

Art in America

TIM DAVIS AT BRENT SIKKEMA
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by Matthew Guy Nichols

When I visited the Louvre as a teenager, I stood before the Mona Lisa with a throng of other tourists and snapped several pictures of her famous smile. The resulting photographs were unremarkable and revealed my dim reflection in the Plexiglas barrier that protected the portrait. Like me and countless other museum visitors, Tim Davis has preserved on film his encounters with world-renowned paintings. But quite unlike the masses, Davis has created compelling works of art from a practice that typically yields only throwaways.

For his second solo show in New York (both with this gallery), Davis photographed 20 paintings hanging in American museums and printed each image (all from 2003) in dimensions that approximate the original work. Davis invigorates shopworn strategies of appropriation by shooting the paintings from slightly oblique angles. This approach creates subtle distortions of form. Furthermore, he deliberately positions his camera to capture reflections of the existing light sources in each museum. Streaking across the varnished canvases, the reflections reveal tiny cracks, vigorous brushstrokes and traces of impasto, and generate a tension between painterly substance and photographic flatness.

Davis also incorporates the reflections as formal and narrative elements. In many photographs he appears to spoof the efforts of the average camera-toting museum visitor by allowing the bright lights to obscure crucial areas of a given painting. In *The Artist in his Studio* (from Permanent Collection), for example, two blinding orbs obliterate the painted heads of James McNeill Whistler and one of his models. Smaller white spots mar a self-portrait by van Gogh and are comically misaligned with his facial features.

Elsewhere, Davis cleverly blends the reflected lights with the illusionistic light effects within the paintings. *Miss Alice Bolt* (from Permanent Collection) includes a harsh glare in one corner that appears to cast the painted shadows throughout the portrait. In other works the reflections approximate celestial bodies, enhancing bucolic landscapes with the suggestion of radiant sunlight. This effect is best achieved in *Fugitive Slaves* (from Permanent Collection), a photograph of an Eastman Johnson painting that depicts a family on horseback in brisk flight from slavery. Although the human protagonists in Davis's image are hidden by the blast of reflected light, this same bright disturbance doubles as a guiding moon and lends nocturnal drama to the scene.