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PHOTO: BARRETT BARRINGER

Julyan Davis

by Deborah Walden

British artist, Julyan Davis has found his home in the American South. His history with this region reads like a romance. “I’ve always been an artist. There was never really a dramatic moment there.” He came from a family of artistic types. His father, a London barrister, played guitar and wrote. It was his father’s music that first introduced Davis to the American South. Davis describes his dad as an “Americanophile” who loved Appalachian folk music. After studying *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school, Davis rabidly made his way through the works of Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, and Flannery O’Connor.

The American South took hold of his imagination.

After graduating from art school in London, Davis returned to his family home in Bath, England, with a lot of confidence and very little direction. Convinced by a few early sales that he could make it as an artist, he floundered as he realized that painting pictures is only half the work of being an artist. It was around this time that Davis stumbled upon Carl Carmer’s book *Stars Fell on Alabama*, and it changed his life. An interesting, early-twentieth-century chronicle of the history of Alabama, one chapter in particular grabbed his attention. This passage described the 1817 journey of a group of ill-fated Frenchmen who hoped to found a new settlement on American soil.

Shanties, abandoned filling stations, endless lines of trees—his work stems from careful observation of the world we often overlook as it blurs past our vision on the interstate.



right: **Green Building**, Oil on canvas, 20” x 40”



above: **Dry Lightning, Delta**, Oil on canvas, 36” x 48”



left: **Abandoned Mansion**, Oil on canvas, 36” x 38”

A sea party of hopeful Bonapartists had exited France after Napoleon’s crushing defeat at Waterloo. A group made up of aristocrats and generals, they would plant vineyards for a “wine and olive colony” in Alabama. A crucial misunderstanding of the climate doomed this venture. Towns and counties in Southwestern Alabama still bear their mark. Davis was so captivated by Carmer’s Alabama that he packed up his paints and moved there. Marengo County, named for Napoleon’s first Italian victory, seemed to call Davis across the Atlantic. He planned to live off the sale of his paintings and write a novel about this strange chapter in Alabama history. Perhaps the strangest twist to this story is the fact that those nineteenth-century Frenchmen were my ancestors. A branch of



my extended family still lives in tiny Marengo county, and I spent weeks of every summer there growing up. Davis and I realized that we had both been in this small, forgotten corner of the state at the same time, never realizing that some twenty years later we would meet.

I can personally vouch for the power of Davis’ art. After all, it is part of the calling of an artist to make grand revelations out of things that we have already seen. Take sunsets, for instance. There are sunsets every day that most of us barely even notice. An artist, though, can expand the context of a sunset, spirit it, enhance it, give it an emotional character. A true artist gives us a gift because, however briefly, they let us see the world through their eyes.


I have been going to Marengo County for thirty-one years (I made my first trip when I was two weeks old), and I have never really seen the beauty in that place. Seeing Davis’ canvases, though, I began to think about its rugged peacefulness—the endless swaths of stars in the night sky, the violet cast to empty fields at dusk, the saturated blue of its celestial dome. If only in my mind’s eye, I was able to reexperience unnoticed beauty through his work.

Davis’ art has continued to grow over his two decades stateside. He has begun to experiment with human figures and to play with geometric and abstract elements in his works. He says, “I like exploring abstract shapes and flat qualities. I try to take two extremes of what influences me and bring them together. That’s how each artist finds their own unique style.” A technical virtuoso as a painter, he is able to anchor large regions of strong line and shape into naturalistic images. His paintings, at times, have a photographic quality. And sometimes, his landscapes are so

above: *Corner Store, Montford Avenue*, Oil on canvas, 32” x 72”

right: *Abandoned Farm House*, Oil on canvas, 24” x 24”

simplified, so boiled down that they are like whispers or suggestions of a place. No matter what, they are always beautiful, and they always seem to hint at a human presence. “I like faded, slightly haunted-feeling spaces,” he says.

Meditations on some dust-blown country heaven or the arching branches of a streamside tree, Davis’ paintings follow the back roads of the South. For many of us, they take us on a journey off the beaten path of our own memories. It is as if that human presence suggested in his landscapes might just be our childhood gaze rolling over some unexplored corner of our grandmother’s hometown. A delightful guide, Davis traveled halfway across the world to remind the American South of its own inherent beauty. Guided by a sense of destiny, borne in from some other place, he is one of the brightest stars to fall on Alabama. 

Julyan Davis is represented by Tinney Contemporary Gallery.
www.julyandavis.com



left: *The Midwife's Cove*, Oil on canvas, 38” x 36”

above: *Bank Interior, Newbern, Alabama*, Oil on canvas, 30” x 24”

below: *Washerteria*, Oil on canvas, 20” x 36”

