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Robert Fishko, *Director*

## **DAVIS CONE**

(b.1950)

*Forum*, 1994

acrylic on canvas

25 x 43 inches

signed and dated center

"Davis / Cone / 1994"

signed again and titled on the

artist's label affixed to the reverse

"FORUM Davis Cone"



## **Provenance**

The Artist

OK Harris Gallery, New York, NY (the artist's dealer, 1978-1999)

Private Collection, Los Angeles, CA (acquired directly from the above, c.1995)

Forum Gallery, New York, NY (the artist's dealer, 1999-2014;  
acquired directly from the above, 2017)

## **Exhibited**

*Davis Cone: Popcorn Palaces*, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, May – June, 2001

The exhibition traveled to Forum Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, July – August, 2001

## **Literature**

Kinerk, Michael D. and Wilhelm, Dennis W. *Popcorn Palaces: The Art Deco Movie Theatre Paintings of Davis Cone*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 2001, p. 111, Reference, p. 105, Illustrated.

## **Note**

The painting represents the *Forum Theatre* at 314 Main Street in Metuchen, New Jersey. Opened in 1928 as both a vaudeville and movie theater, it was revitalized as a performing arts center in the early 1990s before temporarily closing in August, 2007. In the Fall of 2009, the *Forum Theatre* reopened to show foreign, classic, and independent films, all projected in thirty-five-millimeter format.

## Essay

“A writer relies on more than just physical description to portray a character – it is his relationship to the world around him that builds a total portrait. Likewise, the personality of the theatre is revealed in how it ‘sits’ in relation to the sidewalk, cars, adjacent stores, signs, etc. As a result, the paintings often become street profiles and the theatre is seen as part of a whole. I think this information adds to rather than diminishes the importance of the theatre.”

(Davis Cone, quoted by Chase, Linda. *Hollywood on Main Street: The Movie House Paintings of Davis Cone*, The Overlook Press, Woodstock, New York, 1988, pps. 95-96)

Standing before an Art Deco movie theater painting by Davis Cone is a magical experience. Each work is a mesmerizing creation by an artist whose technical expertise is equaled only by his humanitarian spirit which breathes life into his long-lasting, chosen subject matter. No analysis of Cone’s methodology can effectively account for the end-result of his paintings, since ultimately they embody what remains the inexplicable mystery of great artistry. They are the beloved creations of a singularly gifted painter who has committed life and art to his greatest interests. The painstaking, precisionist execution of one of his large-scale, forty-eight-inch canvas may take in excess of eight months to complete. Remarkable is the fact that its composition is wholly determined by just a few hours of intense, initial photographic work by the artist. Since most of the theaters Davis portrays are dispersed about the vast American heartland, he must strategically get himself and his photographic equipment in front of them, whether they be in Chillicothe, Illinois, Ashland, Wisconsin, or Bellevue, Kentucky. Cone sets up this tripod and camera *en plein air* just as one of his favorite historic painters, the French post-Impressionist Albert Marquet, used to carry his brushes and portable easel to his predetermined outdoor sites. The climatic effects desired and sketched in oil a century prior by Marquet are the same which Davis captures with his shutter speed, aperture and ISO settings. Like the French master who later finalized his compositional ideas in his studio, back in his own workspace Davis begins the laborious process of narrowing down his innumerable shots (previously slides, now digital images) to those very few which directly serve him in his final painterly creation. And like Claude Monet, another of Cone’s favorite Impressionists, who sequentially painted subject matters like the *Rouen Cathedral*, London’s *House of Parliament*, and his *Haystacks* and *Poplars*, so too does Davis paint some of his theaters in series, beginning with the *Cameo* in Miami Beach (first in 1987), and including others such as the *Heart* (Effingham, Illinois), the *Civic* (Farmington, Michigan), and the *Hollywood* (Litchfield, Minnesota).

Davis Cone was born and raised in Augusta, Georgia. After graduating from Mercer University in Macon in 1972 Cone entered the University of Georgia in Athens where his postgraduate coursework in graphic design included studies in photography. It was photography guru Wiley Devere Sanderson (1911-2011), László Moholy-Nagy disciple at the New Bauhaus and forty-year-long professor at the University of Georgia, who passed onto Davis his dedication to photography and his technical knowledge of cameras, lenses, film, and optics. While Cone utilizes photography in specific ways as the foundation to his paintings, he *is* himself and for over four decades has been a master photographer, totally relying on his skillset during the atmospherically sensitive, fleeting moments he spends before his subject matter, those particularly pressure-packed instants that determine the future outcome of his paintings. Years ago Cone fused his love of photography and painting into an artistic means of expression, just as he ultimately consolidated his passions for Art Deco and historic American movie theaters into a singular topic for representation. He grew up in small-town America during a time when regularly attending movies at the local theater had not yet been eclipsed by television, sporting events, and other newfound national pastimes. The focalized theater, not the sprawling shopping mall, was still

America's secular meeting place, just as the "piazza" (town square) continues to represent such a venue in old-world European towns. The glowing theater marquee, faithfully illuminated in the evenings, offered hope to a suffering pre-War population and community to a post-War nation. It also bestowed unto middle America a touch of glamor, as so effectively encapsulated by the title, *Hollywood on Main Street*, of Linda Chase's 1988 monograph on Cone. Moreover, the theaters continue to represent the personal friendships, social interdependence, and human values which Davis Cone the person recalls from childhood and which he perpetually seeks to keep alive in his own life.

