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Steve Pulimood interviews Tim Davis

“I think you can look at any work of art and calculate how it celebrates and how it criticizes the culture it comes from. Faced with the camera’s omnivorous celebratory desire, photographers must act like critics, sieving out unwanted interpretations and analyzing visual flux into ample intent pictures.” –Tim Davis, “My Life in Politics” (2002-2004).

In 2001 Davis earned his M.F.A. from Yale and mounted his first solo exhibition at White Cube in London. Since then, he has been part of group shows at The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art and, most recently, the Tate Modern.

Tim Davis is currently a Rome Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

Steve Pulimood: What types of shows have you done in the past? I've noticed that writing is important to your work as is grouping the pictures as bodies of work.

Tim Davis: The body of the work is essential question of complexity for a photographer, it's one that hasn't always been questioned or pushed. Right now in the world of photography especially, but I think in all art forms generally, the gallery system has necessitated a slimming down in the scope of the body of work.

Most shows that you go to in a gallery are eight large photographs usually very similar to one another that are quite narrow in their bandwidth of attention. It's easy to put in press release what it's about. It's easy for collectors and curators to understand which are the good pieces. I've made lots of show that are narrow in their focus as well. My practice as a photographer has become more like the practice of a poet and writer, which is to make bodies of work which are more complex, more open-ended.

SKP: When you select an image to capture in a photo, is it important to know where you are? In the political pictures you are looking at something that is weighted with political content. I can almost read a headline into some of the images. For example, in the series "My Life in Politics" (2002-2004) there's an image of a man seated with a bumper sticker stuck on the back of a man's shirt that reads, "PALESTINIAN STATE NOW," with a ketchup packet splattering its red contents in the foreground ... You can put a tagline to that. But others have a pure aesthetic sense....

TD: When I was more of a poet, I never used the term 'writing about'. You don't really write around a subject, you write through it. So I've always thought about writing through. Whatever the topic of the poem was, or even in the way that I write essays, I throw language at a topic and watch it rattle around like a particle accelerator smashing an atom. That's how we know how everything in the universe works. Smashing things up and seeing how they work, which seems to be a particularly human way to have developed an understanding of the universe. I often start with a title and mode of inquiry.

SKP: So the photographs in a way are an attempt to organize various aspects of a subject. You begin with a theme, you find the images that help like words to construct a sentence or an argument...

TD: ... like an array which has been getting wider and wider.



SKP: If you find a random image that surprises you going through this process do you save it?

TD: Absolutely.

SKP: Some of these works encompass a series of years?

TD: Some are illustrative, and some are metaphorical. If I think about constructing a body of work like I would a poem, a poem isn't a logical set of bullet points it's a series of images. I am interested in eccentric ones, ones that don't necessarily make sense, yet my work is very aestheticized. I am still a picture maker. I have a lot of friends who are artists who use photography, who question why my work looks so good.

SKP: A sense of complete disorganization is a popular aesthetic front. 'This is what we see in the world, this is how things look...' Sometimes I see that in your work.

TD: The picture making is not formulaic. In the Dusseldorf school, you have a formula for a picture and that is carried out to the point of genius with the Bechers ... and with their students it is diluted a little. I am not working that way. Looking at the body of work here on the table: there are all kinds of areas of inquiry, there are portraits, details, landscapes, interiors, things that look minimal, things that are overall compositions....

SKP: How would you chart from when you began photography to now, what are the things that most interested you? When you begin finding a thread...

TD: It almost always begins with an observation. I see something, take a picture of it and I won't know for years why I did it or what it was about. That's a very old-fashioned way to make art. It doesn't conform to the Chelsea gallery / MFA world where you have to have a theme, you have to have the conceptual parameters down or almost have to have the press release in your head before you start. But I often start that way and then another observation connects back... and I keep marching in that direction looking for that thing.



SKP: Does the writing ever intervene?

TD: The writing usually comes at the end. I used to be in publishing and I would write the back flap copy, which is similar to a press release. I once did a performance where I had artists bring me their slides and in fifteen minutes I would generate a press release.

SKP: Summarize their entire life's creative output!

TD: It was a rousing success.

The way that I am working now is much more like writing. One image or one phrase piles up on another, piles up on another, piles up on another... You look at what you have and then you go back and restructure.

SKP: Do you ever recombine images? Take images out of a series and reuse them? Do certain images have multiple lives?

TD: There have been pictures that have gone from one body or work to another... where I have sort of ceded them. One of the problems of a certain amount of success, is that things go out into the world and are published. There are times when I wish I could have something back for another purpose. I think what I may show next in New York ... are pieces that are not parts of bodies of work... that are more like sculptures, in fact they are sculptures.

I have sculpture envy in a way. All the sculptor friends that I have work on single pieces. They have problems, they solve and then they move on to the next piece... You don't always have the burden of accumulation. I am sitting down with a hundred contact sheets in front of me. I have no idea really what any of it means...

