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Herbert Davidson: Portraits of Solitude

BY JOHN WILLIAMS

THE CREATIVE LIFE Chicago artist Herbert Davidson pursues is simple, ordered, and solitary, like the pictures he paints. In a sense his pictures are his life, records of the things he sees, of the people he knows and meets, of the experiences he has. Like seeds, he plants these experiences daily in the back of his mind and some take root, grow, and eventually bear fruit. This creative cycle has continued now for Davidson for more than 20 years, and it is again reaffirmed every time he begins a new canvas.

All his paintings, and even the illustrations he has been doing for *Playboy* magazine for almost as long as he has been an artist, seem to have a similar theme: people alone in their solitary world. Whether it is a child off in the woods lost in thought; an old woman poised with a searching, inward look; or, as in the case of his illustrations, portraits of celebrities; his pictures provide penetrating glimpses, candid moments in the lives of his subjects.

The solitary feeling Davidson captures in his work is a feeling he knows well, has known all his life. Even as a child Davidson liked being alone. And although he doesn't think it is a universal trait in children, he knows that children aren't always happy and carefree and oftentimes need to be alone.

"I love being by myself," Davidson says. "Even when Lee (his wife of eight years) is home, she never comes into the studio. Even the cat doesn't come in."

Davidson, 49, has been painting in the detailed, highly polished style that characterizes his work since shortly after he graduated in 1956 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Upon graduation, he was awarded a traveling fellowship and, for the next year-and-a-half, he roamed around Europe, spending most of his time painting and studying in Florence.

In Europe he was inspired by the stained-glass windows of the Chapel Saint Louis in Paris and the work of the 15th- and 16th-century Italian Masters. He was overwhelmed by the beauty and grace of Botticelli's



Photo: Everett Oehlschlaeger

Right: *The Runner*, 1979, oil, 28 x 21. Courtesy Everett Oehlschlaeger Galleries, Inc., Chicago, Illinois. Here Davidson's concern was with the chiaroscuro effect of vibrant color in the light on the trees and on the model while maintaining a sense of quiet in the shadows.



HERBERT DAVIDSON



HERBERT EMMISON



Above: *Approaching Showers*, 1979, oil, 20 x 28. Collection Mr. William McClain. Davidson often uses neighborhood children as subjects. By carrying his camera with him as a sketching tool, he can capture them in unposed positions—as he did here.

Opposite page: *The Choice*, 1978, oil, 30 x 24. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Albert C. Hanna. This painting changed drastically as it progressed. Using three different sources—one for the figure, another for the background, and a third for the pumpkins—he began with the figure of a boy lying down in the field of pumpkins.

drawings and still finds inspiration in them to this day. It was during this trip that he made up his mind to be a painter.

Davidson describes his work during his school days as bordering on fantasy, a strict departure from the genre style that characterizes his work today.

His work at that time, especially his figure studies, were stylized, probably as a direct result of the inspiration from the stained-glass windows he so admired. But after his return to the United States, that soon fell by the wayside. He then began painting still lifes and worked with the figure more seriously.

He held his first solo show in Chicago shortly after his return from Europe. Its success gave Davidson the financial security and incentive to continue. He painted for three more years in Chicago and then went to Israel, where he lived and worked for a year-and-a-half. During this period, Davidson felt his work was beginning to mature, to be free from the influences of school.

"I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to paint while I was in school, but it wasn't true," he says. "I found that I was like unformed clay. I had things running in my head from my school days that had to take time to gestate. You just have to get away from school for a while to let your

ideas mold and mature."

As he looks back at the progression of his work over the past 20 years, Davidson finds that his work hasn't changed all that much, it has just evolved: "You don't look at something I did 20 years ago and say, 'I wonder who did that.' You know it was me. I mostly wonder why I did that and why I did it that way."

Mood and setting in a painting are quite important to Davidson and have even become more important over the years. In his early work, he wasn't as concerned with those elements or with what he calls "focusing in on a figure." He says his early work may have contained those elements, but it was probably unintentional: "Now I search it out, strive for it."

