

# BROOKLYN RAIL

## Karin Davie: *It Comes In Waves*

12 November 2025 | By Alfred Mac Adam

To announce her new show “It Comes in Waves” on Instagram, Karin Davie posted a brief clip of Sylvester J. Pussycat, Sr. (to use his full name) from *Looney Tunes*. A flattened Sylvester, who has been steamrolled, slides down a staircase like an old-fashioned slinky. In Davie’s usage of this clip, he enacts her exhibition’s title by becoming a wave himself, but there is more. The *Looney Tunes* series’ Art Deco logo made up of concentric rings moderating from red to orange, adumbrates Davie’s own manipulation of color. And of course, Sylvester, a latter-day version of Camus’s Sisyphus, is simultaneously pathetic and heroic, pursuing Tweety Bird, like Davie herself pursuing some ideal.

What is Davie saying in the title of this stunning but economical show of eight oil-on-linen paintings? What besides Sylvester comes in waves? Inspiration? Nausea? Some ecstatic experience she’d rather not discuss? Or is it her painterly movement, the physical act of making art? Throughout her career, Davie has flirted, especially in her trompe-l’œil paintings of drapery, with the curious relationship between painting and dancing, as if the motions she makes during the act of creation were somehow reflected in the work. A fusion of intention and action that takes us back to the malleable fluidity of Sylvester and his cartoon cohorts.



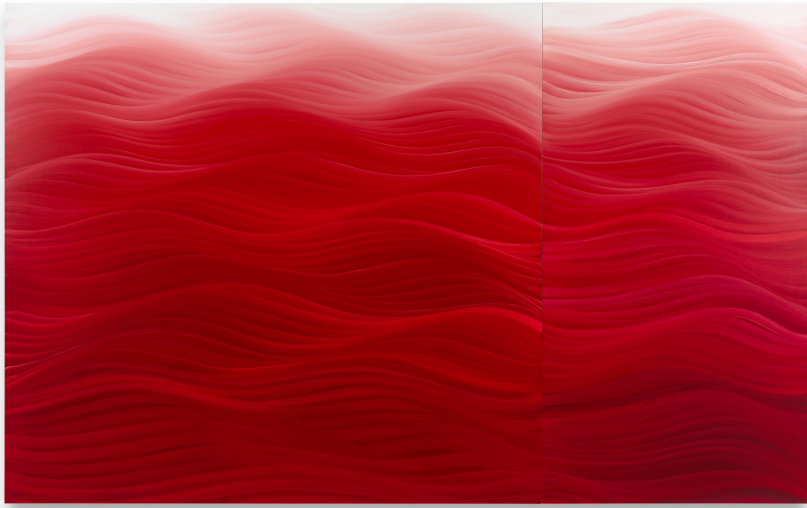
Karin Davie, *Trespasser no 1 (Small)*, 2025, Oil on linen over shaped stretcher, 40 × 32 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

The fundamental ambiguity of these paintings represent a breakthrough in Davie’s career: the wavering coils in each painting might variously bring to mind folds in fabric, complex biomorphic plumbing, or simply illusionistic shapes intended to convey a rhythm or pulsation.

Two of the eight, *Strange Terrain no. 4* and *Strange Terrain no. 5* (both 2025) are diptychs, but asymmetrical diptychs in that one side is larger than the other. This asymmetry reminds us, as do the occasional blemishes in Davie’s surfaces, that perfection can be pursued, but not necessarily attained. In the same way Persian and Arabic rug makers express humility by occasionally including a mismatched line, Davie pays homage to the Sisyphus in all artists, doomed to seeking an unattainable perfection.

The two diptychs are exercises in painterly irony, their scale a declaration of Davie’s artistic power. The large, horizontal canvases allude to landscape painting without being landscapes. The shading is light at the upper



Karin Davie, *Strange Terrain no. 4*, 2025. Oil on linen, 78 × 129 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

level of both works, automatically creating an illusory depth or distance. The more romantic or dramatic of the two, *Strange Terrain no. 4*, recalls a lava flow or volcanic mountain range, though that is merely association because the painting itself has nothing to do with natural phenomena.

Two of the smaller paintings, *Trespasser no. 1 (Small)*, and *Trespasser no. 2* (both 2025), also stand out. Here color is of the essence, and again the peculiar sheen, of Art Deco art and illustration—David Alfaro Siqueiros's 1936 portrait of George Gershwin is a case in

point—is a major influence. The oil paint Davie uses has its own luster, but the combination of her waves with the texture of her medium is utterly mesmerizing. This is not the single plane effect of Color Field painting where the combination of matte finish and textured brushwork (as in a Mark Rothko painting, for instance) was supposed to focus the viewer's attention on the color. Here the color achieves a material presence, as if aspiring to be a discreet object in itself.

Both *Trespasser no. 1 (Small)* and *Trespasser no. 2*, with their subtle shading and illusionistic folding, are experiments with the psychological effects of color. Not blinding but certainly enveloping, a bizarre instance of color as seduction. At the same time, Davie has marked both canvases with her signature notch in the upper edge. What to make of these deliberate violations of the canvas? At one level, they remind us that Davie has experimented with sculpture, that in 2006 she showed *Separations With Mirror and Blend no. 4 Alterations And Separations Series*, a three-dimensional work composed of pigment, zippers, mirrored mylar, and paper. At another level, the notches are imperfections intended to remind the viewer that the charm of the green or blue paint is an act of rhetorical seduction. So, the notch may be a kind of confession or, more likely, simply one of her quirks. Whatever they mean, they remind us that these eight paintings are Davie working at the top of her game.



Installation view, "Karin Davie: It Comes In Waves," Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, 2025.  
Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery.