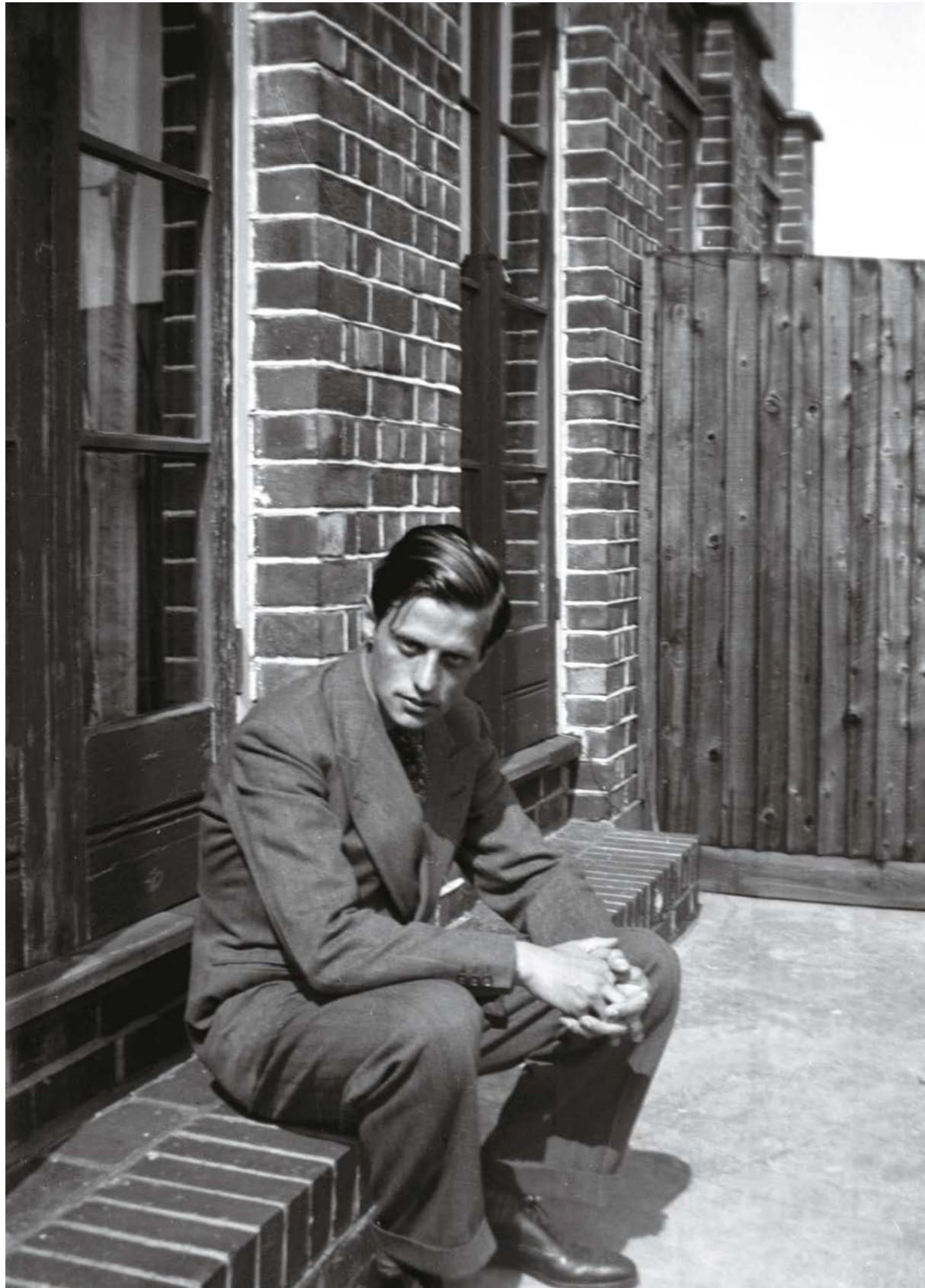


Francis Davison Collages

This catalogue is dedicated to
the memory of Michael Harrison, 1947-2013,
Director of Kettle's Yard, Cambridge.