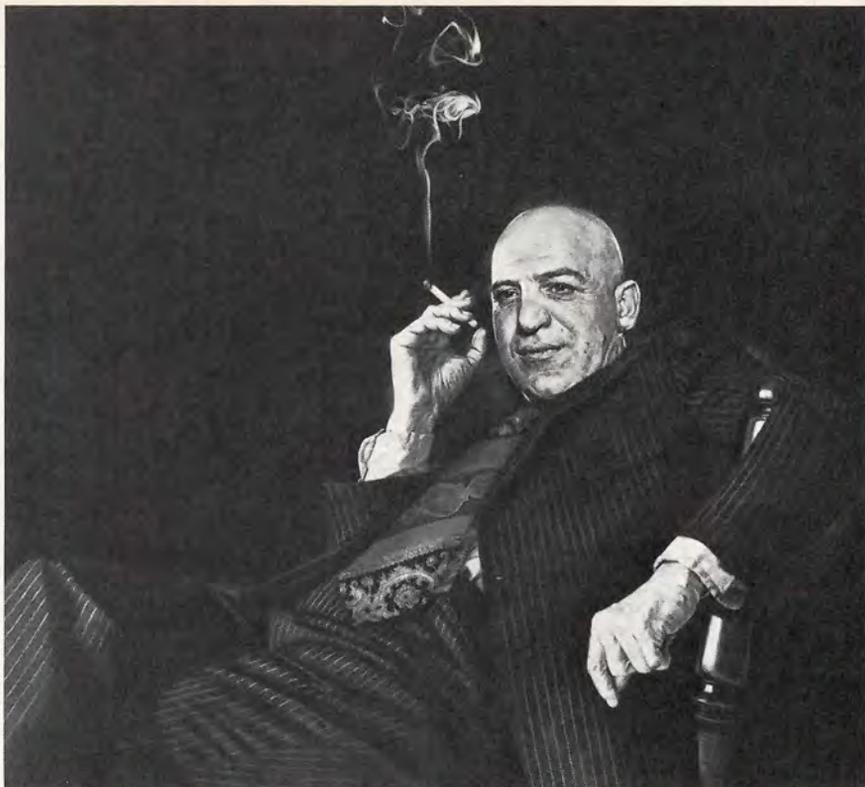
Davidson says of his work: "I want it to have a certain presence; I hope, although I don't think it is an absolute, that when someone looks at it that they are going beyond the surface—the drawing, the color—and they are getting some idea of what it is I am dealing with in the painting. But I don't think it is necessary in anyone's painting to know exactly what the artist had in mind when he was painting. You can react to a piece of art within yourself without knowing what the artist intended."

Davidson can't remember a time when he didn't want to be an artist. While he always drew, he attended

Right: *Telly Loves Ya*, 1978, oil, 25 x 30. Copyright © 1978 by *Playboy*. Using just a face shot for likeness. Davidson created the pose, attitude, and setting of this convincing portrait from his imagination—using a friend as the model.

Below, right: *James Dickey*, 1969, oil, 30 x 24. Courtesy *Playboy* magazine. In his illustrations, Davidson tries to create a sense of the character of his subject as he did here with Dickey, who was working in North Carolina at the time this portrait was done.

Below, left: *Good Ol Boy*, 1970, oil, 18 x 14. Courtesy *Playboy* magazine. Davidson finds his *Playboy* portraits interesting, because he feels they are similar to his other work. "I've turned down one or two commissions for every one I accept," he comments. "There has to be enough interest in it for me to do it. I spend such a long time with each piece that if it's not something that really interests me, I know it will be a battle."



Opposite page: *Woman In Thought*, 1979, oil, 30 x 25. Collection Dr. and Mrs. George F. Stevenson. Davidson often poses his mother—whom he finds a willing and interesting model—as he did here. Technically, he concentrated on the white emerging from the canvas and from the background.

children's classes at the School of the Art Institute and remembers being "turned on" by Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*: "The fact that someone could paint a painting that could evoke a strong emotional response was exciting."

Today Davidson finds inspiration in the work of Jan Vermeer. "He has probably had the biggest influence on me of any painter," comments the artist. "For me his paintings are more than the light and the luminosity that they are famous for. And his pictures are more than just genre pieces. What Vermeer has captured is a moment in time."

Davidson sees himself following the traditions of the genre painters of the past. He feels that all the work he has done so far has led him to this point.

Although Davidson's own work may be restricted to representational painting, he admires many of the moderns and especially finds power in the works of Willem de Kooning and Francis Bacon. Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting were in vogue while Davidson was a student, and, while the concepts interested

him, he never felt the need to work in those modes.

As in the traditions of the genre painters of the past, Davidson relies on the things and people he sees around him for subject material. "The pictures are always there," Davidson says. "Unlike some other painters, however, I never recall seeing something and saying to myself: 'Gee, I'd love to paint that.' Never. I see something and it triggers off an image in my mind. I may say to myself: 'That incorporated with this other image may just make an interesting painting.'"