SKP: Do you think that is a burden specific to photography?

TD: I think so. It's easy to produce a lot of work...



SKP: Of course quality remains a factor... Working here in Rome, when someone looks at this work are you an American photographer?

TD: I think so.

SKP: Why?

TD: Because of the almost built-in American desire to see things in your own particular way, a kind of asocial way. One of the things you notice when you are in Italy is that people are comfortable with their lot in life. If you meet a waiter he seems happy to be a waiter, whereas in America everyone is striving to be something else. The landscape is itself constantly in flux. The sense of history is null. You don't like it, we knock it down and build a new one right on top... This cycle is very clear in the American consciousness.

Immediately when I arrived in Rome, my thought was to address these great antiquities with a new way of looking at them ...maybe something irreverent... Without dealing with tourism in a cheesy way, it seemed impossible. Tourism is its own kind of critique. Maybe that's it. It's a kind of critical vision inherent to American photographers.

If you think about the photographers most influential to me: Walker Evans, Stephen Shore, and Robert Adams... these are not photographers with a very clear, critical view. They had a thorough way of seeing all this change, and in retrospect a lot of their work feels critical. My sense of being here was immediately shifted. I started to go out to the suburbs, which in many ways are like America.

SKP: Explain.

TD: Structures that are much more temporary, things that are poorly built, suburban visions where spaces aren't used or are constantly re-used... a sense that history happens in much shorter periods. So I have a picture of swimming pool sales place that looks like Stonehenge...

SKP: Do you want the irony of an image like that to be associated with: 'Suburbia, Rome, Italy, 2007,' not Iowa...

TD: I think that it works best under the rubric of calling it "New Antiquity", the title of this project... as of this very moment.



SKP: Good title.

TD: What it's come to be about for me has been putting on a polarizing filter over my eyes to look at this much more recent world as if I'm looking at an ancient site. So the way that archaeologists might...

SKP: But what if it's ugly or... boring?

TD: Because a photograph is so generous, it portrays everything you put in front of it uncritically. It has a great negative capability. It can portray some pretty horrific things with an incredible amount of poise. In the histories of art of the 18th and 19th centuries, there are prioritized lists of what is valuable, history painting is the best, then religion and mythology lower down, portraiture, genre scenes, then the bottom is still lives... any old thing... throw it on a table and make a painting of it.

I think in photography, the values are reversed. It's very difficult for a photograph to convey history because it's only taken from one perspective. It's always a diminishment of history, whereas with objects and ugly things, the photograph is just another object or ugly thing. It can really equal or elevate those everyday, ugly, quotidian things into a different status through the quality of the attention of the photographer. Things can be elevated into things that are truly moving and beautiful.

SKP: Do you avoid being didactic in your work? Especially if it's political in nature, are you ever tempted to put in easy to read visual critiques like 'it's all bullshit, it's all artificial...'

TD: There have been readings of 'My life in politics' that argue that the work seems bleak and nihilistic. But I don't think that is. The only way that we are going to survive in

this meta-modern, post-modern, post-post-modern world where we are not only overwhelmed by images but that we are aware that we are overwhelmed by images and we have totally assimilated to the idea of being overwhelmed by them, is through very careful attention. I feel that my work is completely filled with joy. I feel privileged to see what I see.

I've come to Rome and what I am doing is rummaging around a garbage pile next to a highway looking at a bunch of snails on plastic bottles, but I feel filled with a truly revelatory feeling. That's really going to be the way to change the world, to keep everyone's attention pitched higher and higher, not to give in to the sense of being overwhelmed by what's out there and by the incredible levels of ever-increasing phalanxes of bullshit that are thrown at us constantly... but to be able to incorporate it and throw it right back at people.

In the art world a few years ago, I wrote that sincerity is the new irony. That just seems to be a fashion choice. Without irony we would be nowhere, so why give up that kind of richness. I noticed in the Venice Biennale a suspicious lack of humour. That was very distressing. Humour is an inseparable part of my life.

But when it comes to making things, a different mode gets turned on. That mode is a reverence for the way things appear in the world. In a way that makes my work difficult to transcribe into a press release, to say the work is funny and ironic, or the work is reverent and neutral. It's trying to have both of those things, trying to delight in the language of making pictures and within it being able to find all kinds of contradictions and ironies... and stupid, stupid jokes.



SKP: Do you find yourself testing the temperature of the argument when you group the images together?

TD: Yes, that's going to be a big test of this Rome project. Am I making some weird epic poem that no one is going to be able to translate? Sometimes I think is it something that's only going to be translatable here or only in Europe. I feel a certain amount of anxiety about this, but for the most part I am proud to not know. I am proud to be working on something that isn't just an illustration of an idea, that isn't a canned art product for easy consumption.