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Francis Davison c.1939

An Introduction to Francis Davison

Background

Francis Davison (1919-84) was the adopted son of the managing director of the Eastman Kodak Company, George Davison, a wealthy philanthropist. He grew up at the Davison villa near Cannes but was sent to school in England, where he made lifelong friends with Patrick Heron. Francis later read English and anthropology at Cambridge, and his first great love was poetry. It was not until 1946, when he met Margaret Mellis in St Ives, a meeting engineered by Heron, both protagonists being on the rebound from failed marriages, that Davison showed any real sign of wanting to become a visual artist. Mellis was by temperament an enabler - she also encouraged her first husband, Adrian Stokes, to be a painter - and Davison now began to paint, with her enthusiastic support. His early work is essentially École de Paris tempered by Christopher Wood and Alfred Wallis. Like his mature work, it is vigorous and dramatic: painterly in application, with an occasional Fauve intensity, in which the influence of Patrick Heron can also be discerned.

For a short time Davison and Mellis, with her son Telfer from the marriage to Adrian Stokes, lived in the by now semi-derelict Cannes villa, before settling in England in 1950, first at Syleham in Suffolk, and then by the sea at Southwold. (They had married in 1948.) In Suffolk, Davison's early Parisian painterliness was supplanted by a more rigorous and austere vision of flat, abstracted field systems punctuated by scattered farm buildings. In 1952 he began making collages and discovered his true métier and material, never afterwards returning to paint. His early collages were a direct development of the cottage-and-field motif of the paintings, but his mature work moved into a new area altogether and a different level of attainment. In abstract collage, Francis Davison finally found his voice, and a highly original one it proved to be.

Davison's distinctive collage style of interlocking patterns floating in space is a clear development of Britain's linear tradition which stretches back to

the great age of Celtic ornament and manuscript illumination. He had the remarkable ability to make torn paper look like brushstrokes of paint, when many of his more radical contemporaries were exploring the further reaches of post-war abstract painting. In some respects, Davison can be seen as a painter manqué, though this implies that he would have preferred to have painted, when it's evident that the medium of collage suited him entirely. And it can be argued that the language of collage he created was more individual and powerful than anything he could have done in painting. Certainly, his work is best considered in the company of painters: Heron, Roger Hilton, William Gear, William Scott. Margaret Mellis was a friend of Hilton, and she invited him to stay in Suffolk. During this visit Davison grew convinced that the older artist wanted to steal his ideas. He hid his work away and treated Hilton with suspicion. This paranoid behaviour reveals something of Davison's secretive nature, but it also indicates how close this group of artists were in their thoughts and responses.

Actually, both Davison and Mellis admired Hilton's work, and although Davison's approval was tinged with rivalry, the linear quality of his collages does encourage comparison with Hilton's nervous stuttering charcoal line. As I have written elsewhere: 'That shambling yet cursive line of Hilton's is like the way we so often touch - not in graceful smooth-

flowing Hollywood caresses, but in awkward jabs and spasms, with the odd stutter or jolt of electricity...' The same could be said of Davison's fast-flowing or more deliberately paced linearity, often discontinuous but strongly assertive however interrupted. There is a distinctly tactile quality to his line - as if it in some way lassoed life itself, and touched it deeply. That rootedness is essential to the success of Davison's imagery.

Hilton's paintings of the early 1950s, such as *February 1954* (Tate Collection), were beginning to look very much like raggedly stretched hides or assemblies of torn paper, but he rarely strayed into collage, remaining true to paint (oil and then gouache) to the end of his life. It was Davison who saw the potential in collage, no doubt alerted to it by Margaret Mellis, who had been experimenting with the medium herself since 1939. Davison pushed collage further than Mellis ever did (though she was to employ a parallel and equally inventive approach in her driftwood sculptures), and exploited not only the physical possibilities of the material, but how it might be closely structured without affecting its immediacy. The extent of the results has yet to be fully appreciated: only now is the true range of Davison's work beginning to be shown.

His reclusive nature had the effect of keeping the work largely unseen, and it was not until one or two astute critics began to champion Davison's collages

A-42 1952-53

50 × 59 cm



B-4 1963-65

73 × 82 cm



that he was persuaded to exhibit in the last years of his life. By far the most significant exhibition of his work at this time was the solo show at the Hayward Gallery in 1983. But the Hayward was a huge strain on Davison - not only the construction of the frames (which he made himself on the kitchen floor), but the effect of going public, even though he longed for recognition. He was such a private man that he felt more than usually vulnerable at showing the distillation of his life's work and inviting a response. Although the young Damien Hirst later admitted that the exhibition 'blew him away', the public in general seems to have been rather baffled. A few of the more discerning critics recognised the quality of the collages, and some artists responded positively, but the exhibition changed little, and Davison died in 1984 largely unknown and unrecognised. He is still one of the best-kept secrets of the British art world.

