



Text

Above: Install of *Desire Itself*

→ Institute 193, Lexington

Artist Profile: Mike Goodlett

October 18, 2021

[Review](#)

John Brooks

Pondering the state of mind we call desire raises two antithetical questions: what do we do with it, and what would we do without it? Aristotle equated desire with the soul's motion, a theory which suggests that its very existence staves off indolence; conversely, Buddhism teaches that desire causes all suffering. Both concepts ring true. While not inherently bad, unchecked desire has been ruinous to many and is, one way or another, at the root of nearly every pernicious action we humans have unleashed upon the earth: war, colonialism, climate change, inequality. On the other hand—no disrespect meant to the Buddhists—imagining a life without desire is akin to being invited to a banquet where the food has neither taste nor smell; it's unthinkable, and, more importantly, no fun at all. Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, who, for his crimes of leftism and open homosexuality, was executed in 1936 by General Franco's ultranationalist forces, wrote: "*To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves.*" Though I didn't know him, I suspect that Lorca's assertion would have resonated with the late Mike Goodlett; its veracity is why his work exists.

In late June, Goodlett passed away unexpectedly at the age of sixty-three, just at a moment when he and his work were beginning to achieve wide recognition. Having followed his career—though he would probably blanch at that word—for a number of years, it is clear that he was a singular and visionary artist; it is clear, too, that he navigated his chosen course by following the tides of his desires. Born in Lexington, Kentucky, Goodlett lived and worked in rural Wilmore in a familial farmhouse that became a sanctuary and stronghold. A gay man, his sexuality was integral to his identity as a human being as well as his posture as an artist, if the two identifiers are even separable. Goodlett grew up in a place and time in which he was taught, explicitly and implicitly, that his sexuality and his desires were wrong, sinful, and something of



Index

Home
About
Masthead
Submissions
Equity Plan
Opportunities
Events
Podcast

Shop
Support Us



which to be ashamed. By now, of course, we are familiar with stories like these; they are all too common and not necessarily particular to Goodlett or any other individual, yet it is always the individual who bears the hardship of finding a way to survive under such oppression. In examining his work and through conversations with some of those who knew him, it seems that Goodlett felt, on some level, burdened by his desires, yet his output reveals that he also utterly relied on them—for inspiration, motivation, pleasure, and escape—in both his artistic practice as well as in his daily life. What any artist chooses to make work about is telling; that Goodlett chose to center his practice around an exploration of his sexual desires—despite associating them with degrees of shame—indicates both how fundamental they were to him, and how he instinctively came to understand that acknowledgement of and an acquiescence to his carnal wants was imperative for his continued existence.

Desire also provided an abundant reservoir from which Goodlett invariably drew inspiration. In the aftermath of his death, Lexington's Institute 193 presented *Mike Goodlett: Desire Itself*. Recently closed, the exhibition brought together seven of the artist's shadowbox dioramas, on loan from various private collections. Each of these rarely seen works—made sometime in the mid-2000s—is a self-contained maximalist universe, replete with paper forms, figures, ribbons, spools of thread, beading, bits of fabric, folded journal entries and other bric-a-brac. Quirky, humorous, sad, and poignant, the homespun aesthetic of these constructions differs vastly from the artist's more formalized recent work, but they are slyly sophisticated and essential to understanding Goodlett's perspective. Even casual inspection reveals the foundations upon which his oeuvre—a catalog of furtive sexual appetites brimming with lust, sensuality, voyeurism, and, paradoxically, a detached sentimentality—was built. Reliquaries, the boxes corral most of the elements found in later works: domestic tableaux, body parts, tears, keyholes, various apertures, many prying eyes, figures by turns prim or faintly demonic, architectural features, pageantry, and numerological riddles, among many other wonders. Influences abound, from Joseph Cornell to René Magritte, Hans Bellmer, other surrealists, the Hairy Who artists, and the Chicago Imagists. Infused with Goodlett's trademark suppressed eroticism, the dioramas are beautifully strange. Equal parts ethereal and psychosexual, they are surprisingly sensitive and nostalgic; even the ballpoint Bic pens Goodlett employed to make his drawings and journal entries were artifacts from his childhood, introduced to him by his mother, who worked at a bank and brought them home. Each work seems to exist as a way to quantify, categorize, examine, domesticate, and control—however briefly—his desires.

