

# Richard Kalina on Stuart Davis

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Stuart Davis, *Rue Lipp*, 1928, Oil on canvas, 32 x 39 inches

A little while ago I went to the Stuart Davis retrospective at the Whitney. I was expecting to like it, and I did. I've seen my fair share of Davis' paintings over the years, and I have particularly fond memories of his solo 1991 Metropolitan Museum exhibition, *Stuart Davis: American Painter*. That show (his first retrospective in 25 years) provided a chance for me to experience Davis in depth. It opened my eyes both to his thematic continuity and his delight in improvising on those themes. The prospect of the Whitney exhibition – after another 25 years – whetted my appetite. I'd always been attracted to the complex, jazzy, and colorful paintings for which Davis is justly famous. I've admired them for their verve, intelligence, workmanlike commitment, and painterly savvy — for the way that they move the cubist project forward and outward, without repeating it or diluting it. Cubist painting, having a strong methodological underpinning, was capable of many variants, not just in structure, form, and intention, but also in the flavor of — for want of a better description — its place of national origin. The bulk of cubist paintings are French, but Davis' are great American paintings and they strike a sympathetic chord with me. One reason, pretty surely, is that those high-keyed paintings have something in common with the work I've been doing over the years. So, with this writing project in mind, I was prepared to discuss a painting like the electrified

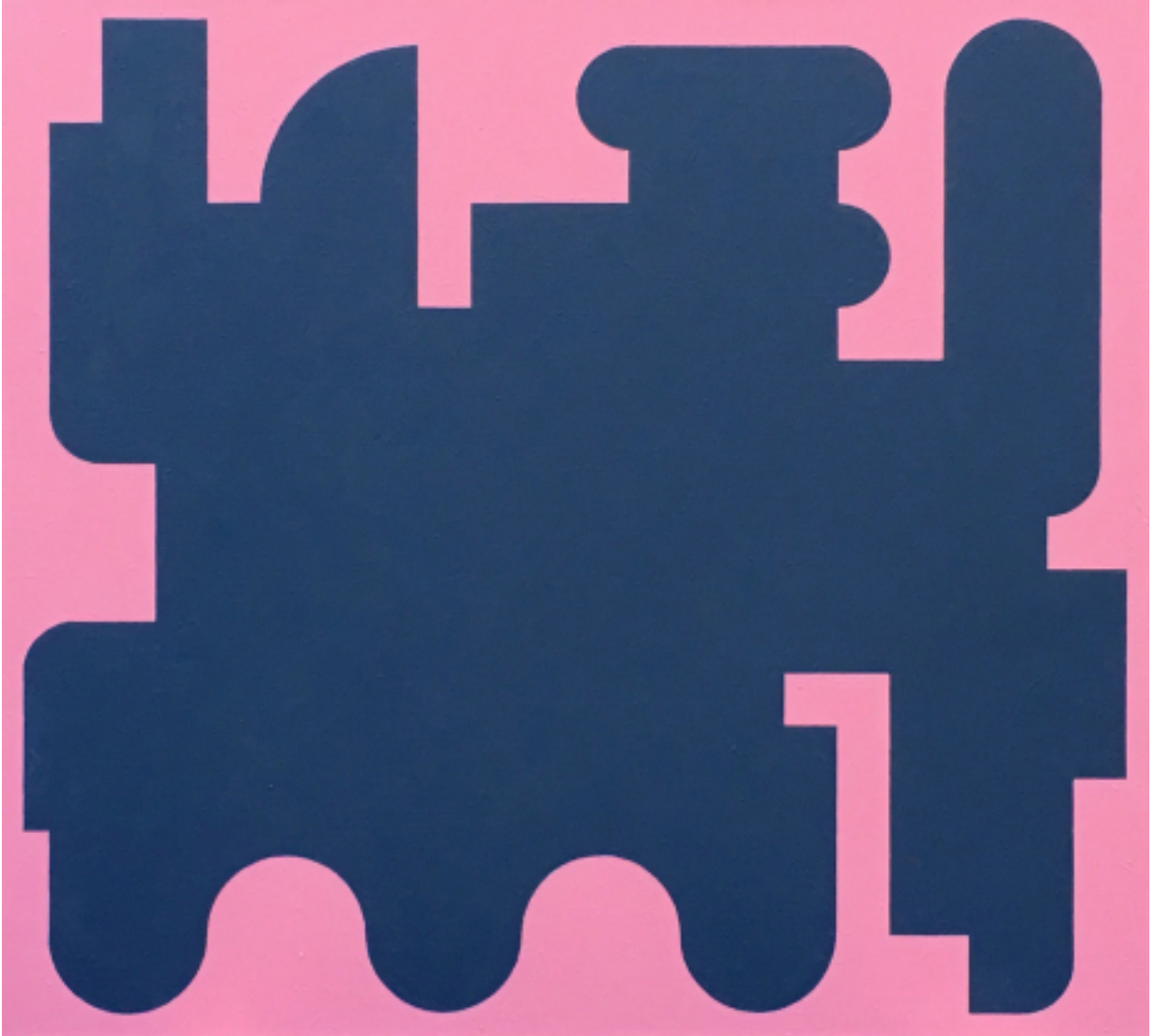
yellow, fuchsia, scarlet, black, deep lime and cerulean *Owh! in San Pao* (1951) or the pulsating 1938 mural, *Swing Landscape*, with its kaleidoscope of saturated colors and its treasure trove of small, interlocking, seemingly endlessly elaborated shapes.