Context

Francis Davison used plain paper, coloured but not printed, unlike say Schwitters who revelled in the previous life of his collage elements (newspaper, bus tickets, tin foil, franked envelopes) and invited the strangeness of new juxtapositions. Davison's approach was purer and in some ways more exploratory than this. Schwitters shoved everything together almost haphazardly to create a new and startling reality, like the chance meeting of an umbrella and

a sewing machine on a dissecting table, whereas Davison tested every disposition repeatedly until he got it right. His employment of what was in effect mass-produced coloured wrapping paper gave the initial impression of informality. The humped, wrinkled and sometimes folded paper is simply glued together, with no attempt to smooth or flatten it, or present it tidily. Davison's collages are the reverse of precious, but they generate their own currency by this very inelegance.

The colour, though intentional, is found colour - he worked with the given colours of the papers he collected, and although they often look as if painted, he never actually painted them. A feature of the mature work is the preponderance of big blobby *taches* of colour such as you might find in the abstract paintings of Bert Irvin. The comparison with Roger Hilton's work has already been made, and Hilton's friend and colleague Sandra Blow should also be mentioned in this connection, a vivid and prolific collagist herself. Similarly, some of Davison's shapes have a kinship with the ragged colour areas in Patrick Heron's paintings. It wouldn't be entirely surprising if such close friends were to influence each other, and interestingly, Heron's late work, particularly of the 1990s (made when Davison was dead) seems to share a similar complexity of formal language, though with greater violence of colour.

Colour really took off for Davison when the range of found paper available to him suddenly broadened out in the 1960s. Davison's collages are remarkably painterly in their use and application of colour. It sometimes takes an effort to recall that all these marks, shapes and groupings are made from nothing other than torn paper. The lines and blocks of colour so resemble brushstrokes and painted dispositions that the eye can be briefly tricked - particularly where Davison has torn away bits of paper previously stuck down, leaving only a trace or echo, like a smear of pigment. Davison was a master of the edge: not simply in the ragged outside edges of his collages which, while remaining roughly square or rectangular, frequently take on a new and radical dynamic through an unexpected rhythm of projections and protrusions matched by gaps and absences; but also within the collage, as different edges of paper are lapped and abutted in lyrical and often quite complex patterns and layers. Davison used tone to great advantage, varying the browns and blacks and reds with instinctive subtlety, and employing blue with particular verve. Light comes through these collages, but is as likely to be dark light as bright. (The effects can be muted though sonorous.) The artist also made telling use of white, though in his later work white is often replaced by absence - a gap in the weave, a hole through which the colour on which the collage is mounted may show through.

The gaps act like breathing spaces, bringing a new sense of transparency to the work.

Certainly Davison made brilliant use of negative space, not only in the notched and jagged profiles of his collages but also in the apertures, both real and illusory, within the compositions. Initially, Davison used some kind of sheet or backboard on which to build his paper structures, but this soon gave way to a freer sense of construction, in which the overlapping fragments of paper themselves constitute the finished work. The uneven edges are simply where the torn paper stops. It was in 1963, while staying with the Herons in Cornwall, that he started to work without a backboard. From then on, the collages became increasingly self-sufficient.

The ragged edges help to project energy outwards, rather than containing it within a rectangle, but if this suggests a dispersal of effect, the opposite is in fact true. Somehow Davison's collages become more potent and intense despite their rough and permeable edges. These collages are multi-directional, like tapestries, or like Adrian Berg's big Regent's Park paintings of the early 1980s. They could be hung any way up and still hold their space forcefully on the wall. What could be viewed as an uncertainty about the orientation of his images was actually a hard-won freedom.

B-8 1963-65

56 × 61 cm



B-38 1963-65

70 × 60 cm



Although there are occasionally cut edges to be seen in his work - especially in the early years - for the most part Davison tore his paper, rather than risking the kind of fluency with scissors that Matisse developed, and which itself could become a mannerism. (In much the same way a painter might work with the other hand than usual in order to disrupt habit and avoid the familiarity of easy solutions.) One of the great American practitioners of collage was Robert Motherwell, dedicated Francophile and one of the chief exponents of Abstract Expressionism. He claimed that collage was a modern substitute for still-life, citing the debris left on the tablecloth at the end of a meal. But this was by no means a universally accepted definition. For Davison, collage was the antithesis of still - it was all about movement and the passage through life, about active experience and a celebration of living, not *nature morte*. But then Motherwell himself also admitted the active nature of collage, writing in 1946: 'The sensation of physically operating on the world is very strong in the medium of *papier colle* or collage...'