Goodlett's shadowboxes and Institute 193's gallery space mirror each other: quiet, intimate, compressed, and rich with content. For the exhibition a thick faux-linen curtain was drawn across the gallery's front-facing plate glass window—ostensibly to protect the works, which are comprised of non-archival materials housed behind non-museum panes of glass—but the curtain also served as metaphor, teasing passersby with the promised spectacle of a secret world. Enticed to peek behind it, viewers encountered a similar but exaggerated arrangement in Goodlett's baroque depositories, where what is visible, digestible, and quantifiable is outstripped by what isn't. Even discernable elements are neither narrative nor particularly intelligible; glimpses of words, phrases, and numbers can be found throughout the works, but reading what one can only deepens the mystery that is Goodlett's psyche. Arguably, it isn't our primary job as viewers to psychoanalyze the person who made what we're looking at, but when the work is so deeply aligned with the artist's innermost self, we can't resist. Philip March Jones, founder of Institute 193 and MARCH, says: "Goodlett was, first and foremost, a voyeur and his works almost always reference that particular state of being. In the drawings, there are often holes, openings, or other voids (think Baldessari but with different intent) that serve as invitations to the viewer to share in the experience. As a young man, he went so far as to construct cardboard movie theaters complete with audiences and curtains, a practice he continued for

Install of *Desire Itself*



Install of *Desire Itself*



The Visiting Hour (Some Are Ghosts), 2007, wood, ballpoint pen, paper, glass, 42 x 29 x 6.5 inches. Collection of Jim Gray.



Untitled, 2001 - 2007, wood, glass, paper, ballpoint pen, 46 x 35 x 6.5 inches. Collection of Jim Gray.

[Index](#)

[Home](#)

[About](#)

[Masthead](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Equity Plan](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Events](#)

[Podcast](#)

[Shop](#)

[Support Us](#)



decades, to view his own erotic drawings, illustrated on long, thin pieces of paper and rolled onto spools at either end of the box. A variety of shame was, of course, inherent to the work. Indeed, the initial and evolving abstraction of the figure in all its forms was a response to his unwillingness to be forthright about his own particular desires, things that remain taboo in rural Southern communities. He has always hidden in plain sight. Ultimately, Goodlett's desires were vast and fluid, but also restrained by his life in Wilmore. This particular set of conditions gave rise to what he has left behind."

In a piece entitled *The Visiting Hour*, Goodlett—in exquisite cursive written on a cloud-shaped doodle—confesses: "Now I should just forgive myself for everything and move forward. Besides they are all probably dead now and can't judge me further. Oh Well." That word—confession—is apt, but as seems the case with the whole of Goodlett's work, such disclosure is purely for his own benefit, not ours. Notably, he doesn't permit us to see him too clearly; for every line of legible text, dozens of journal and diary entries are folded over and over again, stacked tightly like bricks or debris, or even rolled tightly like his beloved, omnipresent cigarettes, destined to become nothing but ashes. The act of folding is an act of obscurement; it is a protective act. Despite willingly exhibiting his work, Goodlett perceived danger in excessive clarity and exposure—an afflictive paradox common among diaristic creatives. Although some of the shadowboxes were specifically made for friends, benefactors, and fellow artists, Goodlett didn't trust anyone with all of his secrets. They're at hand en masse, but to reveal them fully would be to see them destroyed. Small gauze screens, centrally placed, hang at the top of some of the assemblages; apparent connections to the spirit world—according to some who knew the artist—they are also a way for Goodlett to add another protective layer between himself and our rapacious curiosity. Wrestling with the thrill of decadence and the so-called indecent—as well as the shame associated with such activities—he no doubt suffered from worries about the societal constraints placed upon him, but was, as a man and an artist, ultimately unconcerned with the external. A self-proclaimed homebody who was in many ways indivisible from the bucolia of his farmhouse, he existed within his own orbit, pursuing art for his and its own sake, not for any sort of career or prestige. He was known to destroy piles of his work, sometimes before anyone else had seen it and occasionally—awkwardly—after it had been sold. Goodlett made work because he wanted to, but also because, as Lorca insists, he had to.

