



**For This Ambitious Photographer,
Politics Is Where You Find It**

**by Vince Aletti
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Tim Davis's 'My Life in Politics' is this ambitious photographer's most ambitious show. With nearly 80 color images, both large and small, filling the Bohlen Foundation's two floors, it's more than most viewers can comfortably absorb, but comfort is definitely beside the point here. Davis means to get on our nerves, to keep us on edge—and maybe that's where we need to be right now.

Spurred by September 11 and inspired equally by his grandmother's collection of activist buttons and Walker Evans's anti-polemical *American Photographs* (1938), Davis set out across the U.S. looking for signs, however ephemeral, of political engagement. Signs, quite literally, were often what he found: "Vote for Guerra," "Dick for P.V.," "Peace"; handwritten placards, bumper stickers, buttons, banners. Knitted into the chain-link fence behind a baseball diamond is the slogan "Arab = Jew." A Martin Luther King Jr. mural hangs above the booths at a taco stand. Life-size cutouts of the Clintons and JFK wait alongside Buffy, Dr. Evil, and Xena the Warrior Princess for photo ops. Not surprisingly, many of the demonstrations Davis happened upon were just as lifeless and pathetic. Not far from an equestrian statue covered in scaffolding, three people stand behind the podium at an anti-flag-burning protest, facing seven people with cameras and notepads.

As social documentary, this is quirky, deliberately tangential stuff, circling warily around the presidential race, but always with an eye on that particular prize. Davis calls it, immodestly, "an expansive, complex, multifaceted, poly-partisan body of work," but also notes that its sprawling messiness is entirely "appropriate . . . as a way of describing our democracy." He's right on both counts. Politics is in the eye of the beholder, and Davis's show works because it doesn't attempt to make anything perfectly clear.