In fact, Motherwell, who made his first collage in 1943, a decade before Davison began to explore the medium, considered the torn edge to be his own original contribution to the art of collage. (Who did what first is always a vexed question among artists. As early as 1916 Arp had made torn paper

collages.) But Motherwell used collage on canvas and most often in conjunction with paint, whereas for Davison at the height of his achievement it was an altogether purer form, only employing paper. In addition, Motherwell observed that 'the tearing was also equivalent to murdering symbolically'. Perhaps there is some truth in this: violence is often an essential aspect of the artist's method, and Davison, for all his languid exterior, certainly had a passionate temper. Telfer Stokes recalls that the only time he saw Davison happy was when he was making collages. He wouldn't be the first artist to have remained on an even keel through the practice of his art, though this therapeutic aspect to his activities should not be exaggerated.

Besides the European, English and American artists with whose work Davison's can be fruitfully compared, reference should also be made to African textiles. In particular, the marvellously free improvisations on African bark cloth, a potent mixture (like Davison's) of the organic and geometric, and the distinctive patterns of Kuba cloth from the Congo, made from raffia palm leaves. I would not want to over-emphasize any of these comparisons, but they do help to establish the international context in which Davison's work should be viewed. What he in effect achieved was a translation into collage of a painterly language pioneered concurrently in the postwar

world by a number of artists, some of whom he knew and admired. Of course it's not a direct translation, more a parallel, of similar intent and direction, though also highly original. Davison discovered unique tonal effects and colour combinations through his medium of torn paper, and investigated an approach to formal pattern-making that was as inventive as anything attempted by his contemporaries.

The Language

Generally the collages are unsigned, undated and untitled - almost anonymous, yet the character of the artist (or at least of the art) can be read and learnt from prolonged study of the work. Their lack of dates indicates an unwillingness to be categorised in terms of stylistic development, and underlines Davison's habit of re-working (if not actually cannibalising) earlier collages to make a new statement. The determination not to date or title the work also bespeaks a brave attempt to focus the viewer on the work itself without any distractions. He knew that in England gallery visitors much prefer to read the information panels than look at the art; better still watch the film about the artist's private life...

It has been remarked before that the key to Davison's work is not so much what he put in as what he left out, but this is too reductionist an approach. Davison was no minimalist, as his richly

allusive collages with their bold thrusts and counter-parries, their dancing and unorthodox symmetries, their euphonies and discords, make amply clear. The collages are not in any way representational, and exist principally to investigate the physical properties of torn coloured paper when juxtaposed with similar fragments. They are truly abstract works, yet they also evoke the design of maps and aerial photographs and thus link to the planar paintings of East Anglian farms and fields that Davison was making in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The scale of the marks reduces the referential content of the work. Although strips of paper may be taken for paths or roadways through a wild or semi-industrialized landscape, the painterly 'blobs' of colour (actually roughly torn small square-ish rectangles of paper) that often punctuate the surface are either too big or too small to be read as (for instance) buildings. The blobs are there for their own sake, as part of Davison's potent abstract design, for which they are neither too big nor too small, being perfectly judged for their purpose. In the process, they defeat the urge to attach recognisable meaning to their disposition. We may want to read them as buildings, but we can't convincingly. In earlier work we are encouraged to identify grouped strips of colour as trees; in later collages, the abstract impulse is more pronounced, and yet the world is still conjured through their forms.

B-71 1963-65

55 × 75 cm



C-1 1970

46 × 79 cm



These collages are not just a play of shapes and domino dots. There is here something of the electric pulse of Mondrian's New York paintings, all dance steps and syncopated beat. In relation to his late work, Mondrian spoke of the destruction of natural appearances and 'construction through continuous opposition of pure means—dynamic rhythm'. This is what Davison was doing with his dislocations of scale and changes of pace: he was dealing imaginatively with the material world in order to liberate the spiritual. There was a side to him that wanted to be a priest, and at Syleham he often gave the sermon at his local church, proving himself an effective lay-preacher and parish visitor. This changed when he moved to Southwold in 1975, and the final period of his life and work was inaugurated. He no longer had time for the Church: all his energies were poured into his collages.

