

When we encounter the work of Tim Stokes we are drawn into a wonderfully uneasy mood evoked, in large part, by light emanating from behind closed doors, over half-walls, through grates and around corners. The air fills with mystery as our oldest dreams and fears are played upon. This form of illumination, however, curiously reveals as much as it conceals: we recognize much of what we see, but it is oddly construed, strangely configured. And the otherness of the work is only made more apparent as we are drawn ever further into an atmosphere of disquiet created by eccentric light. Yet, as the work beckons us to approach, it recedes from us.

Surely even if we were not speaking of strange light, could we not say of all works of art—whatever their mode or conception—that they were at bottom things that *loved to hide*? They show something, yet hide everything—intents, meanings, relations. Can anyone now even solidly say of art that it ought to be read *this* way or *that*? If we could remove the imperative *ought* from our question, would we still not have some manner of judging, some means of entry, some position of relating at all? Of course we would, yet it is while thinking through such things—instigated in this instance by Stokes’ art—that we find difficulties, that problems present themselves, that obscurities threaten our vision.

We then must reconsider the means of illumination as well as the essence of light.

Consequently, if you have had at least a glimpse, then what better manner of introduction to the work of Tim Stokes than a reflection upon the use—his use—of light, as well as the game of hide and seek that art plays when we start to consider how we actually relate to it, how we really understand it? Such elusive illuminations and occluding games divulge art’s mystery.

Now, if we follow mystery back to *mysterion* we find that it conveys something of truths revealed yet kept out of reach. We also find confidential arts, crafts, and rituals—ways of working that bring the obscure nature of the world into the light, into understanding. How much more interestingly complex then become works of art that employ light to illuminate as much as cover? Mystery’s secrecy—its tension between something given and something withdrawn—is, in such a way, perhaps perfectly manifest: just enough is presented to tempt us to reach out and comprehend, but a fleeting luminosity absconds with itself back into darkness, and we are left wondering whether or not that upon which we looked really wanted to be understood at all.

Perhaps there is an intricate and enigmatic accord that runs between invitation and a need for distance. Art is put out for us to see; yet something essential about it stays hidden. This mild paradox of tension creates a vital interstice: a space wherein we become caught *between* what we see and know, and what we cannot quite see and what we will never know.

Are we at this point thinking through the *work* of an artist? Or his *intentions*? The latter, while always the titillating topic, is always the impossible one. It is always the former, the work itself, which must be thought through, read and experienced.

Setting aside the unknowable intentions of an artist—were they even desirous to entrust us with such—it takes no original insight to concede that *from conflict all things come to pass*. It is the most ancient of wisdom: opposing forces come at one another, and in their tension something is born, something shows itself, a dynamic compact forms—such is present in all remarkable art. And while the tension itself may often remain concealed from us, there is a peculiar light that allows us to see the manifestation of the conflict, the child of creative tensions—something permits our approach towards the art.

Now, I would make the case, the impeccably crafted scenes, interiors, and whimsical constructions of Tim Stokes bespeak this unification of variant forces and a means, however imperfect or difficult, of intelligible entry. On the one hand, he works with a minimalist's love of forms reduced and uncomplicated, replicating quasi living spaces and utilities that appear quite functional: the water runs, the lights turn on, the chairs swivel. Yet the objects are all wrong. Or, better put, they have a function that swerves the usual function of the place or things he has created: they appear strange and askew, as if serving a new and unfamiliar function, oftentimes one that seems quite uncomfortable, perhaps even unsettling. On the other hand, he works with light in a manner that somehow manages to both call attention to the work's strangeness while drawing us away from its strict literalness—a means of entry that keeps us in the doorway, at the threshold. More than that, the light often hyperbolizes the uncomfortable and strange nature of the work.

Imagine the work of Paul McCarthy or Robert Gober if it were illuminated by Dan Flavin. The already odd and askew becomes interrupted and covered with light that does not truly illuminate anything but rather takes the viewer even farther afield of any certainty. As a result, questions arise not only about the implied subject matter—which is often read as a psychological expression of the artist—but also about how we might even approach that subject matter (whatever it is) by way of its actual form. This peculiar light on and with already strange constructions problematizes our entry into them, our participation with them; yet, simultaneously with, if not because of, that peculiar light, the work becomes that much more alluring as an object of mystery—and mysteries beg our seeking, our own reckoning projected, our own reasons read into them.

Of course oddity and strangeness mixed with solid craft is not unheard of, not new. Still, on occasion, we come across the work of an artist that shows a mode of peculiarity, which stirs a bit deeper and offers us a bit more of a dangerous invitation. Such work has this funny way of bringing us in by playing upon our primal anxieties, especially fears of separation—not a feeling of loneliness, rather a deep-seated dread of irreconcilable relational distance: infinity separates us, we never entirely know the hearts of others, intentions are strange and elusive; yet... does not some light shine on our thoughts and creations, on the words and deeds of others, each illuminating the other, each allowing for some amount of shared experiences? True, we do not have the *same* experiences, but they can be *shared*—they are *relatable*. And the sort of work we have been talking about draws attention to this impossible *and* necessary separation: it is *because* there is such distance between us that we can reach out and across infinity to touch one another, be

with each other. It is this primal separation that gifts us with the possibility of giving and receiving.

It is my confident contention that spending time with the work of Tim Stokes opens this doorway into an impossible admixture of shared nostalgia and dread, as well as the impossibility of truly knowing another's mind. As it is with such work, critical explanations may be necessary, even warranted, yet they will ultimately prove inadequate: our own personal responses and participation are required in each and every case. We might be tempted to think of these works as manifestations of the artist's own intents, his own internal affairs translated into objects for our perusal, but we should avoid such a temptation. To paraphrase the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, *while most of us believe our thoughts are a private possession, they are in truth shared*. Put most directly, our reading of the work is co-constitutive with the work itself. Simply by bringing our own complicated narratives to its reading and function, we help it to be.

Is such true of all works of art? Perhaps. Yet it is work that signifies the strange, that plays with and upon illumination, that both reveals and hides itself, which most seductively calls for our involvement. That most needs us, and us it.

Before leaving you to interact with the work, it should be pointed out that not all of Tim Stoke's work is about light. Like any artist, his creative and curious needs take him down various roads—some without light, some humorous, others direct and off-putting, others subtle and stealing. Do not, however, worry: I am sure that if you have opened yourself to these thoughts of illumination, mystery, and participation, you will be reasonably prepared to accept the work's summons to a tenebrous space of craft and idiosyncrasy begging your consideration.

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