

CRANBROOK ACADEMY
OF ART MUSEUM

500 Lone Pine Road, Bloomfield Hills, Mich. 48013

Interview with Gene Davis, January 24, 1981 by John Gerard,
Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

For the exhibition, Viewpoint '81, at the Cranbrook Academy of Art/Museum in Michigan, Director Roy Slade invited six artists to paint works directly on the walls. Included were Daniel Buren, Gene Davis, Patrick Ireland, Sol Le Witt, Rick Paul and Dorteia Rockburne. The entire available wall space in Cranbrook's main gallery was consumed by Gene Davis' stripe painting, "Black Yo-Yo", his largest interior work. Each of the two sides measures 104'6" long by 14'8" high; 216 vertical stripes of varying widths were painted on each wall by a crew of Cranbrook Academy painting students. Twenty seven gallons of blue and black paint, 3500 yards of masking tape were used in the process. The work was partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. On the occasion of his visit to the Museum, Curator of Collections John Gerard spoke with Gene Davis about his thoughts on painting.

John Gerard: Mr. Davis, you have spoken earlier on the influence of children's art and the two sided nature of your work. Would you clarify that division and how children's art has influenced your work?

Gene Davis: I have been stereotyped incorrectly as a painter of masking taped stripes and this is really an erroneous way of perceiving my work. I have always worked, in addition to stripes, in a more intuitive, free, even whimsical manner and this has drawn me to children's art, to other forms of art that are less preconceived. The way I got to children's

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art was when I first began to paint I was deeply influenced by Paul Klee. The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. has a room of Paul Klee paintings, under whose spell I came. I spent a lot of time there as a young artist and, of course, Paul Klee was also very much influenced by children's art. I like almost any art that de-emphasizes skill. I am very suspicious of skill, especially the empty display of skill or virtuosity, of which the art world abounds. That's one of the reasons I am very suspicious of some of the photo-realists. My natural inclination is to like artists who dull their hand, who are awkward. It is said that late in life, Paul Klee used to work with his left hand, because he got too suspicious of the dexterity of this right hand. I know exactly the implications of that. In my own work, in addition to doing stripe paintings, I am doing right now a lot of collages, which are playful and are childlike. I could show you some, which, if you didn't know, you could mistake them for children's art.

J.G.: You had mentioned your affinity with punk music and how this music is one of the only energetic sources of art today. You are always listening to music in your studio from Bach to jazz to punk. What about that wave, that beat, that pulse?

G.D.: I have always listened to music going back to the beginning and so I have gone through several waves of new music. I like new experiences. I was very much into the "Stones" and even back earlier into jazz - Thelonius Monk, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman. I like whatever is new, whatever is original, and whatever happens to present the most energy at the time. So that has naturally lead me to punk music, "The Clash", "The Police", "Talking Heads", whatever, because I think they are doing something new. It is a new manifestation of energy in the music world.

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I don't want to keep listening to the Rolling Stones, I would get tired of them. So I go with whatever the new generation comes up with. God knows I'm not a part of it; I'm far away from many of those people. But I've never made the mistake, like a lot of older painters do, of renouncing everything that tends to come into conflict with your own viewpoint. I invite the young people to try to bury me. I think it is what they should be trying to do. Every artist has to face that ultimately; you can't stay avant-garde forever. I embrace the new.

J.G.: You have also gone through several waves of popularity with the younger artists and, at this point, you feel you are on the decline with these younger people; but yet your work remains very much in demand in the market today.

G.D.: The best of any approach tends to survive. My work was avant-garde in 1958, in fact it met with tremendous opposition from the art critics when it first came out, because it challenged painterly abstraction, the academic mode of the day. But the work is destined to join hand with art history eventually; it no longer becomes avant-garde when you become familiar with it, you drain it of its information. My work has now been drained of information; it has no new information to offer as it did in 1960; we color painters influenced art. But, you can't do that forever. I'm philosophical about it. Younger artists are doing exactly what I was doing in 1958 - trying to bury your elders and that's tradition.

J.G.: Are you stuck in any kind of rut of your past at this point in your life?

G.D.: If you mean am I doing parodies of myself, no. My new work is not hard

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edged stripes anymore; it's extremely painterly and is picking up on some of my abstract-expressionist roots. The stripe format is so broad; it permits endless exploration and variety. There is no end to it.

J.G.: You have expressed your awareness of the pulse and the beat of music. Aren't your stripes patterned after a beat?

G.D.: Not consciously. That's after the fact. Critics like to make that analogy, but it is an analogy of their invention. I suppose that my love of music is unconsciously getting into my work. It is just sheer accident. I can see where, if you wanted to play around with the analogy, you might say music is time interval, my work is space interval, and so on ad nauseum. But that is not the way I look at my work.

