

Photography is a series of problems to solve

A conversation with Tim Davis

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As I dive into Tim Davis' *I'm Looking Through You*, I am reminded of something I heard a while ago: a good photo edit is like the structure of a song. You have the introduction, verse, pre-refrain, refrain, the verse again, pre-refrain, refrain, bridge, verse, refrain and outro; or something like that. I'm not very familiar with music composition, yet the latest book by Tim Davis, published by Aperture, somehow resonates with me with musical notes. If I close my eyes, I can hear the noisy streets of Los Angeles, the honking of cars, and the indistinct shouting of people waiting under the traffic lights. I cannot, however, capture the thoughts of the people who live in this book which is so colorful, so glamorous, and so full of stimuli. I can't go under the surface of their images; I cannot perceive what their masks hide. My mind instinctively fills this void with my thoughts, and the music I hear is actually the one that comes from inside of me.

I wonder if the people portrayed are happy.

In their oversaturated lives they seem to be mostly indifferent, as if they too could only grasp the surface of things. But then, why should "the surface of things" have a negative meaning? If you think about it, we learn a lot through the surface of things: touching, feeling, pressing, squeezing the surfaces. Children experience the world first through their sense of touch. Even sex is an exchange of tactile rather than visual sensations. We live, therefore, by experiencing surfaces constantly.

This book is made up of different types of attractive surfaces—the ones that make us experience the world—, of graphic signs, and of faces that are like masks. It is a journey, and like all the journeys, it has a soundtrack. Its soundtrack. I challenge you to choose your soundtrack as you browse *I'm Looking Through You*—I guess Tim would too. Indeed, music is an essential part of his practice and this book is a compendium of everything that the artist Tim Davis is: a photographer, a writer, and a musician. An enthusiast. Yet, while we were talking on Zoom, from one part of the world to another, Tim showed me the wreck of a sign that says "Silenzio", the Italian word for "silence". I smiled. I liked it. Life is made up of surfaces but also of contradictions. And in the end maybe that's what you will find inside this book: the freedom to learn and unlearn, to fall and fail, to love and not be able to. Images and words: words that speak of images and images that speak of words.



Tim Davis, *I win Photography*

You can consider *I'm Looking Through You* as a photo documentation of Los Angeles. I see it more like a love letter to photography, which is, in Tim's own words, "a series of problems to solve".

Read my conversation with Tim Davis to learn more about *I'm Looking Through You*.

At the beginning of the book, you wrote "The camera is a machine that can see only surfaces." Tell me more...

This is an acknowledgement about how a photographer understands the camera's relationship to the world. Everyone on Earth is out there, including you, taking pictures all the time now. And as these cameras can do so much, I think it is important for photographers to understand more about how the camera sees. Maybe X-ray cameras are different, but most cameras just see the surfaces of things. We tend to think of that as a kind of shallowness. But in reality, there's a lot that can be expressed in the surface of the thing — the surface is how we communicate as a species. We are very sight-oriented, and have been trained for thousands of generations to understand, say, the subtle shifts in body posture or facial expression, to know whether someone is going to try and eat us. So this camera, this gobble of surface, has a beautiful relationship with the world, always seeking those places where the light creates this unbelievable amount of surface, of beautiful surface, and of meaningful surface.

But in a way you can also go deep into the surface using photography, can't you?

I think you're right. I think that what I'm trying to acknowledge is that I'm trying to play with something that could be seen as a deficit. In literature we can just say "Rica was thinking 'who is this guy, this old man in America?'" The camera can try to approximate that, but it has a very complicated relationship with what's happening inside of you. In the same way that if we both lay on our backs and looked at the clouds, you might see fanciful creatures, and I might see meteorology. Photographic empathy involves watching the shifting surfaces of the world for signs of what's going on inside. This requires imagination. And unless you have imagination then you do only end up on the surface, I think.

In a previous interview you said that the project somehow came about from everything that you don't like. First the decision to post on Instagram, then to shoot only vertical frames. Can you tell me more about this kind of conflict that gave life to the project?

