneration and reflection. In one painting, *Again* (2021), a view of Drakes Beach after the fires were controlled, he depicts solitary waves—which he describes as glass-like in form—rolling across the calm waters toward the beach. The light coming through the smoky gray fog hanging in the air is tinged red, creating a filigree of pinkish-red reflections that flicker ebulliently across the shallows.

With this exhibition, Samuels-Davis introduces a new body of work called *Scrappers*. As the title suggests, these small abstract works utilize left-over paint scraps that the artist scrapes off his palette with a razor once they’re nearly dry. He likens the meditative process of creating these textured, almost sculptural paintings to solving a puzzle, as he must scan and select from hundreds of scraps to piece together the rough semblance of a portrait. His use of these by-products from his practice mirrors his use of leftover wood when working outside to create benches, fences, a “fox den” for his daughter, outsize bird nests, and Earthworks-style art in the vein of Andy

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Goldsworthy. Such projects bring his practice full circle and underscore his personal commitment to take nothing for granted, even detritus.

Kai Samuels-Davis was born in Catskill, New York, in 1980. He earned a BFA in 2002 from the State University New York, Purchase, followed by an MFA in 2006 from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. He has exhibited across the United States and Europe and has had his work featured on the cover of publications by Mary Oliver and Charlie Pendergast, and in the recent Netflix show *Russian Dolls*. This will be his fourth solo exhibition at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery.

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Kai Samuels-Davis

b. Catskill, NY 1980

Education

- 2006 Masters in Fine Art, Art Center College of Design. Pasadena, CA
- 2002 Bachelors in Fine Art, SUNY Purchase College. Purchase, NY

Solo Exhibitions

- 2021 The Clearing, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2018 The Shadows, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2016 Wilderness, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2015 The Cold Press Gallery, Holt, UK
- 2014 Between Head and Hand, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2013 The Cold Press Gallery. Holt, UK
- 2012 Quicksilver Mine Co. Forestville, CA
- 2011 The Cold Store, Norwich, UK
- 2007 Maude Carin, Los Angeles, CA
- 2004 Underground Arts Society. Altadena, CA

Group Exhibitions

- 2018 Disrupted Realism, Stanek Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2017 ARTIST AS SUBJECT: 20th Anniversary Show, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2015 Lightning Strikes: 18 poets. 18 artists, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, CA
 - Mini Show, Bolinas Museum, Bolinas, CA
 - Nourish, Napa Valley Museum, Yountville, CA
 - The Unit, London, UK
- 2013 Hello, *Goodbye*, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, CA
 - The Fig House. Los Angeles, CA
 - Galerie McGinty. Altadena, CA
- 2012 West County Design. Valley Ford, CA
 - Galerie Rauchfeld. Paris, FR
 - Graton Gallery. Graton, CA
- 2011 Quicksilver Mine Co. Forestville, CA
 - Local Color Gallery. Bodega Bay, CA
- 2010 The Cold Store. Norwich, UK
 - West County Design. Valley Ford, CA
 - Gallery at the End of the World. Altadena, CA
 - National 2010 juried exhibition. Sebastopol, CA
- 2009 Gallery at the End of the World. Altadena, CA
- 2007 M.J. Higgins Gallery. Los Angeles, CA

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- Hive Gallery. Los Angeles, CA
- BrenArt Gallery. Pasadena, CA
- Gallery at the End of the World. Altadena, CA
- 2006 M.J. Higgins Gallery. Los Angeles, CA
- Underground Arts Society. Altadena, CA
- 2005 M.J. Higgins Gallery. Los Angeles, CA
- Underground Arts Society. Altadena, CA
- Windham Fine Art Gallery. Windham, NY
- Purchase College Gallery. Purchase, NY
- Utica Museum of Art. Utica, NY

Publications and Awards

- Lightning Strikes: 18 poets. 18 artists. Dolby Chadwick Gallery, 2015
- Mary Oliver, Felicity (*cover image*), 2015
- Charlie Pendergast, *Gone Untreated (cover image)*, 2015
- Studio Visit Magazine, Winter Edition 2012
- Never Lazy Magazine, December 2012
- Sonoma County Emerging Visual Artist Award, 2012
- Yoo-N-LA magazine, Volume 1, 2011
- Poets & Artists magazine, August 2010
- National 2010 juried exhibition. Sebastopol, CA. Merit Award