Davis Cone's adoration of the Art Deco style soon extended from visual appreciation to outright ownership. He has systematically built an important collection of Deco furniture which favors the Streamline Moderne forms of the 1930s and includes pieces by Donald Deskey, designer of the *ne plus ultra* example of the genre, namely the interior of New York's Radio City Music Hall. Needless to say, Cone's devotion to Deco has over the years determined his places of residence, to the three American cities which offer the best examples and greatest concentrations of the style: New York, Los Angeles, and Miami Beach. While he has painted big city theaters, such as the *Metro* in New York and *Radio City* itself, the *Chicago Theatre*, and the *El Rey* along Miracle Mile in Los Angeles, his documentary homage rests with the small-town, lesser-known, theaters, a number of which have been torn down since his photography and paintings of them. Wide, Western type boulevards meant for quick, drive-through passage cleave the downtowns of Larkspur, California, Litchfield and Wadena, Minnesota. However, like Medieval French steeples, the vibrant, tall finials of the towns' Art Deco theater marquees grab the momentary attention of the out-of-towner. In Cone's 1994 painting of the *Forum* in Metuchen, New Jersey, he places the theater at the center of the composition, the undulating marquee details of its budding Deco forms shining bright in a cloudless day. Three vintage station-wagons line the narrow, East Coast street, one parked directly in front of the theater where a young man idly sits on the sidewalk. So vivid is the setting that the viewer can immediately identify the time of year reflected: in this case late Summer when one is still bathed in the glow of a warm sun while the Fall foliage has already begun. Also found in *Forum* is the artist's unconventional way of signing and dating his paintings, which for a bit always seems to elude the onlooker. Like 19<sup>th</sup> century American landscape painters whose rapport with their subject matter inspired them to incorporate their names within the compositions themselves, so Davis' autographs appear in the license plate of a passing vehicle, in an unobtrusive street sign or, as in *Forum*, in the lower portion of a calendar listing in the theater's window.

In 1979 Davis Cone had his first one-man exhibition at OK Harris in New York, the gallery which Ivan Karp established a decade earlier after leaving legendary contemporary art dealer Leo Castelli. Karp focused on painters working in the style known as Superrealism, Hyperrealism, or Photorealism \*, terms which came to have varying connotations for those artists who purposely made their paintings look like the very photos from which they were conceived. While the inevitable exclamation on the part of a viewer of a Davis Cone painting is that " it looks like a photograph ! ", in fact the *differences* between photography and reality are paradoxically at the core of Davis' approach. Were one to examine *Forum*, for instance, it would quickly become evident that the entire composition is in uniform focus. This is a photographic impossibility for the type of "deep space" (the artist's terminology) arrangement favored by Cone, no matter what type of lens or depth-of-field aperture setting he could possibly employ. Additionally, shutter speeds in photography may be applied to freeze the movements of a desired subject matter, like those of a vehicle or passerby. If unaddressed when focusing on a *motionless* structure such as a movie theater, then that very vehicle or passerby becomes incidental and reproduces with blurred effects. However, hardly ever does Cone adhere to photographic likeness in choosing to paint motions which are inevitably picked up by his camera, probably so as to not detract too much attention from the

theater itself. Rare exceptions include the nighttime taxi head-light flares in his *Criterion Center* of 1986-87 and the two cross-walkers in his *Radio City* of 2013.

Furthermore, the configuration of components in Cone's paintings never conform to any individual photograph he has taken. Rather, for each locale he culls through his repertoire of images and entirely eliminates or partially crops physical elements (a passing car, a pedestrian, a street sign, etc.) out of his final painting at the same time adding others of interest from different shots at varying angles. While nothing is introduced outside of his photographic work for each theater, nothing of the final painting precisely matches any original photo. No other Photorealist painter utilizes photography so efficaciously to generate a painting less associated with an individual photographic image. Hence, Cone discards the Photorealist preoccupation with maintaining an inherent awareness of the photographic source in the final painting product. Instead of removing emotional content from his subject matter, Davis willfully introduces the emotive into what are animate portraits of his beloved theaters in their natural settings. With mesmerizing reflective qualities and brilliant weather effects, Cone salutes the historic grandeur of the American Art Deco movie theater and welcomes the latter-day nostalgia it evokes.

