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OBJECT OF MY PERCEPTION

Tim Davis offers a fresh view of classic paintings ■ BY FELICIA FEASTER

VISUAL ARTS

Tim Davis: Permanent Collection and Abelardo Morell: Selected Works

Through June 25, Jackson Fine Art, 3115 E. Shadowlawn Ave. Tues.-Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 404-233-3739. www.jacksonfineart.com

To quote those surfside philosophers, the Beach Boys, photographer Tim Davis gets around.

In his far-ranging work, Davis has documented the American political scene in a snarky 2004 project called *My Life in Politics*. With his images of mall gun shows, protester-flanked abortion clinics, and cardboard cutouts of presidents and movie stars, *My Life in Politics* depicted politics as just one small diversion in the American entertainment and consumer machine.

In an earlier project, *Retail*, Davis surveyed a similarly banal American landscape where the neon logos of McDonald's, Jiffy Lube and Burger King are reflected in the windows of nearby suburban homes.

At times, Davis' overriding theme appears to be the increasing stupor of an America where surface trumps substance. But Davis thinks about his work in an entirely different way.

For Davis, it's all about the light. And it's hard to miss the light in the selection of 12 photographs from Davis' most recent project, *Permanent Collection*, currently on view at Jackson Fine Art.

For *Permanent Collection*, Davis traveled to museums across the country, including Atlanta's

High Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago. Then, he photographed how the light these museums use to illuminate their oil paintings can reveal or obscure.

In Davis' photographs of works by Manet, Caravaggio and Joan Miro, light bounces off the paintings' surfaces, creating vague halos of white or the reflected grids of fluorescent light fixtures.

The use of light in *Permanent Collection* can clarify information in the paintings, like the cracks and fissures of timeworn varnishes. But just as often, light can obfuscate, leaving critical narrative information unreadable.

Using no light source of his own, Davis captured how a burst of white light reflected off Caravaggio's "Ecstasy of St. Francis" explodes like some holy sunburst from the image. In the painting "Greek Girls" by Thomas Sully, the light obscures the faces of the maidens in question. In many cases, the illusion of an actual painting is so real that people become confused. (Davis also prints his photographs in the exact dimensions of the original oil painting.) Some people mistake Davis' photographs for the actual paintings themselves.

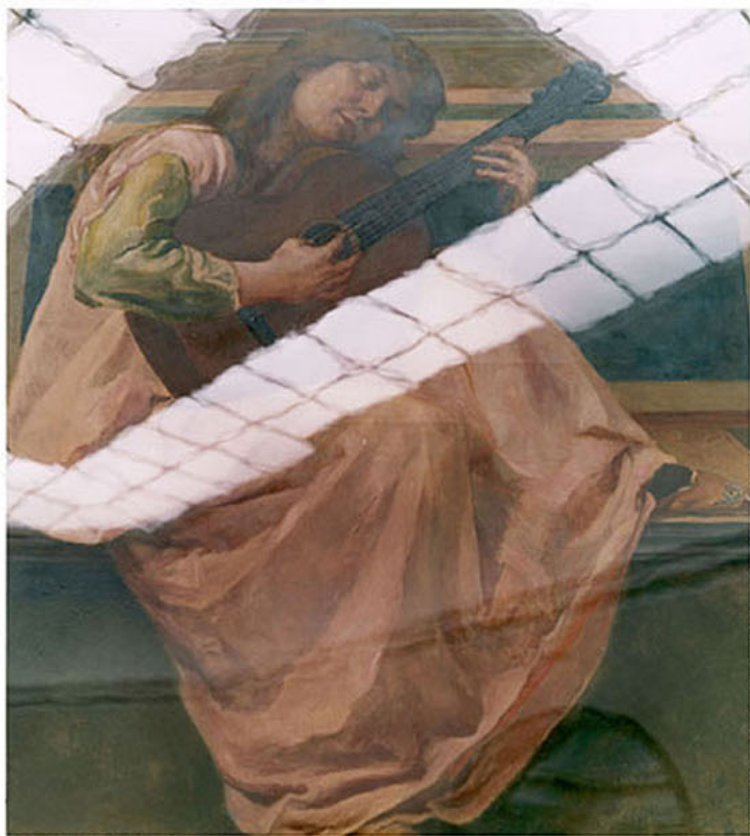
"I had a critic come up to me at a gallery and say, 'You are such a smart-ass,'" Davis remembers. "And I said, 'Why?' And she said, 'Painting the glare right into the painting? I can't believe that you'd do that. That is such a smart-ass thing to do.'"

The work often wreaks havoc with our perception. "If you come to the opening, I guarantee you'll see people moving their heads to see around the glare," Davis says.

Permanent Collection can be both rewarding and frustrating. Davis isn't trying to mimic the one-dimensional quality of an art-book reproduction of an oil painting. Instead, Davis strives to capture the cracked, vulnerable appearance of these artworks as objects with a fragility and history that gives them an almost human dimension.

"I think that I have a total faith in photography, a great faith in photography to record these exuberant, ecstatic moments of observation," Davis says. "I get so much more pleasure out of being able to experience these paintings in a way that I couldn't experience just in a book."

For example, says Davis, "Why go to the High? There is a book of the masterworks in the High. I could sit and look at them all my life in the comfort of my own home. When you get there, you want to experience something different on some level. I think. For me, that's what all my work has been



"Cartoon for Glass" by Tim Davis

about: looking at things in a way that you're maybe not supposed to look at them."

Davis is a graduate of Yale's prestigious MFA photography program, which has turned out some of the most successful names in contemporary photography, like Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Justine Kurland, Gregory Crewdson and Katy Grannan — all heralded masters of psychologically intense, narrative images.

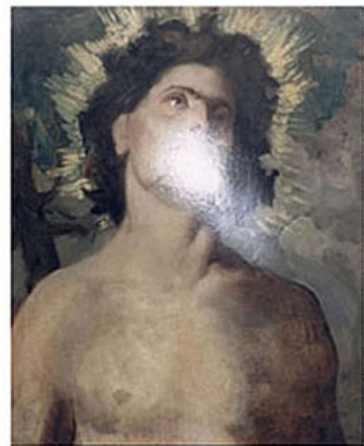
But the Yale photographer that Davis feels the most affinity toward is Abelardo Morell, a 1981 graduate. Davis pushed Jackson director Anna Walker Skillman to include Morell's photography alongside his work. "I feel very, very indebted to his work, which is about very specific uses of light

[and] light that's transformative," Davis says.

Considering his terse but evocative work, it's hardly surprising that Davis once considered focusing his attention exclusively on his poetry. In fact, a book of his poems, *American Whatever*, was published last year. But Davis puts his greatest faith in still photography.

"What an incredible privilege it is to be able to see — and that's what photography is," says Davis, sounding confident that he chose his life's mission wisely. "Our culture is teaching us not to look at anything too closely. And photographers are training themselves to look at everything very specifically."

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"St. Sebastian" by Tim Davis

Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta & Greenville, Van Dusen Gallery, New York