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Noah Davis

Roberts & Tilton
Culver City, California

Using Richard Brautigan's 1968 novella, *In Watermelon Sugar*, as his inspiration, Noah Davis presented a series of cryptically narrative and strangely riveting paintings. Shown under the title "The Forgotten Works," these canvases told of the conflicts within a small group of characters residing in an insular, postapocalyptic Eden.



Noah Davis, *What They Did to Themselves*, 2010, oil on canvas, 77" x 94". Roberts & Tilton.

Lined along one wall, eight medium-size square works read like a storyboard. The sometimes surreal and erotically charged sequence began with an image of a slim black man dressed in a business suit and trapped inside a giant inverted tumbler. Over his head, ice cubes clung to the bottom of the up-ended glass. A brushy background the color of a watermelon rind sets off the helpless figure, creating a beguiling sense of theatricality. The concluding painting—whose title, *1984* (2009), refers to another work of fiction—showed a child in striped pajamas sitting on a bed wearing a white-face mask.

This whitewashing, which stripped *1984* of its sense of innocence, was seen in several paintings elsewhere in the show, adding a ghostliness to the storylines. One particularly eerie image, *Inboil* (2010), features a skeletal man with a bandaged leg dangling from a doorframe by his long skinny arms. The drippy white paint and cavernous black background convey an undercurrent of brutality.

The sense of menace here was reinforced by several of Davis's complex and ambiguous titles. *What We Did to the Elephant in the Room* (2010), a painting showing two men mopping up blood from an injured elephant, makes the cliché literal, then takes it to a violent extreme. In *What They Did to Themselves* (2010), a figure dressed in white is walking along a road, oblivious to the supersized scene behind him, of two soldiers attending to a body on the ground. The discordant scale conveys the inescapability of a suppressed memory.

—Susan Emerling