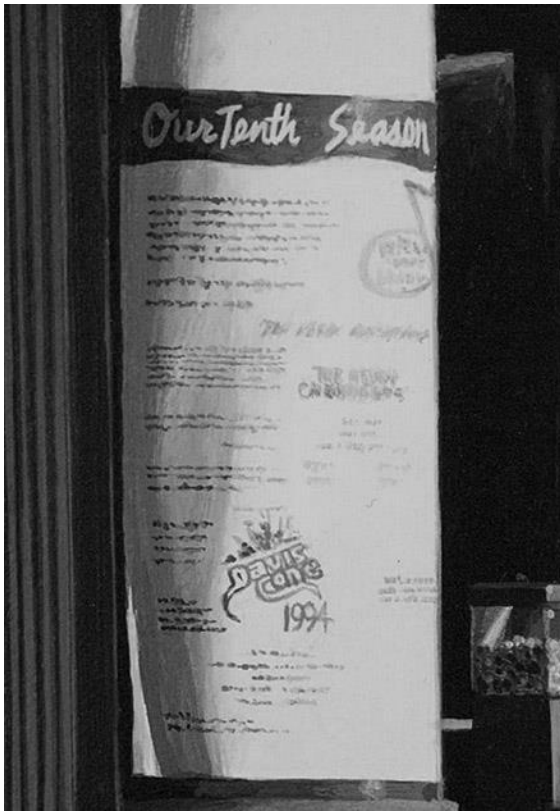
“Cone's work presents a perfection of all planes of focus. The camera and film are limited in their ability to capture a full range of shadow and highlight; they also have a limited ability to focus on close and distant objects simultaneously. But the pupils of the eyes constantly dilate and contract in varied light conditions, adjusting to remain ever in focus. Near and distant objects, while not seen simultaneously in focus, nevertheless automatically are registered in the brain in perfect focus. The eye delivers components to the brain always in focus, and the miraculous brain assembles the pieces into a whole. Cone's paintings go a step further, presenting an image that exceeds limitations of both camera and film. Cones describes this as retranslation. His paintings are retranslated from their photographic origins to the consistent perceptual focus of the human eye so that by painting from the composite of all the information the finished artwork has an infinite depth of field. Everything is in focus with breathtaking detail and clarity. Numerous closeup telephoto shots of the various surfaces provide the artist with many of the fine details lost in the basic source or working slide. In his paintings, textural differences are emphasized, creating greater contrast and resulting in a heightened sense of depth. Objects tend to separate themselves from their surrounding in the painting – this being a marked difference from the flattened photographic scape of the Photorealists.”

(Kinerk, Michael D. and Wilhelm, Dennis W. *Popcorn Palaces: The Art Deco Movie Theatre Paintings of Davis Cone*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 2001, p. 93)

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Photorealism, which eventually supplanted the terms Hyperrealism and Superrealism, is fundamentally an anti-subjective art like Minimalism, a concurrent but visually unrelated movement. Aimed at obviating personal artistic interpretations and eliminating emotional responses on the viewers' part, Photorealism focuses on surface qualities rather than spatial depth and represents a profound reaction against the gestural, painterly values of Abstract Expressionism from the 1940s and 50s. The concept of painting an image of a photograph to look just like a photograph raises phenomenological questions about direct and non-direct experience, as did the mid to late-1950s work of Neo Dadaists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in more veiled ways. Pop Art of the 1960s paved the way for the vast implementation of photographic images as source material. However Pop extensively manipulated photography, especially towards its exclusive focus on mass-media, while the artists Malcolm Morley, Audrey Flack, Chuck Close, John Salt, and Richard Estes did not in the photorealist work they independently began to produce, 1965-67. “Each had turned to the photograph to solve particular artistic problems but in so doing they unwittingly established the boundaries of the new style while their central concern with the world as seen through the lens, rather than the eye, unearthed an area so rich in artistic possibilities that by the end of

the 1960s a host of other painters were investigating it, and Superrealism came into existence.”  
(Lindey, Christine. *Superrealist Painting and Sculpture*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1980, p. 43)



Cone, *Forum*, detail of artist's signature and date



Davis Cone in 2013 beside his painting *Heart Nocturne, Harvest Moon* (2007-2008)



Cone, *Metro*, 1986 (Private Collection, Tulsa, Oklahoma; theater located in New York City)



Cone, *Lark, Double Portrait/Bay Light*, 2010  
(Private Collection, New York; theater located in Larkspur, California)



Cone, *Hollywood Theatre with Red Vehicles*, 2001  
(Collection of the artist, Los Angeles; theater located in Litchfield, Minnesota)



Cone, *Radio City*, 2013  
(Collection of the artist, Los Angeles; theater located in New York City)



Radio City Music Hall, interior design detail by Donald Deskey, completed, 1932 (Photograph by Thomas & Archikey)



Albert Marquet, *The Seine River at La Fretter in Autumn* (coll. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec Museum, Albi, France)