Their worn distressed look was evidence of human involvement, human usage, and if the imagery at first glance seemed not to relate to the phenomenal world, the colours did. But look closer at the forms that Davison orchestrates. A picture is a sum of decisions, and these collages are no exception. It could be argued that more hangs upon the formal decisions of an abstract artist than upon the work of a realistic or figurative painter who can perhaps rely on the distractions of subject to tide over possible

insufficiencies of style. But actually, with any kind of art, it's always just a question of getting it right. Seemingly effortlessly, Davison created a fully-realised spatial world of recession and depth, in which his portions of torn paper are vigorously deployed to summon up a parallel universe where coloured paper is as important as streets and buildings, sea or boats. It's quite possible to recognise in its rhythms the lift and pitch of the sea as experienced on board ship, or the bounce of bicycle tyres over country lanes.

Determined Irregularity

Davison's collages are about a journey through a changing world, about flux and transition. He believed, with Heraclitus, that nothing stayed still, that no man ever stepped in the same river twice. Hence each collage was a unique statement rather than part of a series or sequence, and each could be challenged and found wanting (and subsequently re-cycled) if it didn't reach his exacting standards of honesty and originality.

Did Davison nevertheless develop a kind of handwriting in his collages? When Mellis wanted to help in his last illness when he was too weak to tear the paper, she found it surprisingly difficult. As Telfer Stokes comments: 'Who could replace his hands? He'd developed a whole history of tearing paper and working it. It was a very private activity.'



Francis Davison in Venice, 1948

All his work is imbued with a strong sense of structure and design. According to Mellis, Davison left nothing to chance, all was intended. Telfer agrees that this was the result, though working towards that end was more complicated. He elaborates on the process: 'I think Francis' method of work was a trance-like dance. It was in essence anything - completely free from restriction, certainly free from thinking. The form that this took is what we see as his collages. A very singular attribute to paper is that it's thin, it's possible to work in layers without it looking like that. Francis' method was working over and over, always keeping an eye on what was revealed underneath by what he was cancelling out and adding to, on top. Contrary to expectation, overlaying simplifies, both cluttering and at the same time dispersing elements. In the final stage each bit of paper had to be that size, that shape, that colour and in that place, because every bit was dependent on every other bit, otherwise what had led up to it would not make sense.'

There's fierce wit in these damaged shapes, that don't pretend to be a perfect square or rectangle; or, for that matter, simply organic, not man-made or geometric. Davison's directness is challenging to our preconceptions of what art is and what it can do. A new and unexpected harmony of relational structures was created

from apparent disunion, with colour relationships echoing the interlocking shapes. These crenellated, cogged and toothed shapes - which Mellis called 'nitched' - have a determined irregularity, admirably suited to such a difficult, tough-minded and independent individual.

Collage is a highly sophisticated art form, despite (in Davison's case) its often slightly farouche and rumpled appearance. It draws upon both thought and feeling, rationality and intuition. It can also engage with extremes of melancholy and joy, emotions which Francis Davison experienced in nature, art and poetry, but which he best communicated through collage.

Andrew Lambirth

September 2017

Andrew Lambirth (born 1959) is a writer, critic and curator. He has written on art for a variety of publications including *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Spectator*, *The Sunday Times*, *Modern Painters* and *RA*, the Royal Academy magazine. Among his many books are monographs on Craigie Aitchison, John Armstrong, Francis Davison, William Gear, Nigel Hall, Maggi Hambling, Roger Hilton, John Hoyland, David Inshaw, Allen Jones, RB Kitaj and Margaret Mellis. He was art critic of *The Spectator* (2002-14) and his reviews have been collected in a paperback entitled *A is a Critic*. He lives in Wiltshire.