Davidson says he always has the next three paintings worked out in his head, but he works only on one canvas at a time—through completion—because he feels that, if he stopped for a while to work on another piece, he would lose the excitement that brought him to the idea in the first place.

The approach the artist took with *The Choice* somewhat illustrates the process that goes on before Davidson undertakes a painting. The little girl pictured in that painting is Davidson's wife's grandchild. She came to visit

one day wearing the yellow slicker. Davidson thought it looked interesting and took a number of photos of the child. About a year later, just before Halloween, he was driving through the countryside just north of Chicago and spotted a stand where a local farmer was selling pumpkins. There were two or three huge racks filled with pumpkins and hundreds of others lying all over the ground. As is his practice, Davidson took a number of photos. Months later he began playing with the idea of putting a little boy in the composition lying down amidst the pumpkins. He did the sketches and was pleased. But when he transferred the sketch to a large canvas, it didn't work.

Davidson gave up the idea, deciding to come back to it at a later time. He says he never tries to force an idea, because he has found through experience that forced paintings just don't work. He prefers to set the idea aside and let it gestate for a while longer. That's what he did.

About a year later, the idea of putting the figure of his wife's grandchild dressed in the yellow slicker in a composition with the pumpkins came to him. He added the distant background from another photo taken at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo, which is a few blocks from Davidson's home. This time Davidson was pleased with the results and executed the painting.

Since the late 1960s, the camera has become an important tool in Davidson's work. He began using it to study the effect of light and dark, the *chiaroscuro*, which he felt was lacking in his work, and discovered it could be used as an excellent sketching device. He takes pictures continuously, never actually seeking any particular subject matter. "I'd never find anything that way," he says. A child down the street may catch his eye; or he might find an abandoned sand castle on the beach or the way the sunlight hits a particular tree interesting. Parts of these pictures combined with others may eventually find their way into one of his compositions.

Davidson's studio has two windows with northern exposure. Natural light is a must for this artist because of the effect it has upon color. Under artificial illumination, Davidson has found that his pictures have a much darker appearance and his colors are not as vibrant.

His painting routine rarely varies. He usually works five, sometimes six, days a week in a studio that he emphasizes is only 12 feet from his bed. He begins by 8 a.m. and works until sundown.

Davidson has used the same palette for 20 years. It consists of burnt um-

Continued on page 77



'Indian red'—as Wright called it."

Over the years, Myers has built up an elaborate collection of colors: printing inks in different brands (some etching, some litho), oil paints, earth colors and black in pigment form, Day-Glo® colors, French colors—many from the Graphic Chemical and Ink Company just outside Chicago. "I have a large collection of inks to choose from and I know them all well," she comments. "I know what each ink looks like and what it does—which are transparent, which are opaque, when I have to add more oil, and how much Easy-Wipe® I will need."

Myers claims she owes her ability to print the large areas of subtle tone in her prints to Easy-Wipe, a product produced by Graphic Chemical. She adds it to all her inks to give them the suppleness that allows her to wipe a plate evenly. "Most etching inks are too sticky," she explains. "I need a rather soft, nonsticky ink."

Myers has agreed to do the Wright folio of six prints (*Johnson's Wax, The Guggenheim, Wingspread, Taliesin West, Marin County Civic Center, and Unity Temple*—an early Wright building and the only interior) in an edition of 50, although her editions are usually smaller. She would like to

have her plates printed commercially, but most commercial printing firms either can't print as smoothly as she does or won't because it takes too long. (She has gotten the actual printing down to about one hour per print.)

Aside from making plates and printing editions, the business aspect of printmaking is extensive. "Although I work long hours," she comments, "I never cease to be amazed by how much additional time artists must spend doing things other than actually working on their art. Shopping for inks, for the right papers, for tools; keeping records; writing letters; negotiating with galleries for sales and for shows; ordering plates—I could go on. The production of the Wright prints, with each set in its own portfolio, has taken and promises to take even more time than usual.

"But it's a satisfying life," she allows.