But on the way to those later works, another earlier group of paintings caught my eye and spoke to something else in me. As a younger man, Davis was a member of the Whitney Studio Club, and was one of the few in the inner group who had not gone to France. He very much wanted to do so and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney financed a trip for him by buying a number of his paintings. Davis left in 1928 when he was in his mid-30s and spent thirteen months in Paris – a time he referred to as the most seminal in his artistic life. *Rue Lipp* (1928) comes from that period. When I refer to Davis' later paintings as great American paintings, I mean that they in some way fully inhabit an American identity and experience: jumpy as they are, they are existentially comfortable with themselves. *Rue Lipp*, on the other hand, while less formally innovative, is nowhere near as sure of its basic cultural premises. And this works very much to its advantage.

It is a painting that is happily invested in a new artistic, personal, and cultural milieu. Set in the Brasserie Lipp, a Left Bank restaurant Davis frequented, the painting combines a still life of drinking paraphernalia with a street scene viewed from the restaurant's second story. You sense its openness – its tipped planes are nowhere near as closed in and reflective of the forms around them as are the structural elements of the later paintings. Its lightened colors too – warmly scumbled pinks, lemons, grays, tans, and off-whites, cut in with muted blues and reds – seem welcoming, and the painting's calligraphic flourishes, combined with the elegant but slightly awkward lettering set into the composition's perspectival diagonals, impart a kind of pleasant giddiness to the ensemble. We can feel Davis' joy in drawing, the confidence that he was developing that would allow him to meet the challenges that advanced French art presented to him.

At the risk of oversimplification, the underlying practicality and work ethic of America is an impediment that many at key times in their lives (especially artists, writers and musicians) are delighted to jettison. For an American to live in a country like France and feel immersed in a culture oriented to the pleasure, ease, and graciousness of ordinary life and still be productive is truly liberating. We can see that Stuart Davis is taking in the quiet hum and pulse of another way of living and making, enjoying the kind of nourishing cultural estrangement that leads to unanticipated developments and surprising growth.

*Rue Lipp* brings to mind another artist who I have been looking at with increased interest – Raoul Dufy. Dufy's work, often dismissed (and unfairly so) is elegant, imaginatively composed, and sweet in the very best sense of the word – an extraordinary amalgam of luscious color, graceful line, and a finely tuned but loosely sprung planar scaffolding. I think that Davis took something indelible away from France and artists like Dufy and Matisse, a certain *joie de vivre* that saved his art from the potential aridity of later machine-oriented constructivism. One of the joys of going to a great exhibition is making connections that you might not normally make, of upending your expectations. Of course the more typical Davis paintings will continue to be exciting and inspiring – and it is clearer than ever that he inhabits the upper tier of 20<sup>th</sup> century painting. But it is the Paris paintings that stick with me, the ones where I sense him settling into his true artistic self.



Richard Kalina, *Kromos 3*, 2016, Oil on linen, 35 x 38 1/2 inches

Richard Kalina is a painter and critic based in New York and East Hampton. He teaches at Fordham University and is represented by Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. [www.richardkalina.net](http://www.richardkalina.net)