That's an interesting observation. One thing I think about our modern life is that everything is more convenient. For example, you and I are talking and looking at each other across six hours of space and time. And, I think it makes it challenging to challenge oneself. I used to wake up every day and write poetry. Now I stare at my phone. The convenience of everything makes it very easy to fall into dreary patterns. One of the interesting parts of this project for me, was starting out with the sense of "I'm going to just do everything differently than I've done it before, and see what happens." It's easy to look at the production of artists and see artists that find a set way of doing things, and bore into that hole all their lives. And then there are artists that what you see in their output is a series of self-imposed challenges and blockages — rats building their own mazes. That condition leads to inevitable failures sometimes; things that don't work, and yet I've always been someone that can't avoid those challenges. I see photography as a series of problems to solve.

I've never heard about this kind of definition of photography, I love it. Thanks.

That's why I've always loved assignments. I've always loved it when a magazine says "Go photograph this building in the city," and then I think "How am I going to do it; it's a little problem to solve." And every photograph is like that, I think.

Photography is definitely something that challenges oneself. Changing topic, I was wondering, how did you work with Lesley Martin on the making of the book?

The graphic designer, Andrew Sloat, also designed my last Aperture book that was in 2006, called *My Life in Politics*. He has now stopped designing books, and is the head of design for the Brooklyn Academy of Music. But we brought him out of retirement. It was a very long process; it took almost three years to get going and part of that was Lesley's initial instinct, which was to have a lot of pictures. There are 160+ pictures in the book, so that really made editing and sequencing very difficult. It started out with us for almost one-and-a-half to two years getting together with little tiny prints and making pairs of pictures — just putting them together and finding pairs. It was a whole conclave; we were getting together and trying to find the perfect things and it was really fun. It was almost as if it were three people playing a game; making spreads that communicated with each other. The pictures were fun and pleasurable, and they have humor and lots of feeling and emotion in them. It was very tempting to put two pictures together that had an obvious relationship; we did that a lot. We ended up with a book where you are reading it and you are almost looking for that relationship. Sometimes I turned around and broke up a lot of these diptychs, trying to make them less dualistic. In fact, in the final year I completely re-edited the entire sequence while listening to music. I made a playlist of *film noir* soundtracks, including some Italian ones, and I edited it with that in mind; I would listen to this narrative music — music made to accentuate drama —and the book became more and more emotional. I wanted the

process where it was the first time in my life where I really didn't have a job. I had this incredible amount of time and I was unburdened from having a big heavy camera with a tripod that I have always worked with. So, I was free to walk, and I love to walk. I found myself walking around all day long for many, many, many miles and I was also aided by the fact that Uber and ride-sharing services had come along, so I could walk as far as I wanted and go back home easily. I didn't even have to worry about where I went; I didn't look at a map, I just walked. I may be an intense person, an enthusiastic person, and a hungry person — always hungry for more — and part of that is connected to music. I write songs, and I love music. I'm very involved with music in all parts of my life; there are always little songs playing in my head and I'm always writing little songs. As this work progressed, I found myself writing songs alongside the process of taking pictures. Even in a ten hour day of working all day, there's lots of time when you're not taking pictures and I would start to work and write songs in my head and record little voice memos on my phone. Maybe I looked a little bit insane wandering around Los Angeles on foot where not that many people are walking on foot, and looking like I was talking to myself. It just became this thing, where I couldn't believe how productive I was being. I was in my late 40s making this work, and I couldn't believe how much energy I had. I am 51 and at the height of my powers. I just spent two weeks making a project in Sardinia and it was interesting because Italians are very good at relaxing, measuring the day, taking the time to slow down and enjoying life and I'm not like that at all. So, I was working with a wonderful assistant who lives in Olbia, a great wonderful person, who spent all day and night with me, and I think he was a little shocked at how hard I was working; I worked from 8:00am until 12:00am. Occasionally we'd stop to have a snack, but there was no "Let's have dinner!" as I know what that means in Italy: that's two hours spent. I kept resisting as it would be two hours that I couldn't get to work and I only had two weeks to make this project.

There are a lot of photographs of writings and signs in the book. Where does this interest come from?

