

art US

Tim Davis BY CARLA RUTH DUNHAM *Tim Davis*

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York NY February 9 - March 18, 2006

If photography is light, what happens when you make light the subject of photography? Inevitably it leads to distortion, confusion, blindness, flatness, and occasionally visions of temporary clarity. Tim Davis's "Illuminations" [sic] shows us that light has many layers, obeys its own motives and effects, and, though white, can even be dark. *Control Screening* (2005), a 35-minute video showing objects passing through an X-ray machine at various levels of magnification, met gallery visitors as they entered. Indeterminate shadings of things shifted in and out of focus, now closer, now more distant, but never quite clearly. Whatever certainty might be attributed to light's ability to discern and make visible was best checked at the door.

Davis is perhaps chiefly known for his large-format photographs of outdoor scenes eerily illuminated by an obscure source. Light's strangeness, how it always seems to come from an invisible place, is made doubly so when the artist does not rig the lighting but happens upon it. Great yawns of silver loom like specters over a despondent house in *Searchlights* (2005). It is the Second Coming, but no one is home. The motor vehicle in *Car Accident* (2005), left unattended as though inviting theft, is parked near a tree so mystically aflame with light it could be the Burning Bush.

If these images seem sinister, it must be the light. Alluding to this sleight of hand, Davis's photographs deliberately *dis-illuminate*, nudging us to see that something could be slightly awry with familiar sources of lighting, like fluorescent tubes and the blinding wattage used at gas stations and in public institutions. The nearly indistinguishable white-on-white stuffed animal in *White Tiger* (2005), perhaps once from Vegas's Mirage Hotel, is for sale in yet another mini-mart. The purpose of commercial lighting is to help us discern differences and make selections from available options. Davis has turned this valuable tool into blankness or pure blandness, leaving us with no appetite for shopping. Still life, long the study of light's effect on surface and color, is turned into a clever joke in *Bad Bulbs* (2005). Warped and melted, three bulbs spool out, seeming flat. The photograph's lighting robs them of volume and only shows what is readily obvious, their spent existence.

Distortion again appears in *Pictures* (2006), where a six-minute video spool slowly pages through mundane photographs. But rather than holding them close to the camera's eye for easy viewing, Davis seems intent on giving their shiny surfaces such a harsh glare that the central images of each photograph dissolve into a blur. Thus are we blinded from what we expected to see and what we could really never see—the images' implied context, the relationship between the photographs and the person flipping through them.

In the gallery entryway ten photographs of shadows cast by sculptures offer the only bit of clarity in the show, however abstruse in nature. Here the human figure is allowed only a momentary appearance, if at all. It is finally reflected light, what appears actually as darkness, that allows us to see something in depth, something we cannot really see but which we know is there, because the shadows tell us so.