Myers's home base is a large working dairy farm located outside Madison, Wisconsin. Her printmaking activities are balanced with teaching positions—such as the semester she spent as Distinguished Professor of Art at Mills College in Oakland, California, in 1979; the month as Artist-in-Residence she did in Morocco, also in 1979; and the summer session she is

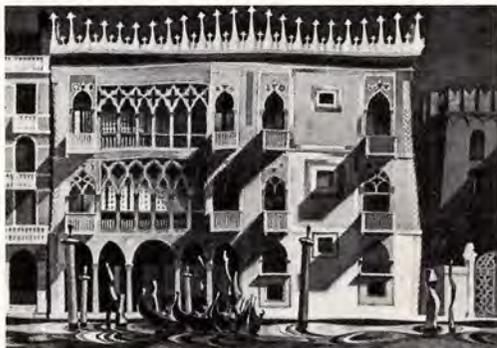
teaching this year at the University of Wisconsin in Madison—which she accepts on an irregular basis. She has won an impressive list of awards and has had solo shows and been part of group shows regularly since 1960. And while she feels Wisconsin patrons are her strongest supporters, her works hang in major collections throughout the world: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Art Institute of Chicago, The Victoria and Albert Museum of Fine Art in London, and The National Collection of Fine Art in Washington, D.C. are just a few. And several of the galleries she deals with throughout the country have planned a special showing of the folio: The Madison Art Center in Madison, Wisconsin; Joy Horwich Gallery in Chicago; Associated American Artists in New York City; and Haslem Fine Arts, Inc., Gallery in Washington, D.C. •

DAVIDSON (from page 59)

ber, raw and burnt sienna, phthalocyanine blue and green, ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, titanium white, and the cadmiums—red light, orange, and yellow medium. He uses ivory black only to lay in his initial sketch. He prefers linseed oil as a me-

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dium because it is a slow drier. The slower the paint dries, the longer he is able to work back into his paintings, which is important for the tonal effects he tries to create.

There was a time, Davidson says, when he spent as much time on the preliminary work for a painting—getting the composition correct—as he did on the painting itself. That has changed. Now he spends a day or two on the design, sometimes longer. But there are times that the idea is so etched in his mind that he goes right into the painting without any preliminary sketching at all.

Generally, however, Davidson blocks out his composition in an almost abstract form to get the basic shapes, the pattern of the design, which he feels is what will really carry his painting. He then begins to sketch in the drawing very freely with a thin sable brush and black (ivory) paint on an inexpensive, double-primed canvas, which he has toned with burnt umber. (He gave up expensive linen canvas because, he said, he threw out almost half the roll, cutting around the nubs and flaws. To a painter who works as finely and detailed as Davidson, those flaws could mean disaster if they appeared in a critical area of the painting. The cotton canvas has a smoother consistency with very few nubs, which he finds amenable to his work. He tones his canvas with umber, a technique he discovered after studying some of the unfinished work of the Italian Masters.)

Next, Davidson refines this free sketch, wiping out lines and perfecting others until he gets a finely detailed drawing: "I find the better my drawing is, the easier it is to paint."

His next step is to mix the colors he is going to use on the palette. For example, if the colors he is going to be primarily concerned with on a particular day are reds and yellows, he will mix those colors and their complements.

In the first stage of the actual painting, Davidson begins to lay in color all over the canvas, defining the major areas of light and dark. He emphasizes that he doesn't lay in color in flat washes; he is constantly aware and is always working for value changes. This first stage may take two or three days or as much as a week, depending on the size of the picture.

In his mind, Davidson says, he is thinking of laying in the darks and building up the lights. His prime consideration is the overall light and dark pattern with slight refinements to both. The values are of utmost importance at this stage and will continue so throughout the picture.

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"redefining" or "the introduction of real color." He lays in one color on top of another, similar to an Impressionist technique of broken color, but in a much more subtle manner, again always working for value changes. He will often introduce a complement in a major area of color to give it vibrancy. In the past he used to glaze areas of the picture with a complementary color but eventually gave that up, because he finds that by using broken color his paintings are more alive. In the next and final stage Davidson will go back into the painting to refine both color and value, working and reworking to get the desired effect. Then he puts in the subtle changes of color and value that he feels pulls the picture together. When the painting is completely dry, he will varnish it with three thin coats of damar varnish.

Davidson's biggest expense in painting is brushes. He uses a variety of them, mostly sables, but he relies heavily on a No. 2 or 3 round. The brushes come to a very fine point, perfectly suitable for the detailed work that Davidson does. He wears out as many as two or three brushes a painting. Besides the sables, which he also uses in flats and brights, all of varying sizes, but no larger than a quarter of an inch, he also has on hand a few large bristle brushes for big areas and a number of synthetic sponges cut up into small pieces, which he uses to create texture.

It takes Davidson anywhere from three to ten weeks to complete a painting, depending on the size. He seldom paints on larger than two-by-three-foot canvases, because he feels everything he has to say can be said within that size or, for the most part, within a smaller format. He used to complete 20 paintings a year but has found, as time goes on, that it is more difficult to please himself, so he winds up taking more time to finish a painting.

