

aLIVE

night vision

george kotsovos sees something in shadow at mahan gallery

by melissa starker

darkness lends itself to a lot of possibilities. it can evoke nothingness, or be filled with real or imagined horrors. photographer george kotsovos sees something in the dark, but he's comfortable with it. he uses it like others might use light, surrounding his models in shadow to focus a viewer's attention on their simulation of everyday actions. his artful, artificial scenarios are currently on view at mahan gallery.

standing in the nearly empty gallery, which would be packed later that evening for his opening reception, kotsovos said, "i really enjoy black. it isolates things."

the cincinnati native, who adopted columbus as his hometown after attending columbus college of art and design, started as a sculpture major then switched to painting before he found photography and film. with photography, kotsovos explained, "there's more of a feeling of accomplishment. it was everything together. i could do so much more with it."

through the process of finding his medium, kotsovos has picked up some interesting, disparate influences. he's particularly attracted to caravaggio's portentous, action-filled *the conversion of st. paul*. "he draws so much from one little instance," he said.

he's also a big fan of the lush cinematography of longtime peter greenaway collaborator sacha vierny. "it's something grander than life," kotsovos said. "he wasn't afraid to be unnatural, to use light like a painter."

the artist taps into something similarly painterly and unreal with his own work. "i wanted to fight against a medium that's so documentary," he said, adding that his hope is to illustrate not reality but "a world attached to this world."

"it's a document of the suburban subconscious of the midwest," kotsovos elaborated. "there's a loose narrative structure, touching on something not tangible with words. when i approach making these photos, i understand the ideas i want to express, then it's trial and error to capture it."

the process of setting up each shot can take up to eight hours, one reason why it's helpful that kotsovos' models are also his friends. he collaborates with them to create a setting that fits with the person being shot.

"they're extensions of the people themselves," the photographer said. "i really rely on a close-knit group of friends. some people you have an emotional chemistry with—you can get something out of them."

kotsovos is so grateful for the input of two friends in particular, doug elliot and brooke

howell, that they're credited on one of the gallery's walls. "i get kind of weird when i make these photos," he admitted. "they tell me what works, what doesn't. they're like an extension of me."

the photographs follow this path, re-envisioning experiences kotsovos has had living here, alone and among friends. everything is shot at night, allowing the artist a greater control over his chosen locations by reducing the amount of visual information passed within the frame. the eye is forced to settle on his indifferent subjects and their simple gestures and movements—unlocking a car door, standing roadside with a gas can, holding a dog (the artist's) or removing something from a friend's eye.

the dabs of illumination found within these pictures sometimes comes from movie production lights, but kotsovos explained that for this series, he experimented heavily with natural light sources. incandescent table lamps and fluorescent porch lights alternately warm and cool the images. the lighting combinations, the medium format and the familiar but heightened situations work in tandem to create a consistent, cinematic sense of dramatic tension.

the act of photography places inherent value on what is captured for viewing, and there is a certain celebration of these mundane moments in kotsovos' work. but the artist seems primarily concerned with something beyond how these framed moments reflect aspects of life normally left unconsidered. he's caught up in the wonder of how we've entered into these patterns, and how the physical and social structure of commonplace existence evolved around us. "it's a fascination with everything, with objects, materials, actions," he said.

"i try to hit people on all levels," kotsovos continued. "if a person doesn't understand it, that emotion should still be apparent."

as you take in his work and discover what levels it hits personally, there's another point of interest to note. through kotsovos' lens, others can see something in the dark. colors used in his compositions pop from the surrounding shadow, but they also seem to reflect onto the darkness, drawing hues from it.

a deep, cold blue takes over the image of a man getting into his car with a bag of ice, while a layer of fiberglass insulation seems to tinge another one entirely in cotton candy pink. the effect is subtly optimistic, a promise that something nice, if not beautiful, might be waiting in the dark.

photographs by george kotsovos will hang at mahan gallery through january 27. for info call 294-3278 or click to mahangallery.com.

january 12, 2005