

VAN DOREN WAXTER

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Karin Davie: “*To Boldly Go Where No Man’s Gone Before*”

By [Alfred Mac Adam](#)



Karin Davie, *Strange Terrain no 1*, 2022. Oil on linen, 78 x 86 inches. Courtesy the artist, CHART & Van Doren Waxter, NY.

Karin Davie is adept at ironic sleight-of-hand: she simultaneously tricks us and shows how her hocus-pocus works. In the title of this double show, she deliberately apocopates Captain Kirk’s sententious prelude in the voiceover for the original *Star Trek* series: “to boldly go where no man has gone before!” Her version is more conversational or vernacular, but it also calls attention to the irony of a woman’s appropriation of it. Even as she calls attention to her female identity, she is simultaneously pointing to her specific kind of artistic practice, which she quite rightly can call a place where no man has gone before. After all, it’s all hers.

And it is not just another version of Op Art, not exactly not-geometric, not infused with hidden biomorphic images, but suffused with a serial production it promptly thwarts through variation: Davie’s work is sui generis and exuberant, which probably explains why she needs two venues to house one show. Two galleries at Manhattan antipodes: Van Doren Waxter on the Upper East Side and Chart Gallery, deep in the heart of Tribeca, each space holding eight paintings, each set of eight complementary to the other. It is impossible to comprehend this dual show without experiencing the work in both galleries, and this imperative goes some way toward explaining how Davie conceives her own work and how she thinks we should experience it.

On the east wall of the Chart space hangs a large (78 by 86 inches) painting, *Strange Terrain no 1* (2022). On the north wall at Van Doren Waxter hangs *Strange Terrain no 2*, a 60 by 70-inch work, and nearby hangs *Strange Terrain no 3*, a 54 by 90 inch piece (both 2023). These three exemplify Davie’s experimentation with series works and how she subverts the very concept by sharply limiting its numbers. *No 1*, perhaps the most abstract of the

three, combines Davie's signature waves on a horizontal axis technique coupled with her color gradation device (Davie is a superb colorist), moving, on a vertical axis, from dark to light, transforming color into fluid matter. But all three, despite the serial intention implied in their titles, are different, variations on a landscape, the rolling, blazing hills of hell—one of the few instances where Davie's work may allude to the world beyond the canvas. It is as if Davie had the same idea at three different moments and captured the idea as it appeared to her in all its singularity at each given instant.

Another mini-series: the identically sized *Traveling Solo no 1* and *Traveling Solo no 2* (both at Van Doren Waxter, both 2023), the solo in the title derived from the shimmering avenue of light at their respective centers. They share Davie's dark to light format, dark on the vertical axis, gradually lightening until the very center. It's there we notice something peculiar: both works are comprised of two panels, but with the paint applied over the division, as if to disguise or dissimulate it. Why two panels? This is no diptych. The answer may reside in Davie's memory of her early career, with its shaped and pierced canvases. This idea of embedded memories carries over into two large paintings, both from 2022, in the Chart space: *In The Metabolic no 9* and *Small But Deadly (Parasite Painting) no 1*. At the bottom center of *Metabolic* there is a small notch cut out of the canvas, looking very much like a mouse hole in a cartoon, while above the top center of *Small But Deadly* there is another notch (an inverted mouse hole) and a small panel with multi-colored swaths painted on it. Again, Davie's personal code, as if to remind herself that her work is a continuous flow, that present pieces are inextricably bound to past work, much in the way Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* depicts the same figure in motion caught at different points.



Karin Davie, *Fight-or-Flight, Fight-or-Flight no 1*, 2022. Oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy the artist, CHART & Van Doren Waxter, NY.

The overarching subject of Davie's work is time: time remembered, time stopped in the abortive series paintings, and time marching on in her magnificent *Fight-or-Flight, Fight-or-Flight no 1* (2022) at Van Doren Waxter. The title refers to a body's physiological reaction to a psychological situation: what happens to us when we suddenly find ourselves in a threatening situation? We choose, consciously or not, either to strike or run. And Davie dramatizes that hinge moment by taking the avenue of light she so often locates at the center of her painting, angling it upward from the left border of the canvas, and breaking it. Is that flight? Is the undulating red line in the lower right corner fight? A frozen moment in a work that might be part of a series (only *no 1* is here), but one we will remember. And memory, the sister of time, is key for understanding this show: Davie wants us to see her work in both galleries, remember it, and connect its individual parts, much in the way she herself sees the relationships at play in her painting. Davie wants us to work with her, and this superb show is a glorious invitation.

Contributor

Alfred Mac Adam

Alfred Mac Adam is Professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He is a translator, most recently of Juan Villoro's *Horizontal Vertigo* (2021), about Mexico City.