

**sonia louise davis**  
***to reverberate tenderly***

12.06.23 – 04.07.24

*Accessible exhibition wall text and labels*

**QUEENS MUSEUM**

**sonia louise davis**

***to reverberate tenderly***

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*to reverberate tenderly* is a multi-sensory exhibition and living environment for creative activity. As a visual artist, writer, and performer, sonia louise davis' working ethos is invested in improvisation as a form of research that uses the body as a guide. The artist's philosophy is characterized by improvisation not only as it relates to experimental music, but as a daily exercise of care, resilience, radical softness, and self-determination in the face of systemic injustices.

*to reverberate tenderly* includes textile-based soft paintings, a wall mural with neons, and the debut of davis' custom steel instruments, or "sounders," to be activated by performers. The artist creates graphic scores using an invented notation that manifests in her work across media. Situated within a lineage of Black feminist abstraction and avant-garde music, this vocabulary of lines, curves,

dots, rings, and dashes are interwoven, layered, and repeated throughout the gallery. These notations or gestures are echoed in davis' soft paintings by an industrial tufting machine, which runs yarns through the surface of each work to create voluminous forms with high relief and texture.

Throughout the exhibition, davis' gestures interact with and inform each other: whether as three-dimensional instruments played by performers in response to her painted wall score or as soft paintings which dampen the acoustics of the space. More than passive abstractions, the bright and vibratory works are also active, functional objects that encourage a heightened sense of awareness and deep listening. *to reverberate tenderly* explores what is possible in a new type of sonic space, one that is attuned to vulnerability and generosity while offering a soft landing for ideas to resonate.

*sonia louise davis: to reverberate tenderly* is organized by Lindsey Berfond, Assistant Curator and Studio Program Manager. This exhibition is produced in cooperation with Friendly Metals (Max Heiges); Essye Klempner and Endless Editions; Matt Dilling and Lite Brite Neon Studio; the QM team: Brian Balderston, Hayley Blackstone, Sarah Cho, Gianina Enriquez, Catherine Grau, Mayisha Hassan, Lauren Haynes, Hitomi Iwasaki, Adrienne Koteen, Amari-Grey Johnson, Lynn Maliszewski, Gabriela Peralta, Aaron Strauss, Heryte T. Tequame, Tiffany Tong, and Maria Fernanda Zambrano; and QM fabricators and preparators: Max Bell, Noemi Bilger, Jackson Denahy, Mark Dwinell, Magnus Gitt Henderson, Brittany Hayden, Taly Kornblum Laudi, Clare Koury, Martin Kramer, Ajay Kurian, Samantha Lasko, Juyon Lee, Jetaime Nkiru, Mallie Sanford, Claude Viaud Peralta; and Eco Management LLC: Max Bell, Sam Branden, Dilan Cheavacci, Mark Power, and Chad Stayrook.

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An audio description narrated by Lindsey Berfond, Assistant Curator and Studio Program Manager, can be found on the Queens Museum Digital Guide, available for free on the Bloomberg Connects App.

## **sonia louise davis**

b. New York, NY, 1988

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*ring sounder, 2023*

Steel, paint, acoustic bass strings, and hardware

*crash sounder, 2023*

Steel, paint, and hardware

*swoop sounder, 2023*

Steel, paint, harp string, and hardware

Courtesy the artist

The formal qualities of these unconventional instruments reference the organic swoops and geometric linework of the artist's graphic notation. The three custom steel works are scaled to a performer's body and have an abstract design that can be played in unexpected ways. There are strings to be plucked or bowed; a conical bell shape that amplifies the voice; and several resonators or percussion components, such as hollow tubing, rattles, and cymbal-like discs. While taking influence

from free jazz, Guatemalan artist Joaquín Orellana's custom marimbas, and West African instruments across history, davis' vivid monochromatic instruments encourage performers to make an original sound. For the artist, her *sounders* level the playing field towards a new kind of improvisation: if you create a never-before-seen instrument, then no one is an expert.

During two live performances on February 3 and April 6, 2024, davis will invite musical collaborators to respond to the *sounders* and improvise in the gallery. Scan to listen to an audio recording of sonia louise davis playing each of the three *sounders*:



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## **sonia louise davis**

b. New York, NY, 1988

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*score for Queens Museum, 2023*

Painted mural with neon tubes and transformers

Courtesy the artist and Lite Brite Neon

The marks in this wall mural, presented in both paint and neon, are an index for the type of graphic notation that manifests in davis' work across media. The artist created her own vocabulary of fluid lines that are as much an emotive form of communication as they are a set of actions or movements. Like notes on a musical scale, this notation becomes a set of rules to be practiced and revisited, but also broken or disrupted. The visual gestures seen here will also become a loose score for performers to respond to when improvising with davis' instruments. Similar to the kinetic energy of the neons on the wall, the works in the exhibition are ever shifting in relation to one another.





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## **sonia louise davis**

b. New York, NY, 1988

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From L to R:

*emergence: wellspring, 2023*

Peruvian highland wool, merino, recycled acrylic, cotton, nylon, silk, and linen yarns

*emergence: natural affinities, 2023*

Peruvian highland wool, merino, merino/nylon blend, acrylic/wool blend, acrylic, wool, and recycled wool yarns

*emergence: springtime again, 2023*

Merino, merino/silk blend, recycled wool, and acrylic yarns

*emergence: brilliant action, 2023*

Peruvian highland wool, recycled wool, merino, merino/nylon blend, and acrylic yarns

Courtesy the artist

davis makes rapid composition decisions as she uses an industrial tufting machine to produce these tactile paintings. While the process itself is

comparable to rug making, davis' painterly approach threads the richly colored fibers at different pile heights, either protruding out in a soft shag texture or looped to be flush with the surface. The continuous lines and intuitive contours of each work are not pre-planned, but improvised. The boundaries between art and life are collapsed in *springtime again* and *natural affinities*, which were created as the blooming cherry blossoms seen outside her studio gave way to the lush summer greenery in Flushing Meadows Corona Park. In turn, davis' soft paintings initiate their own contextual "call and response" inside the gallery. Alongside the velvet acoustic fabric paneling on the walls, the works function as active listeners whose tightly packed yarns absorb the sounds and vibration of their surrounding environment.



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**sonia louise davis**

b. New York, NY, 1988

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*emergence: oasis, 2023*

Merino wool, fine highland/donegal blend, recycled wool, acrylic and polyester yarns with custom double-sided support

Courtesy the artist

This work is the first double-sided composition in davis' ongoing *emergence* series. The artist alternated tufting yarns into opposite sides of a backing fabric, creating a complex constellation of interconnected tones, textures, and shapes. The painting becomes a visual record of davis' dynamic gestures, charting the physical rhythm of the tufting machine as a drawing tool. The title of each painting in the *emergence* series references the work of Black avant-garde musicians such as Jeanne Lee, Sun Ra, and Don Cherry, who all pushed against the constraints of genre, form, and traditional technique to originate new liberatory methods. *oasis* is titled

after vocalist Jeanne Lee and jazz multi-instrumentalist Gunter Hampel's 1979 album.

Lee's multi-disciplinary and experimental approach to improvised vocal music—which involved stretching and enunciating her voice and poetically responding to everyday politics—has deeply informed Davis' own artistic sensibility.



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**sonia louise davis**

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*to reverberate tenderly, 2023*

Risograph prints

Courtesy the artist