C-16 1965-71

83 × 86 cm



C-18 1965-71

79 × 74 cm



C-22 1967

82 × 79 cm



C-23 1965-71

107 × 116 cm



C-38 1965-71

84 × 93 cm



C-55 1965-71

82 × 97 cm



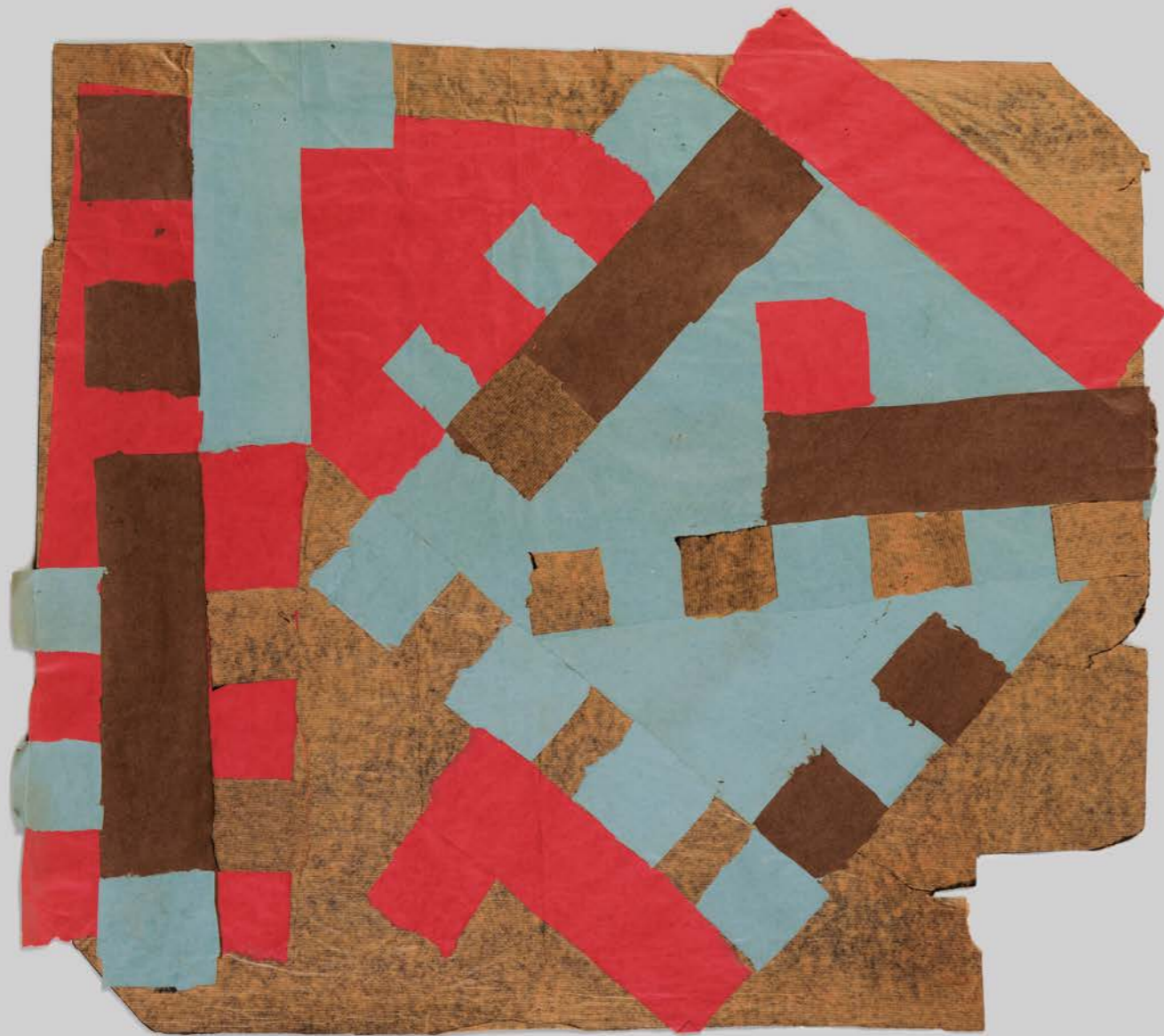
C-58 1965-71

69 × 100 cm



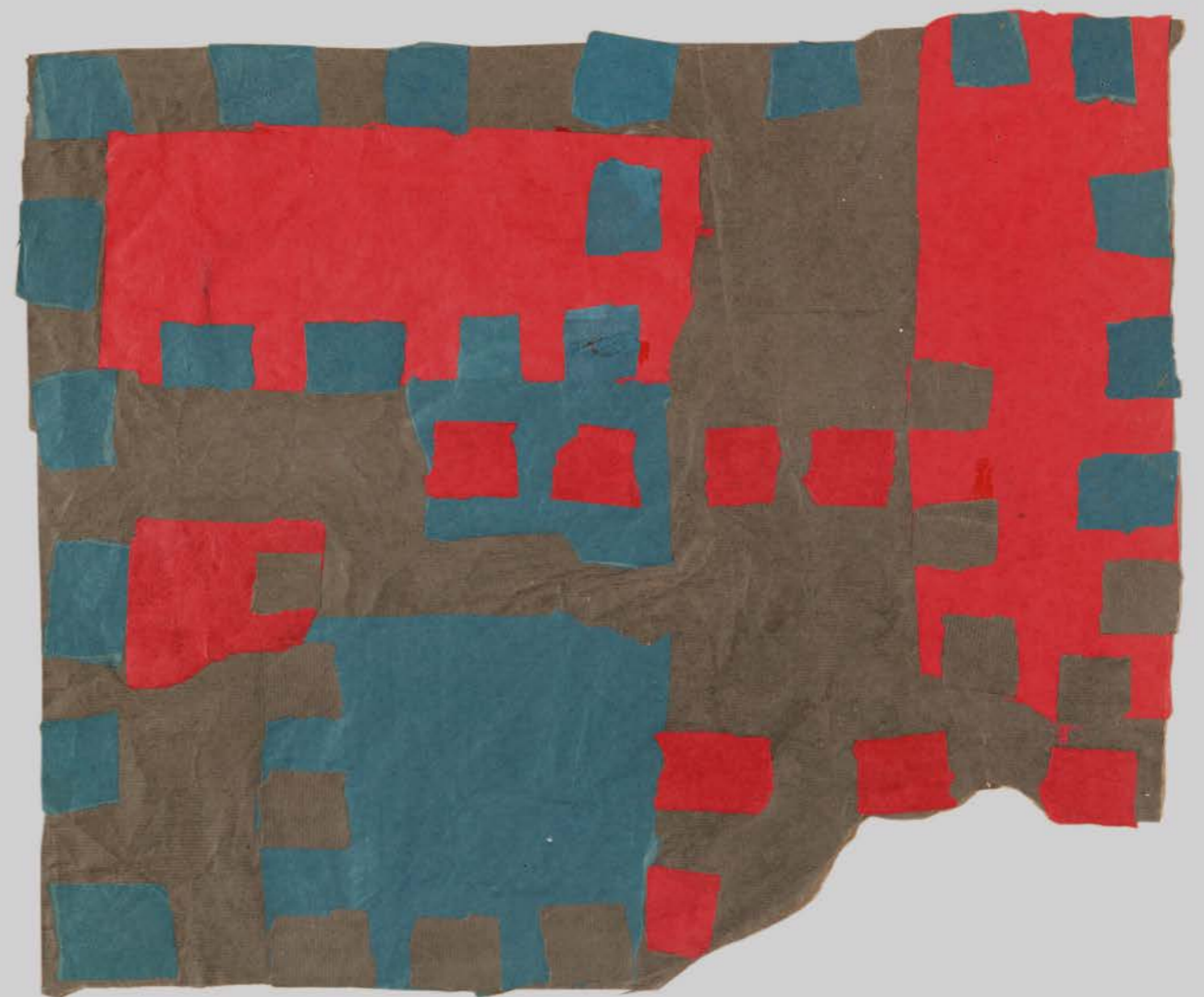
C-59 1965-71

77 × 86 cm



C-72 1965-71

55 × 66 cm



C-98 1965-71

82 × 57 cm



C-126 1965-71

82 × 61 cm



C-116 1965-71

59 × 79 cm



C-151 1965-71

78 × 72 cm



C-155 1965-71

72 × 84 cm



C-156 1965-71

89 × 78 cm



C-160 1965-71

82 × 87 cm



C-161 1965-71

88 × 105 cm



C-163 1965-71

111 × 108 cm



C-166 1969

69 × 87 cm



C-182 1970

72 × 98 cm



C-187 1970

112 × 114 cm



C-145 1970

101 × 115 cm



D-36 1970

107 × 133 cm





Francis & Margaret in the orange orchard at Chateau Des Enfants, Cap d'Antibes, south of France 1947 ('or Adam & Eve in front of the tree of life' as the photographer remarked).

*Image of my desire, a solid granite mass
reclines beside the seeping beach;
its careful draperies move but cannot stir
sensation's strings; and wandering through the maze
of senses mind constructs
a shape in space that leaves no room for my regret*

