

ON VIEW: NOVEMBER 20, 2025 - JANUARY 10, 2025

GALLERY ONE

Franne Davids: A Theater of Faces

When Ricco/Maresca Gallery first presented Franne Davids's art world debut in the fall of 2024, the experience was one of revelation – an artist emerging from a lifetime of invisibility into the bright clarity of shared seeing. That debut introduced us to the scope of Davids's visionary world: the mythic interiors, the chorus of women, the thickly encrusted canvases breathing oil and color. What we encounter now, in *Franne Davids: A Theater of Faces*, is something at once more focused and more intimate – not a continuation so much as a reckoning. Having met her world, we are now asked to meet her.

This exhibition brings together a group of portraits and self-portraits, all oil on paper, made in the last decade of Davids's life. Their immediacy is palpable: paint pressed into surface with a near-ritual insistence, color vibrating against color, line transfigured by repetition into pattern. In these smaller works, we feel the artist closer to herself – as though the great gatherings of figures that once populated her large paintings had fallen away, leaving a single, concentrated presence. Each image feels at once autonomous and mirrored, as if the same woman—altered, disguised, remembered, imagined—were sitting for herself again and again in a private theater of faces.

Born in 1950 in Connecticut, Franne Davids spent her adult life largely within the confines of her family home in Waterbury. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in her twenties, she withdrew from the public world but never from art. Her basement studio became both refuge and laboratory, a place where paint could absorb and translate the voices and visions that filled her days. The portraits on view here are part of that lifelong dialogue: between inner and outer, hallucination and observation, the self and its multiple projections.

Looking at them, one senses the strange doubleness that governed Davids's life. They are not portraits in the conventional sense, but acts of recognition performed in disguise. The faces—frontal, direct, almost hieratic—are rendered in fiercely saturated color: ochres, cadmiums, viridians, ultramarines, blacks so dense they seem to breathe. Their features repeat with slight variations: thick brows, wide eyes, red mouths suspended between silence and speech. Yet each carries a distinct emotional temperature. Some look at us with quiet vacancy; others seem to glow with interior knowledge. Together, they form a kind of procession, a gallery of selves painted across time.

Davids's surfaces, too, tell their own story. The paint, sometimes a quarter-inch thick, moves with sculptural force. She layered and re-layered her images, obliterating and remaking them until the paper buckled under their weight. What remains is not only color but gesture: the trace of a mind that thought through touch. These are paintings that exist as objects of insistence—proofs of being. The density of pigment reads as a defense against disappearance, as though she were sealing the figures inside their own color fields.

In the context of her biography, it is tempting to read these faces as symptoms or artifacts of isolation. But to do so would flatten what they achieve. For Davids, the act of painting was not therapeutic or cathartic; it was ontological. The women she created—herself among them—inhabit an order of reality as valid as any external world. Their patterned backdrops and ornate garments suggest both domestic wallpaper and visionary architecture: spaces of imagination where she could reconstitute the self again and again. Through repetition she achieved variation; through confinement, vastness.

There is something profoundly theatrical about these works, but without performance. They are private masks that reveal more than they conceal. Her faces recall the psychological intensity of early modernist portraiture—Modigliani’s elongations, Chagall’s dreamers, Matisse’s pure chromatic orchestration—but their essence remains singular. The world of “outsider art” offers partial analogies—Aloïse Corbaz, Madge Gill, and others who transformed their isolation into cosmology—but Davids’s portraits carry a different kind of gravitas. They do not expand outward into fantasy so much as deepen inward into presence.

If her earlier paintings suggested the mythic scope of a collective feminine consciousness, these works isolate the pulse of that mythology in one face: her own. Seen together, they read as a diary without language, a serial confession rendered in paint. The insistence on portraiture suggests a lifelong desire to see herself into existence—as though she were painting toward an image of wholeness that forever eluded her. In that pursuit lies the poignancy and power of her art.

Davids died in 2022, leaving behind a body of work that had never been shown. In the short span since her discovery, her paintings have already begun to recalibrate our sense of what visionary art can be. *Franne Davids: A Theater of Faces* reveals not the breadth of her imagination but its depth—a painter’s self-encounter carried out over decades, in solitude, with absolute conviction. To look into these faces is to witness an artist who found, in the act of painting, the only form of companionship she could trust: herself, multiplied by color.