Exploring Goodlett's life and work reminds us that to be an artist of any sort is to be, at least partially, an observer; to observe is to stand aside so as to watch and, in an artist's case, to retain and perhaps record, in order to relay. This deliberate disengagement from the multitude can be necessary, allowing the artist to address issues and propose questions in ways that non-artists cannot. By separating oneself, one becomes other, and, though adversity is often its companion, otherness provides a kind of autonomy and asylum that can facilitate artistry. Though a kind of loneliness permeates Goodlett's work, it is never maudlin, but rather simply lingers as fact. As a gay man of a certain generation who also happened to originate from and live in a rural, conservative area, Goodlett was doubly, if not triply, other. This matters because it was his otherness, his solitariness, that seemed to drive the development of his work; if his desire was the lit flame by which he navigated, his otherness, if not his shame—or the need to find an antidote for his shame—was the fuel. When considering Goodlett's work not just on its own merits but also its relationship to developments in contemporary art, this rationale becomes more engrossing. Principally driven by Queer artists like Salman Toor, Doron Langberg, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Anthony Cudahy, Cassils, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Mickalene Thomas, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Kehinde Wiley, and Jenna Gribbon, among many others—all of whom are at least a generation younger than Goodlett—Queerness is very much the vanguard of contemporary art. Broadly speaking, much of this figurative work can be overtly celebratory, of the individual as well as the community; viewers behold the immediacy of Queer bliss in its oneness,

Index

Home

About

Masthead

Submissions

Equity Plan

Opportunities

Events

Podcast

Shop

Support Us



rather than, as in Goodlett's work, catching a glimpse or a suggestion of pleasure lying somewhere nebulously beyond what is presented. It isn't the case that one is better than the other, merely that there is variation. Some of this has to do with fundamental differences between figuration and abstraction; many would say that allusion is more powerful than explicit depiction—and I would argue this is true in Goodlett's own work—but these differences are also the product of time and psyche. Putting aside for a moment that cultural backslide is completely possible—if not even likely, given recent political events—today's mainstream acceptance of homosexuality makes an artist like Goodlett, whose creativity and desires were so driven by peering covertly from the shadows, increasingly rare and makes these early shadowboxes feel even more extraordinary and profound.

Secrecy and the allure of the illicit, however, will never entirely lose their appeal. As inherent outsiders, artists and Queer people often have iconoclastic streaks, and resist or reject to a degree much higher than the general community the confluence of heteronormative mores and their own lives. Cruising, polyamory, the "Right Now" aspect of hook-up apps like Grindr and Scruff are very much a part of Queer culture past, present, and—one doesn't need a crystal ball to say—future; this makes Goodlett's work acutely relevant. His body of work is a chronicle of Queerness and a paean to the luxuriance of desire—its pressures and its burdens, but also its beauty, and how it fuels, fulfills, and sustains. Desire can provide a path to freedom, and what a wonderful thing it is to feel free! For Queer people, there can be such ecstasy in relenting to our desires, given that it is those very desires that have shaped our hidden selves and, more likely than not, mapped a history of our pain. Subverting that dynamic requires great strength, but the results are liberating.