Francis Davison

C-148 1970

105 × 112 cm



C-149 1970

147 × 112 cm



D-185 1971

84 × 94 cm



D-300 1971

117 × 150 cm



D-230 1971

110 × 107 cm



D-132 1972

57 × 80 cm



D-168 1972

127 × 131 cm



D-211 1972

112 × 125 cm



D-277 1972

82 × 70 cm



Horizontal Navy (G609) 1978-83

117 × 110 cm



Many Colours (G611) 1978-83

83 × 117 cm



No Number 2 (H23) 1982-84

145 × 148 cm



HL-29 1983

18 × 21 cm



HL-32 1983

18 × 20 cm



HL-60 1983

14 × 16 cm



HL-56 1983

15 × 17 cm





Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1981 Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield
- 1982 Museum of Modern Art, Oxford
- 1983 Hayward Gallery, London, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain
- 1986 Redfern Gallery, London
- 1988 Redfern Gallery, London
- 1991 Redfern Gallery, London
- 1996 Peter Pears Gallery, Aldeburgh Festival
Bede Gallery, Jarrow (with Margaret Mellis)
- 2003 Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London
- 2006 Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London
- 2007-08 Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
- 2010 Goldmark Gallery, Rutland
- 2012 Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1969 *John Moores Liverpool Exhibition 7*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1976 *John Moores Liverpool Exhibition 10*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1979-80 *The British Art Show*, Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield (and toured across the UK)
- 1989 *The Experience of Painting: Eight Modern Artists*, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne (and toured across the UK)
- 2002 *Aspects of Modern British and Irish Art*, Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London
- 2016 *Spring Exhibition: Modern British Art*, Redfern Gallery, London

Bibliography

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Hayward Gallery, London, 1983,
text by Julian Spalding

Francis Davison,
Redfern Gallery, London, 1986,
texts by Patrick Heron and Julian Spalding

Francis Davison:
Works with Green, Redfern Gallery, 1988

The Experience of Painting:
Eight Modern Artists,
South Bank Centre, London, 1989,
text by Mel Gooding

Margaret Mellis & Francis Davison,
A Drift of Angels,
Bede Gallery, Jarrow, 1996

Margaret Mellis,
Austin/Desmond Fine Art,
London & Newlyn Art Gallery,
Cornwall, 2001, with a foreword
by Damien Hirst

Francis Davison: Paintings
and Collages 1948-83,
Austin/Desmond Fine Art,
London, 2003, text by Alan Powers

Francis Davison: Early Paintings,
Late Collages,
Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London, 2006,
text by Catriona Colledge

Francis Davison: Collages and Early Works,
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2007,
text by Michael Harrison

Francis Davison 1919-1984,
Goldmark Gallery, Rutland, 2010,
text by Adrian Lewis

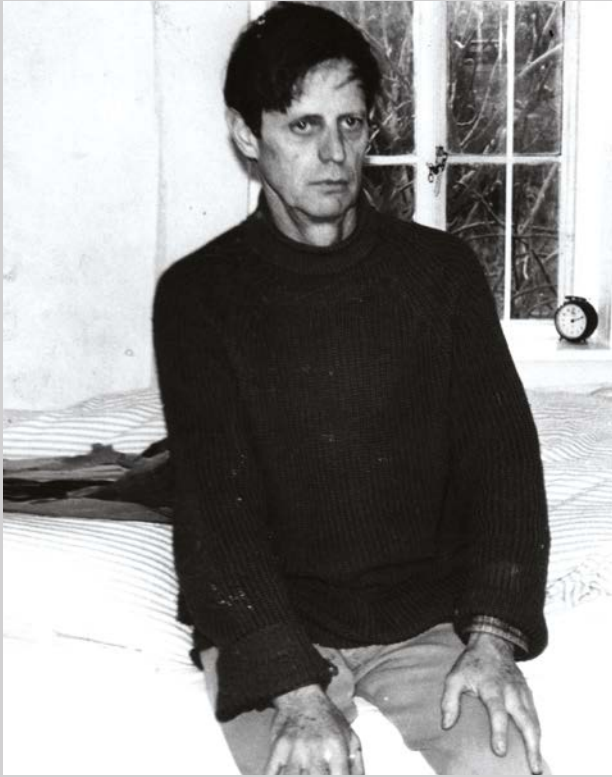
Francis Davison: Collages,
Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London, 2012

Francis Davison,
Sansom & Company Ltd, 2013,
text by Andrew Lambirth



above
Francis Davison with Patrick Heron
at Francis's first wedding, c.1942

above left
Francis Davison, c.1933



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above left

Francis Davison in his studio,
Syleham, Suffolk, c.1975

front cover

Francis about to start on an expedition
in Newfoundland, c.1937

inside front cover

No Number 2 (H23) 1982-84 (detail)

fully illustrated on page 77

back cover

C-58 1965-71 (detail)

fully illustrated on page 29

right

Many Colours (G611) 1978-83 (detail)

fully illustrated on page 75