

Monochromes

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Monochromes. Courtesy of Henrique Faria Fine Art

Jaime Davidovich is best known for his experiments with public-access cable television in the New York of the early 1980s, in particular his tireless efforts directing SoHo Television's vast range of programming and producing his own series, *The Live! Show*, on which he starred as host Dr. Videovich. Yet Davidovich lived several artistic lifetimes over the course of his career. In one of his earliest guises, he was an abstract painter, both in Buenos Aires and New York City, between the late 1950s and the late 1960s. Uniquely among his many activities in this period, his monochromes would articulate a personal understanding of the avant-garde that would deeply inform his later practices. In Davidovich's hands, the monochrome is by no means a signal of the "death of painting." Rather, it is the generative point of painting's expansion: into other media; off the wall and into the street; and ultimately onto the screen.

Davidovich began as a Cubist painter in the mode of André Lhote but was profoundly affected by Abstract Expressionism when he saw it for the first time at the Museu Nacional de Belas Artes during a visit to Rio de Janeiro in 1956. He never explored geometric abstraction, and instead adopted informalism's gestural style, showing in several group exhibitions under the *Asociación Arte Nuevo* umbrella toward the end of the decade. Along with Mario Pucciarelli and Alberto Greco, Davidovich's earliest monochromes are among the first created in Argentina (Lucio Fontana doubtlessly has the distinction of being the first Argentinean artist to paint a monochrome, albeit in Italy). They retain vestiges of composition: the stray horizontals and verticals that lurk at the edges of *Green Painting*; the many references to "landscape," in some cases specifically referencing the Pampas, in a series circa 1960; the delicate ghosts of shapes, hovering within fields of off-white, in examples from 1963 and 1964. The color of the brighter canvases, such as *Green Painting* and *Landscape Pampas 6*, is exquisitely worked, with a variety of other shades blended beneath or around the dominant hue.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the monochrome featured worldwide in the work of major artists such as Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Yayoi Kusama, Robert Rauschenberg, Hélio Oiticica and many others as an emblem for two things: quasi-industrial repetition, and a concomitant reconsideration of Alexander Rodchenko's declaration with regard to *Pure Red, Pure Yellow, Pure Blue*, 1921, his group of three monochromes that "it's all over" in favor of permanent fusion of "art" and "life." In postwar

Argentina, the monochrome stands as one of the key nodes through which foreign influence was engaged and contested, from the developmentalist period in the late 1950s through its disenchantment in the 1970s and beyond. As such, it was part of a larger, teleological push by critics and curators for Argentinean artists to produce the most advanced art possible, reflected in Jorge Romero Brest's claim that informalism represented a "rupture with the past." Aldo Pellegrini would be even more explicit, intuiting in Informalism an example of a new avant-gardes outmoding and replacing an older one: "change always indicates the vitality of art, because every style has within itself the germ of its own negation."

Between 1960 and 1962, Davidovich lived and worked in Bahía Blanca as Superintendent of Art Schools for President Arturo Frondizi's educational reform, while also teaching his own art and art history classes. His meticulous class notes include "monochromatic tachism" alongside Bauhaus exercises—something that could be taught as an essential tool for rising contemporary artists in this moment. Davidovich lost this position when Frondizi and his reformers were ousted in the 1962 military coup and moved to New York City at the end of 1963. He continued to paint monochromes while he gradually acclimated to a pluralistic New York art world, associating with Latin American artists through Jacqueline Barnitz's cocktail parties on the Upper West Side and connecting with Greco when the latter visited New York in 1964 to raffle off other artists' works in Grand Central Station. Several of Davidovich's monochromes in this period, such as *White Painting 1, 1964*, read as both modernist frames-within-frames and ghostly outlines of television screens; gone are the references to the Argentinean landscape. He used television at this time to learn English, immersing himself in variety shows like Ernie Kovacs and Ed Sullivan, sitcoms such as *The Honeymooners*, and even children's programs like *Winky-Dink and You*—but this was far from his first experience of the medium. His family owned a television from when he was fifteen years old, and he watched both Juan Domingo Perón's 1951 inauguration, one of the first televised events in Argentina, as well as nightly broadcasts after August 9, 1952 that identified the precise time at which Eva Perón had passed "into immortality."

Commercial adhesive tape first appeared in Davidovich's work in 1967 with the *Collage Tape Painting* series. The artist used tape as an alternative to the frame—a conspicuous way to literally adhere paintings to the wall. Gradually it replaced paint in his work altogether, while maintaining the key condition of the monochrome—a single color arrayed over a given substrate. As an element of the composition, tape has the advantage of physically layering over the substrate in vertical strips, producing "lines" that are formed by its bordering other strips to the left, right and above or underneath (the artist would later liken these compositions to the gray bars broadcast on Argentine television before 6:00 p.m. cartoons when he was growing up). In 1968, he moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where the cheaper access to space allowed him to develop a mode of post-minimalist installation: covering entire gallery walls in tape. While obviously in dialogue with Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, these works might also be seen as monochromes. As such, they disrupt the monochrome's signification as the end of painting, pointing toward environmental and site-specific practices.

Davidovich also made his first videos at this time, using the color video equipment at the cardiovascular surgery theater at Cleveland Clinic. He began incorporating videotape alongside adhesive tape, juxtaposing the spatial capacity of the latter with the informational capacity of the former. In 1974, soon after his return to New York City, he made *Blue Red Yellow*, a direct reference to Rodchenko. For each color, horizontal strips of colored tape gradually cover television monitors playing static. The work has been shown both as a single continuous tape and on three monitors playing simultaneously, perhaps in homage to the idea that each color represents a separate "monochrome." But what has happened to Rodchenko's original gesture, which marked the historical end point of painting? For one thing, Davidovich restaged the work without using paint. He emphasized process, brushing two media together—tape on tape—rather than reducing one to its minimal conditions. Then this action, in turn, is videotaped. No possibilities are being foreclosed here, as video is relatively new, and no tradition of adhesive tape art exists to be torn down. The historical avant-garde is instead cited as a point from which to open up new media in tandem.



Henrique Faria Fine Art

Gallery specialized in Geometric Abstraction and Conceptual Latin-American Art.

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