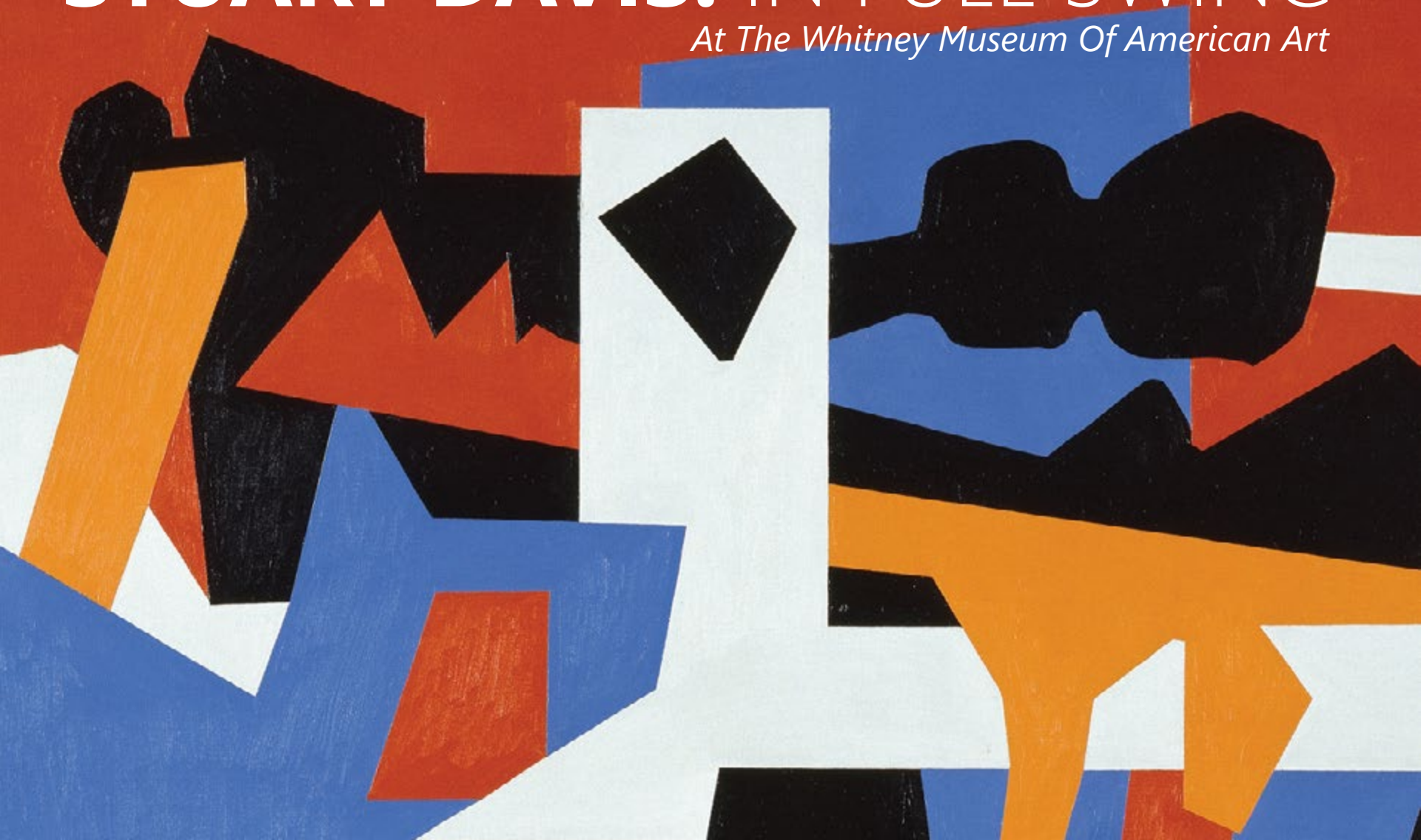


STUART DAVIS: IN FULL SWING

At The Whitney Museum Of American Art



BY JAMES BALESTRIERI

NEW YORK CITY — It was the date that did it. 1939.