Goodlett, for all of his concealing, seemingly knew that. Over the years, his work became more refined and streamlined, jettisoning decoration for an increasingly elegant, almost Cylcadic clarity that masks, at its heart, a magnificent, outrageous obscenity (if we can take that word's meaning without its conventional negative connotation). Though he maintained a commitment to hiding—later through abstraction rather than folding or crumpling—his work evolved into something more overtly celebratory of bodily pleasures, or more specifically, the potentiality of such pleasures. As enchanting and edifying as his shadowboxes are, Goodlett's more recent work was his strongest and, like all great art, does many things at once. In both his recent works on paper, created with graphite and spray paint, as well as in his numerous amorphous concrete and hydrostone sculptures, one is struck by the contradictions he manifests. Goodlett's shapes, forms, and vessels—despite being motionless—feel alive and saturated with spirit; they are graceful and dignified, despite a rawness intrinsic to either their materiality, such as concrete, or prurient subject matter, such as sex toys and the body's eager, sundry cavities. Inventive and curious, Goodlett was committed to extruding a joyful eroticism from everything he touched. He was also a master of his media. Joey Yates, Curatorial Director at KMAC Museum, where the artist's work was exhibited a number of times, says: *"Goodlett had a remarkable aesthetic evolution that charted the myriad ways he could manifest both emotional and corporeal desire. His growth as an artist revealed an active imagination and dexterity for connecting subjects like religion, isolation, and sexuality with his own craftsmanship. Whether skillfully using pen, ink, spray paint, wood, paper or plaster, he always seemed to extract the essence from his materials, imbuing one of his objects or images with a corresponding sensuality and resonance that could only come from that specific material."*

Given his documented reticence and reclusiveness, we are lucky to have access to any of Goodlett's work at all; this is in no small part due to the aforementioned Jones, an early and committed champion. Artists need such advocates in order to succeed, and in the years preceding his untimely death, Goodlett's star was undoubtedly ascending. His work was included in a number of group and solo exhibitions, including at Atlanta Contemporary Art Center; Elaine de Kooning House

[Index](#)

[Home](#)

[About](#)

[Masthead](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Equity Plan](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Events](#)

[Podcast](#)

[Shop](#)

[Support Us](#)



in East Hampton, New York; the University of Kentucky Art Museum; and a hugely important solo show this past summer, presented by MARCH and Mrs. for NADA House on Governor's Island in New York City. That Goodlett died at this particular juncture, at a time when both his own virtuosity and Queer art itself have been brought, deservedly, to the fore, seems a particular cruelty. Coupled with the recent passing of renowned collector Al Shands, it has been a rough summer for Kentucky's visual art scene. And yet both of these men—though quite different in personality and interests—have left us with fabulous legacies: Shands through his generous donations to Kentucky's finest institutions and the vital ongoing work of Great Meadows Foundation, and Goodlett through the bequeathment of his Wilmore home and land to Institute 193 in order to start a residency program, which has just been announced as The Mike Goodlett Residency at House Badlett, named in part for the artist's self-identified alter ego and Instagram handle. Artists, writers, curators, and creatives in Kentucky and beyond will continue to benefit from Shands' and Goodlett's respective foresight.

Like his pastoral sanctuary, Goodlett's enigmatic work endures. For all of its fetishization of the body, allusions to its orifices, and sexual conspicuousness, the weight of what Goodlett chose to keep hidden—as well as its glaring beauty—is his work's lasting resonance, and its magnetism. Asserting that it is appetite, rather than satiation that stimulates the spirit, Marcel Proust wrote: "*Desire makes everything blossom. Possession makes everything wither and fade.*" Goodlett's fascination, his fix, was with desire itself, not with what expectedly follows: conquest, consummation, the vaunted act. The source of his ardor was the proverbial hunt, not the kill; that its climax was interrupted by the impermanence of his own flesh makes his fervent pursuit all the more riveting.

-

10.13.21

Founder of Quappi Projects, John Brooks (he/him) is a Louisville-based painter, writer, curator and gallerist.