I have always been interested in signs. I challenge you and your readers to notice that when you walk through the world, there is a different way you react to signs than you do to everything else. They speak to you in this very direct and unaffected manner, and of course they're designed to control you. So I've had a series of ways of what I think of it as a kind of taking down their power, to rewrite their meanings as my own, trying to gain power over them. In my book *My Life in Politics* there were also a lot of signs; it was about the ways politics emerges into our lives. One of the main ways it does this is through signage. Andrew, the designer, did this thing where he took and hand-drew the signs on pages that were meant to be blank originally. We did the same thing in *I'm Looking Through You*. I think of those pages as a palette cleanser, you know, like a *sorbetto*.

The whole book is a visual celebration of Los Angeles, but also of photography. You wrote a lot about the theoretical approach to the medium in these texts. I was wondering, did this city teach you something about photography, perhaps something more that you didn't know before?

For me, the camera lacks judgment; it loves everything unconditionally like your grandmother. It loves everything you put in front of it. In a way I think photographers are more critical because they are dealing with this machine that

thousands of years of other interpretations? So I went to the suburbs, which were much more familiar to my American eyes. Los Angeles is a place with an ever-unfolding history. It's like its own movie set. Everything feels very temporary and is changing very, very quickly. Sometimes the place you liked to go last week is not some other place. Also, they abandon one building and build another one next to it. It's a horizontal city; it's very spread out, so they don't have to destroy the old one to make a new one. For how beautiful the weather is, it's actually a city of interiors where people drive and park their car and go inside a restaurant, then they go back into their car and drive back to their house. Being on the outside on foot I felt like a pioneer: a person that everyday was in a different place that had no history, almost. The combination of that feeling, the feeling of everyday being as if I stepped my first step out onto the Moon; seeing a new place every day, with how unbelievably generous the place is to photographers. The only thing a camera won't do is take a picture with no light; though it'll try. And there, the light is so unendingly perfect. I come from a gluey east coast with lots of rain, snow, and cold, and I've lived in that environment most of my life. It was almost like an animal raised in captivity and was released back into the wild. It's like those videos where there's a tiger that has been born in a zoo, and it gets released. At first it's hesitant, but then it runs out and everyone cries. That's how I felt. The city is open and available to photographers. That's why Los Angeles is Los Angeles, because of the early filmmakers who recognized that you can practically shoot every day of the year. So, you're in an environment where there is a superabundance of resources.

There is another very interesting sentence in the book at the end where you say, "These dualisms are warning signs you're not seeing a picture. You're seeing a thing and trying to build a picture around it. That's when you give up." Earlier you talked about failure: especially in the art field it's very difficult to see people who show being vulnerable or being able to fail. My question is: how many times did you give up? Why is it important to accept failure?

I have hundreds of projects that failed. What I find as an artist is that I throw myself into everything completely. I am like a person who is jumping off of a bridge and hoping that there is water down there. It's kind of like falling in love a little bit — that thought of "this is everything to me." You sometimes wake up the next morning, and are unsure. If you can't fail you can't be a photographer. You're going to take so many pictures that don't work. There's so much failure. If you can't handle it, it's not a good medium for you. I make pictures all the time and then I expect some criticism back. We're all doing that now. We're all making pictures and we all publish them in the world, and we expect feedback. It's really complicated because I think social media and Instagram would be much more useful if it had a more complicated array of reactions. It's funny, when you have a show or exhibition, people come up to you and go "That's great! I like it. It looks amazing!" I'm always in the back of my head thinking, it would be more useful for me for you to tell me what you didn't like about it. Some people must think that's crazy, but it would be much more useful. I know my work is good! I wouldn't have put it up if I didn't think it was good. But, if I respect you, I want to hear what your criticisms are. This book has a lot in it: a lot of language and writing. I'm very proud of the writing in it, which I think is accessible, and it's based on stories. They are more like stories than essays; no one reads the essays in art books. I keep finding people who got the book two months ago and they finally write to me saying, "I read the essays, and they're amazing! They're so fun and pleasurable!" I feel like there is so much in this book of me, and I'm trying very hard to make it pleasurable but also provocative. I expect and honor any kind of reactions I get. I'm open to those people that don't understand or don't like it because it's too much. I offer you too much.