

Lee Baxter Davis
Curated by Gary Panter

February 2 – March 11, 2006
(Opening Reception: Thursday, February 2, 6-8pm)

“Lee’s art is a revelation. A falling away of scales.
Therein, William Blake and Hieronymus Bosch meet in
East Texas at Lee Baxter Davis’ kitchen table.”

—Gary Panter

Lee Baxter Davis’ deft use of imagery and punctuation of color in his most recent comic and metaphysical visions on view at CUE have the makings of the perfect psychodrama. Rather than the modern, clinical variety, his version is based upon a mystical form of Jesuit meditation where one imagines himself in chosen biblical scenarios. Recurring themes within the exhibition include the conflict between the reality of death and the concept of immortality; the Fall of man, and the relationship between man and woman within a cosmic setting. The artist’s vast repository of religious and mythological symbols and experiences are intertwined throughout the roughly 15 recent works on paper and a few earlier drawings on view. A regional icon, Davis’ thirty-years of teaching printmaking and drawing at East Texas State University (now called Texas A & M, Commerce) has influenced the careers of some of his very prized students including exhibition curator, Gary Panter, along with Whitney Biennial artists Trenton Doyle Hancock, Robyn O’Neil, and Christian Schumann, among others. The exhibition at CUE constitutes the artist’s first New York show.

Though spontaneous in his choice of imagery, Davis’ recent pen and ink, ink wash, watercolor and collage combinations are informed by the darker styles of Giovanni Piranesi, William Blake, Käthe Kollwitz and Leonard Baskin. His formal sense of composition reveals a master printmaker’s concern for detail, line rendering and narrative design, and the influence of European Renaissance pictorial tradition is clearly evident in works on view such as *Family Tree*, 2005. In this curious narrative, a multitude of allusions, metaphors, and myths converge around the theme of sacrifice. At the top right corner, Mary and Jesus appear in a gothic window to occupy a spiritual world marked by illumination, in direct juxtaposition to the darkness of the moonlight, and the surrounding organic, jungle setting. Directly above them, a giant mouse carrying Adam and Eve is about to leap over their heads. Water flowing underneath the principal subject, rendered in the likeness of the artist, signifies creation, purification and baptism. The genesis for this playful spiritual search for identity came from his wife’s fascination with tracing Baxter’s genealogy. Parodying his search for corporeal and spiritual identity, the artist portrays himself in a Rambo-like fashion, urinating into the source for purification. Underfoot, toads and frogs, as aquatic amphibians, serve as messengers between the two worlds; while a bird, grasshoppers, and locusts all serve as ill omens.



Family Tree, 2005
Ink, watercolor & collage, 36" x 44"

(Cont'd)

In contrast, the bell-shaped bird nests surrounding him signify birth and sanctuary; while the antithesis within the narrative takes the form of a dead or dying coyote, whose pregnant body is riddled with similar bullet-hole markings. From his tail flows a flame superimposed and silhouetted over the moon. By creating an imaginary spiritual sort of family tree, Baxter presents the viewer with a metaphor for the search for perfection, in which the path pursued in life is often muddied up by human ineptitude. The importance of the selection and interweaving of chosen imagery lies in terms of achieving a universal meaning. Baxter wants the viewer to recognize the essence of the moment in terms of all of the different complexities put together as one formal sensuous flow of essence – of birth, life, death and how to contend with the meaning of all this. His visual alchemy mixes belief with doubt. Believing laughter and prayer to be close to the same thing, he creates illusions whose idiosyncrasies harbor nervous fits of laughter as buffers against existential angst.



Big Bear, 2005
Pen, ink, watercolor & collage, 21" x 29"

In *Big Bear*, 2005, the title for Baxter's rendition of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is taken from the Big Bear grocery store that operates in his son's town. Rather than depicting a single apple plucked from the tree of life, a bountiful cache of apples springs forth from a wooden grocery crate, as does Big Bear, the God of Vengeance, a drooling, interlocking figure, wearing the hollow mask of Sin. By using multiple-planed imagery, Davis invites the viewer to further interpret the work's meaning critically; while tingeing the malfeasance of the deed with a healthy doze of irony.

Growing up in the small towns of Texas, Davis' boyish pursuits included immersing himself within the complex sagas told by great Southern writers, the harrowing poems of Edgar Allan Poe, and a dizzying array of post WW II popular comic books and newspaper strips such as *Black Hawks*, *Pogo Possum*, and *Mad Magazine*. Largely raised by his Methodist minister grandfather, and having read the bible since childhood, Davis has long harbored a deep-rooted fascination with the more mysterious elements of faith. Three years spent as an Army medic in Korea prompted his investigations

of the Great Cosmic Rift – the mystery of why bad things happen to good people. Spending most of his life in East Texas also presented Davis with the type of severe environment whose precious beauty, like the sea, lies underneath the surface. It has furnished Davis with a perfect analogy for the mad pool of memories hidden in each human being, and therefore the ideal point for investigating life's dualities, by picking out choice segments and placing them within the picture plane – whether found within familiar confines of home, outside among the East Texas brush, or further afield within the realm of the collective unconscious.

In many of the works on view, Davis readily employs collage and black and white imagery as devices to further reach into the collective unconscious. Injecting accident into his largely serial process, he searches for the right image and matching media from a box of stored sketches, and attaches them to the larger work in such a way as the viewer can not tell it is a collage. Inversely, he may create a drawing that appears to be a collage, but is not. As a child reared on black and white films, monochromatic imagery has always signified for him a dream world, as opposed to the real world represented by color. The preponderant use of black and white imagery in this recent series of work, according to the artist, "forces you to look further at internal aspects of imagery. This is all about illusion and I can take a lot of risks when dealing with illusion."

Creating visually ornate interpersonal dialogues serves as the artist's principal means to validate the all too human desire that we are not created for death. In Davis' case, the search for meaning involves devising his own paths and parables, and opening these densely and meticulously crafted mystifications of the past to the eyes of future.

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ARTIST'S BIO:

Lee Baxter Davis was born at Bryan, TX, in 1939. He received his M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art. He has taught printmaking and drawing at East Texas State University for the last thirty years. Now retired, Davis serves as the assistant pastor of St. William the Confessor Catholic Church, Greenville, TX, having been ordained to the Order of Permanent Deacons for over twenty-five years. He is married and works in his studio at home. His prints and drawings have been exhibited throughout the United States and are included in the permanent collections of the Dallas Museum of Art and Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, TX.

ABOUT CUE:

CUE Art Foundation, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, provides educational and professional development programs in the visual arts. These include student internships, stipends, exhibitions, public lectures, and an in-gallery studio program, all of which draw from the talents and experience of the diverse community of artists, art critics, and teachers that the Foundation brings together.

CUE's exhibition season gives unknown or under-recognized artists public and professional exposure comparable to that offered by neighboring commercial galleries, without the usual financial restraints. The Advisory Council, an honorary group of artists and leading figures from the arts education, applied arts, art history, and literary communities, has the responsibility of selecting exhibition curators. The curators, in turn, nominate artists to exhibit at CUE, and continue to play a role throughout the exhibition process. Both the Advisory Council and the exhibition curators actively participate in the public lectures and educational programs.

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For additional exhibition information, please contact Beatrice Wolert-Weese, Gallery Assistant, CUE Art Foundation, 212 206-3583, or email beatrice.wolert@cueartfoundation.org.