The thesis of the new survey at the Whitney, “Stuart Davis: In Full Swing” — that, beginning in 1939, Stuart Davis began to mine his earlier paintings, which are generally Cubist in inflection, for visual material that he would transform into what would become his major, mature, utterly original paintings — sent me racing back to Raymond Chandler’s detective fiction.

Chandler’s pulp fiction stories for Black Mask, stories like “The Curtain” were, he believed, formulaic. But when he began writing novels — starting in 1939, with *The Big Sleep* — he, as he put it, “cannibalized” his pulps for material, even while insisting that they never be collected and republished in his lifetime. You can hear Stuart Davis echoing what Chandler often said of his early work — that it



“Lucky Strike,” 1921. Oil on canvas, 33¼ by 18 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York City



“Colonial Cubism,” 1954. Oil on canvas, 45 $\frac{1}{8}$ by 60 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Walker Art Center

could have been better, but if it had been better, it wouldn't have been published, not in the pulps, anyway.

Curator and head of Modern art at the National Gallery of Art Harry Cooper's outstanding catalog essay, "Unfinished Business: Davis and the Dialect-X of Recursion" defines what Davis — and, in my view, Chandler — was doing, a practice he describes as "recursive," running a course again, not in order to repeat or vary it, but to appropriate what is useful and transform it into something else.

Davis and Chandler, two jazz age giants, one a painter, the other a novelist, take some of the same aesthetic streets in the very same year in order to free themselves from their wardens and bust out of the penitentiaries of their own pasts — it's a thread worth pursuing.

According to Cooper, Davis did not engage in the “Modernist habit of painting a series over weeks or months, as Claude Monet did with his poplars along the Epte, although that is a related practice, one that produced some of Davis’s major work — the tobacco paintings and the eggbeater still lifes. Nor is it the actual reworking of older canvases, as Jackson Pollock did with the 1947 ‘Galaxy,’ pouring paint over an earlier brushed painting, although repainting was not unknown to Davis either, the most dramatic example being ‘American Painting’ of 1932/42–54. Nor is it the phenomenon of a motif cropping up repeatedly in an artist’s oeuvre as if of its own volition... No, what concerns us here is not an uncannily recurrent image, but a deliberately recursive artist, one who reached back — way back — in order to move forward.”

Where Davis saw Picasso on his shoulder, Chandler saw Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, whose novels had propelled them



**“Visa,” 1951. Oil on canvas, 40 by 52 inches.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York City**



"Fin," 1962–64. Casein and masking tape on canvas, 53⁷/₈ by 39³/₄ inches. Private collection.

from the pulps to literary fame and legitimacy. In adopting a recursive strategy, Chandler and Davis see themselves, younger selves, instead of masters who came before. Younger selves sit lightly on the shoulder. Transcending younger selves is possible, imaginable. As Cooper writes, citing the artist's own writings and interviews he did in his later years, "Davis embraced the 'repetitive quest' as the means to confront and conquer his early attachment to Cubism, to have his 'chance alone.' What made his approach original is that rather than return to the attachment itself, he returned to himself returning to it. By defining himself rather than Picasso as predecessor, he put Picasso at a remove, kept him at bay."

Something in Davis's hard edges matches the hard boiled prose in Chandler. Davis's very personal vision, as it makes itself manifest in his mature works, runs alongside Philip

Marlowe's first person narration. Because we see and read through a single set of eyes, we see only what Davis and Marlowe see. There are loose ends in prose and paint. I challenge anyone to explain who did what to whom in Chandler's *The Little Sister* or to define in any convincing way the meaning of the twisted ribbonlike form that reoccurs (recurses?) in Davis's later masterworks.

Is it a circle that doesn't meet, whose ends cross? is it infinity broken? Is it a loop of line around a mooring bollard, adapted from one of Davis's early nautical works? A distillation of the early Christian fish symbol? The letter O becoming X? X becoming O? X and O together? All of these? Something else entirely? Or is it nothing other than what it is? A signifier without a signified. An unsolved, perhaps unsolvable mystery.

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"Owh! in San Pao," 1951. Oil on canvas, 52³/₁₆ by 42 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art

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