photograph

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By Mia Fineman

Susan Sontag once wrote that "the photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways of looking at familiar subjects to fight against boredom. For boredom is just the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to the other."

This line (or some butchered version of it) recently came to mind when I was talking with Tim Davis, my new favorite photographer, about how he got his start as an artist. Fresh out of college in the early 1990s, Davis moved to New York, where he "fell in with a fast crowd of experimental poets," he told me. Jobs were scarce, but he managed to land an entry-level editorial gig at New Directions, an independent press known for its modern poetry list.

"I found that I was not constitutionally suited to sitting in an office," he continued, "so I started photographing the office as a way to make it tolerable. I would just wander around when I was bored an look at stuff really, really closely, trying to find some shred of something that 'quickens the heart.' It was like a reclamation project."

In his office, he kept a 4-by-5 camera mounted on a tripod. By day, it served as a coat rack. Nights and weekends, he would return to the office to make images of the things he had noticed there, like a drawer filled with squirmy rubberbands or a bit of blue sky reflected in the shiny plastic surface of an office phone. After a while, he left the job and started showing his photographs at the Julie Saul Gallery.

"I think all my work comes out of a slightly smart-alecky urge not to see things the way I'm supposed to," Davis said. In his continuing series, "Permanent Collection," he photographs paintings on display in museums, shooting them from an oblique angle to emphasize the reflective glare of the museum lighting, which sometimes obliterates the image itself. Some of the results are jokey, like his photograph of Courbet's famous crotch-shot, "The Source," with a dazzling globe of light hovering just above the.... well, you know. Other pictures are more subtly mesmerizing, like his shot of Thomas Eakins's "The Oarsman," where a barely visible sculler seems to dissolve into a shimmering veil of light.

More recently, Davis has been photographing the multiple shadows cast by sculptures on the walls around them, again calling our attention to accidental effects of light that we generally ignore or overlook. Filled with semi-abstract shadows-within-shadows, the pictures self-consciously echo early modernist light experiments by Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy.

These new shadow pictures are part of a wide-ranging series, punningly titled "Illilluminations." The series also includes photographs of braille billboards, the screens of airport-security x-ray machines, and flowering trees planted next to parking lots, blasted by fluorescent arc-lights all instances of what he describes as the "grand and gorgeous failures of light to sync up to its supposed functions."

For Davis, now 35, photography and the intensive looking that it entails remains an indispensable antidote to boredom. "I have a recurring dream that I'm paralyzed and lying in a totally white room," he told me, "and I'm looking up at the ceiling and getting really depressed. Then I notice the light from the cars outside flickering on the ceiling, and I start to feel better because of the realization that there will always be something to see, there will always be a visual world."