

## PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

*Making Artful Images Out of Science, With the Sure Touch of Experience*

By MARGARETT LOKE

Photographers have long mined the art in science. Berenice Abbott saw abstract beauty in a magnified penicillin mold. Catherine Wagner discovered algae mating in petri dishes transformed into calligraphic semaphores and unsterilized dispensing tubes resembling a work by Frank Stella. Gary Schneider explored the universe in the irises of his eyes.

David Goldes, though, is equipped with an insider's knowledge of science. He has an undergraduate degree in chemistry and biology from SUNY in Buffalo and a master's in molecular genetics from Harvard University. In 1977, six years after Harvard, he received a Master of Fine Arts in photography from the Visual Studies Workshop at SUNY in Buffalo.

Paradoxically, the intersection of art and science in Mr. Goldes's work over the last decade, on view at the Yossi Milo Gallery in Chelsea, bears the mark of an insider-outsider. Only someone who knows about a magnetic stirrer, used in laboratories to mix solutions, could create a tornadolike vortex in a glass jar filled with water. But the image of this phenomenon, "Jar" (1998), evokes a child's sense of wonder. Imagine: a miniature tornado in a glass jar! Mr. Goldes highlights the wonderment

by contrasting the mysterious fuzziness of the funnel with the ordinariness of a glass jar and drops of water near its lid.

Similarly, only someone with a science background will know that if you stick your thumb into the air space created by the vortex, your thumb will be in the water but not touch the water. Mr. Goldes did just that in "Thumb in Jar" (1998). But ever the outsider, he undermines the literalness of the act by showing his thumb and hand in deep shadow, as if the vortex had released a spurt of funky black.

Mr. Goldes, who lives in Minneapolis and is a professor at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, challenges the viewer at every turn to look beyond the obvious.

The obvious here can be its own reward. There is his superb Walker Evansesque frontal directness, his casting in an intriguing new light mundane objects like drinking glasses, drops of water, light bulbs, corrugated boxes, teacups, string and pebbles. With their lush blacks, smoky grays and crystalline whites, Mr. Goldes's gelatin silver prints also have the luminescence of a Sudek.

What is not obvious is how Mr. Goldes does all this. He offers no explanatory notes and only occasionally a slightly helpful title. Like Sudek, Mr. Goldes is a sly surrealist. His images seduce and confound.

In "Pouring" (1994), for example, shafts of light of varying thickness seem to descend on a variety of containers on a table — a wooden bowl, a ceramic bowl, a metal bucket and a glass jar — and on the tabletop



© David Goldes/Yossi Milo Gallery  
"Electricity + Water III" (1993) by David Goldes, at the Yossi Milo Gallery.

itself, which is covered with drops of water. The beams are streams of water, after all. And Mr. Goldes appears to be playing with the interchangeability of light and water. Both are life giving. Both can be seen and harnessed for a time but not held in the hand.

With an almost childlike disregard for what can and cannot be held, Mr. Goldes

tries to make the intangible tangible in his simple setups. For "Bridge" (2001), he places a half-dozen or so lengths of string on two surfaces, one higher than the other. The ends of the strings are in pools of water. In the blackness between the two surfaces the pieces of string, through which the water flows in capillary action, have the whiteness of light.

Lengths of string also show up in "Breath From Across the Room" (1998), this time in a large corrugated box, which takes up almost the entire frame of the picture. Against the box's black interior the ends of the white strings can be seen to flutter. It is up to the viewer to imagine whether it's the photographer's unseen breath — now made visible in the flutter of the strings — or whether the strings are being plucked by some other unseen hand.

Making the invisible wind visible in setups is something the French photographer Laurent Millet does to compelling effect in his "windtraps." While Mr. Laurent joyfully shows the low-tech, magical interactions between man and nature, Mr. Goldes takes a more elegant tack.

As if in homage to Martha Graham, "Bulge" (1998) shows the wind creating a glistening rounded form out of the middle of a long piece of dark fabric.

In "Finding North II" (1994) Mr. Goldes takes similar delight in showing gravitational pull and the direction north. Here, he places magnetized pins on corks floating in water in teacups and the heads of the pins point northward. Look carefully, though,

In a spirit of wonder, David Goldes reaches beyond the obvious toward the intangible.

and you'll see a wayward pin pointing east.

This Wayne Thiebaudesque image has a counterpart in "Tropism" (2000). In this pristine picture, with its themes of light and life, a single light bulb is placed over a host of pots with germinating plants. Those plants nearest the light grow straight up, the other plants leaning at ever more severe angles the farther away they are from the light source.

A light bulb provides the narrative in the exhibition's most virtuosic image. As if defying everything a child has been warned against — electricity and water don't mix — the switched-on light bulb in "Electricity + Water III" (1993) leans into a glass of water. The light, hitting the bottom of the glass, is gently reflected on the table.

Drops of water on a table, air bubbles in a glass and a glowing light bulb have seldom looked more beautiful. This could be a metaphor for human life, shining precariously for a moment. Or an artist's challenging received wisdom. Or nothing more than an exquisitely daredevil still life.

"David Goldes: *The Elements*" is at Yossi Milo Gallery, 532 West 24th Street, Chelsea, (212) 414-0370, through Feb. 9.