Of the work he completes in a year, Davidson finds that there are usually one or two paintings that really stand out and which he feels have really hit his mark. That, of course, is his goal with every painting, but he, like most artists, finds it doesn't happen with every picture. "I consider a painting successful when I have an idea, a good idea that I am excited about," he says. "And at the conclusion of the painting, if the idea I had in my head is pretty close to what happens in the picture, then I know the idea and my attempt to express it were good. When the result is vastly different from the original idea, then I know that there was something wrong with either my idea or my attempt to express it."

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vidson completes in a year are illustrations for *Playboy* magazine. Many artists who do both fine art and illustration feel the combination as a conflict of interest and that they must do only one or the other. Not Davidson. To him, working on an illustration presents the same problems as working on a painting: "I don't think differently. I don't approach it differently. And I don't paint differently."

Davidson and many other artists who contribute to *Playboy* have a unique opportunity because, under the direction of Art Paul (*American Artist*, May 1975), the magazine hires artists as illustrators. They are given full freedom to execute the kinds of pieces they think are appropriate for the particular idea they may be trying to illustrate. It is that method that keeps Davidson working for the magazine.

He has limited his illustration work to *Playboy* by choice. Although he continually receives offers from across the country, Davidson usually refuses them, because he knows he won't have the artistic freedom he gets from *Playboy*. Davidson isn't required to submit any preliminary sketches for approval. He usually discusses the concept with the art director, goes home, thinks out the piece, and does it.

Davidson approaches his illustrations with the kind of creative thinking that has won him constant admiration and numerous prizes. When *Playboy* asked him to do a portrait of Telly Savalas, Davidson accepted immediately because he felt he knew the character and could express it well. "I knew the slouch attitude and the exact expression I wanted on his face. I called up my dentist, who is also my friend, and asked him to pose lounging in a chair, smoking a cigarette." Davidson took a number of photos from various angles to get the body position he wanted. *Playboy* supplied him with two dozen photographs of Savalas's head from which he was able to get the likeness. But there was no such thing as copying the photograph. Davidson created the angle of the face and, more so, created the expression on Savalas's face by playing with the drawing of the features. The painting took a month to complete and has won a number of awards. It will be reproduced in the 1980 *Illustrator's Annual*.

Davidson thinks of himself primarily as an artist who once in awhile does an illustration for *Playboy*. He believes there is a difference between a piece of fine art and an illustration and defines an illustration by the distance he finds between the artist and his work. In fine art, he says, there is no such distance; the artist and his

work are one. It is a fine line between the two and one that in recent years has even become more indistinguishable.

Herbert Davidson says he's been lucky in his career. His work has found an audience. He is paid well and, above all, he loves what he is doing. He has been asked on a number of occasions what he thinks he will be doing with his work in five or ten years. Davidson says he is always a bit surprised by the question, because answering it always means trying to predict the future, something he's never tried to do: "I just don't know what I'll be doing. I don't try to change my work. I know it has changed, as has my thinking, but it has never been conscious. I just go on. I am doing this because I love to do it. And for an artist that's the most important thing." •

VOTAW (from page 63)

how overlooked, and we go back for another look.

When talking about his "diary art," Votaw becomes pensive and quiet. "My family has had more than its share of tragedy, sickness, separation, and death," he says. "I'm always going to be haunted by thoughts from the past. Even in my happiest moments I can think of thoughts that provoke sadness. I can't get rid of these sorrows." Such feelings, Votaw continues, might be the inspiration necessary for a writer to create his poem or novel. But the very act of translating feeling into form provides an emotional outlet which, expressed some other way—or worse, not expressed at all—could have far more serious consequences. "I call my work 'diary art,' because, first of all, it is extremely personal. I don't think about selling. Secondly, if it wasn't for my art, I don't know what I might have become. I take everything out on my art."

Votaw rarely produces a really "happy" painting. "Artists, poets, and dramatists are the frost line of society," he explains. "Everyone who has a gift should be striving to open the eyes of the people who do not have the gift. 'Happy' paintings do not say or do much." And, he adds sardonically, "I won't have a place mat made of my work."

During periods of great creativity, Votaw may have as many as eight or ten paintings going at once. "If I lose the feeling for a certain work, I'll set it aside until the exact feeling comes back. As for original feelings, they are always spontaneous. It's not really inspiration. Lots of ideas occur to me in dreams, so I keep a notebook by my bed. Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night and write down a dream which might eventually be