J.G.: In earlier conversations, you mentioned the "seemingly ridiculous" and how it will make sense in the future. Can this "seemingly ridiculous" make sense to us now or can it only make sense when we have the distance of increased awareness?

G.D.: I think the distance is getting narrower and narrower. We gobble up new advances in art in an ever increasing rapid pace. The time lag used to be twenty years before the public caught up with an advanced movement. Now, it's down to one year. Everything is being accelerated. The "seemingly ridiculous" is an expression which I invented and has special meaning to me. It has been proven over and over again that innovations in art that are "seemingly ridiculous" often come to make great sense after we have begun to be more familiar with their implications. It is a good area to be involved in - the area of the "seemingly ridiculous". A good example: when Andy Warhol first painted his Campbell Soup cans in 1960. I think these could be characterized as ridiculous, at least

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everybody thought so. And if you want to come up to the present time, Vito Acconci masterbating in public at the Sonnabend Gallery in his piece called "Seed Bed" is "seemingly ridiculous". I'll leave it to future generations to see whether maybe that thing had far reaching implications, more than we really understand at the moment. You know, you can do anything if you really mean it.

J.G.: As an artist, do you participate in the "seemingly ridiculous" or do you remain on the same level as your historical counterparts?

G.D.: In 1970 I did a series of videotapes, which could have been characterized as "seemingly ridiculous". Now I am doing collages which embody pornography presented in an almost childlike format. The works are very artless, very crude, raw and very childlike with one small exception - that they often involve very pornographic subject matter. Some of them are truly shocking.

J.G.: Why this deviation from the stripe?

G.D.: It goes back to 1957 when I was doing some very similar collages with pornographic subject matter. I showed them in New York a couple of years ago. Hilton Kramer of the New York Times raved about them. These collages were something like twenty-two years old. I have this rather unusual habit of raiding my past. I've always started a lot of things which I didn't finish and I've done this all my life - just one or two examples of something which might be really far out, something really wild as hell. But instead of exploring it for two years, like say Stella did with his black paintings, I would do two examples and move on to something else. I have a long history of that. So there is a rich source of information back there from the fifties and early

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sixties and lately I am beginning to go back and pick up on some of this unfinished business.

J.G.: Would you say something about the Cranbrook piece, "Black Yo-Yo", and how it fits into your entire concept of the stripe?

G.D.: It is one example of the various utilizations of the stripe that I have done in smaller paintings over the years. That is this idea of an almost monochromatic surface with just two versions of the same color. I've done quite a few paintings like that.

J.G.: This is your largest interior work?

G.D.: Yes, it is. As you already know, I have always been attracted to the extremes in scale - from very, very big paintings, down to my micro-paintings, some of which are $\frac{1}{4}$ " X $\frac{1}{4}$ ". I believe one should go almost too far, one should go to the extreme. It gets back to this area of the seemingly ridiculous. The idea of doing a painting in the street and letting the cars drive over it seems to fall in that character, in that class. I got into doing overly large paintings as a result of this Philadelphia street painting, which I did in 1971-72. The Cranbrook piece is another variation of it, although it is not an exact analogy - it is quite different actually. The Cranbrook piece has to do with fracturing the unity of a room by creating a gentle conflict between two walls. I could have fractured it much more abruptly by having that wall yellow, black and yellow; first I was going to do black and red, and I did a number of studies on it, but I didn't want that violent fracture. So I decided it should be a gentle fracture; you can see a conflict, a tug between the two sides, but is is a very gentle tug.

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J.G.: Is it seemingly ridiculous to paint this work out when the show is over?

G.D.: There is a certain poignancy in the fact that this very elaborate, complex work, which required many, many man hours, is going to be destroyed in less than two months. That creates a certain poetry to the thing. It is sort of like death.

J.G.: Is there a way that children's art has affected your stripe paintings through color or manipulation of line? You have said your work is entirely intuitive; isn't the way that children respond to art entirely intuitive?

G.D.: Yes, it is a matter of degree. Of course, all art is intuitive. It is a matter of emphasis you choose to put on it. But rather than intuition, I prefer the word 'whim'. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "If I could place one word above the lintel of my door, it would be 'whim'." I read a tract written by Einstein a few years back on the scientific process, how one makes great scientific discoveries. It could have been written by an artist. He emphasized the great role of intuition in his scientific discoveries. He said, "I don't know what I'm doing. I get out there and try things." I have no idea what I'm doing. In fact, I think I can make a pretty good case for not knowing what the hell you are doing as a good approach to art. I'm very suspicious of the artist who knows what he is doing. The artist who knows exactly what he is doing, isn't doing very much. You have to operate out of a stance of bewilderment, confusion and not knowing what the hell it's all about.

J.G.: When does the process of art congeal?

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person, it congeals when you produce a - you'll know it. I am talking about the work method, the way of getting there.

J.G.: Are you a genius?

G.D.: I don't know, I'll pass on that one.

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