

## Mike Goodlett: *Desire Itself*

By [Alexandra Drexelius](#)



Mike Goodlett, *Untitled*, 2001–07. Wood, glass, paper, ballpoint pen, 40 x 32 x 9 inches.  
Collection of Jim Gray. Courtesy Institute 193.

“If I could stop time—I would live in the gap and recover and stop time, right at the moment of crisis so that I could have enough time to think of the best way to handle it. I could get some work done. I would begin to age faster than other people and maybe they would notice if I could stop time.” Inscribed on a pleated plume, this musing billows out of the paper cutout of a

woman's soft bob. One of the many garrulous characters in artist Mike Goodlett's ensemble of shadowboxed figures, the woman gazes demurely, her countenance partially veiled by a serpentine wisp of cigarette smoke emanating from the digits of another woman, who coolly retorts, "Lovely."

Time stopped this summer for Mike Goodlett. He passed away on the last day of June at his mother's home in Wilmore, Kentucky, but he spent the past 30 years living and working at his nearby home and studio. This was not merely a marriage of convenience: Goodlett's work was intimately informed by his cloistered surroundings. Working within the off-white walls of his old Kentucky home—the paint cracking, the wallpaper peeling—Goodlett developed ways of describing desire that were born out of his seclusion. In the hopes of providing a new generation of artists with the opportunity to exercise their desires through the constraints of his home, shortly before his death Goodlett donated the property, posthumously dubbed "[House Badlett](#)," to serve as a site for creative residencies.

*Desire Itself*, a commemorative exhibition at Lexington, Kentucky-based gallery Institute 193, presents an efficient yet expansive view of Goodlett's creative output in seven shadowboxes constructed between 2001 and 2007. The breadth of Goodlett's elastic practice—spanning drawing, sculpture, decorative arts, and even architectural interventions in his own home—comes across with renewed clarity in these wood-framed and glass-paned boxes. In contrast to later and better-known work depicting blown-up erogenous objects that swell and ooze in neon and pastel hues, these shadowboxes offer a reserved and compartmentalized eroticism where desire skids beneath the surface.



Mike Goodlett, *An Aspect of the Divine Life (Society Indoors)*, 2001–07. Wood, glass, paper, ballpoint pen, pearls, 36 x 27 x 6 1/2 inches. Collection of Lina Tharsing.

At first, Goodlett's dioramas appear to be cluttered, stuffy, and frivolous affairs. An explosion of handiwork, the collaged compositions intersperse clusters of costume pearls and jewels with flowery penmanship and sumptuous pillows of fabric. Spindly paper streamers illustrated with cryptic symbols, numbers, and ornamental filigree spill vertically, brushing the ridges of artificial blooms and butterflies. Stoic flat figures with pursed lips and slicked-back hair proffer niceties and circuitous reflections. What lurks beneath these bourgeois melodramas posturing as Rococo vignettes, all set in the curio cabinetry of a Joseph Cornell?



Goodlett's shadowboxes bear some similarity to model theatres and peepshows—paper toys and optical devices popularized in 19th-century Europe. These toys manufactured the illusion of depth by layering two-dimensional screens, figures, and props. Scopophilic in nature, they encouraged play through the act of looking. Goodlett's embellished frames, resembling the proscenium arches that frame a stage, provide a theatrical scaffold for his compositions. In keeping with conventional set design, each of his dioramas contains facsimiles of drawn drapes: two garnet strips of velvet evoke a red curtain while pleated sheets of canary yellow paper emulate a lavish window treatment. With the signal of the drawn curtain, the stage is set; the narrative is ready to unfold.



Mike Goodlett, Untitled, 2001–07. Wood, glass, paper, ballpoint pen, 46 x 35 x 6 1/2 inches.  
Collection of Jim Gray. Courtesy Institute 193.

None of Goodlett's rotating cast of characters assume the status of protagonist in his miniature theatres of desire. Putting on airs through lustful chatter and the puff of rolled paper cigarettes—their clumsy filters covered in pink ink scribbles—these graphically rendered figures serve as smokescreens. Fixed in drawn and modeled scenery, they serve as veils, misdirecting the viewer. Indeed, veiling emerges as the dominant framing device throughout these works. Embodied by the fan of a skirt, the crease of a canopy bed, and the netting of a fascinator, veiling is a way of taming and teasing desire. These assemblages inevitably make the viewer a voyeur who peers and prys in every nook and cranny. The eye slips past a cutout silhouette, probes inside the slit of a purse, and dips beneath the floorboards. Floating partitions—red gels, silky gauzes, webbed mesh—beg to be looked through. On the shadowbox frames, peepholes open onto mute screens and empty voids, betraying their purpose. The glass panes embedded in each frame further situate us at a remove from all that is inside, at times reflecting us back at ourselves.

Beneath all of these veils are Goodlett's words. According to Institute 193, the keeping of private diaries was vital to Goodlett's practice. Stacks of these journals, sketchbooks, and notepads propped precariously above his fireplace can be seen in documentation of an exhibition titled *Chez Lui* that was staged in the artist's home by MARCH this past winter. The rest of his journals ostensibly destroyed, what remains of his scribed longings is stuffed into the crevices of the dioramas on view here. With close reading, meandering passages of text can be made out, and the stray licentious fragment—"Dear Love," "please," "lust," and "coming"—pop in and out of view, but the majority of Goodlett's notes are folded, crumpled, and rolled into impossibly tight coils. In these glass tombs, Goodlett preserves his desires, now veiled from our sight.

Maybe time stops for Mike Goodlett right at the moment we threaten to peel back the curtain. Tugging at a drape of fabric with diffident hands, one can seize the gap between longing and release. Disinterested in the kind of desire that can be tethered to anyone or anything, Goodlett grasps desire at the precipice of its unfolding. Before the blink of an eye, he stops time.