

# aperture

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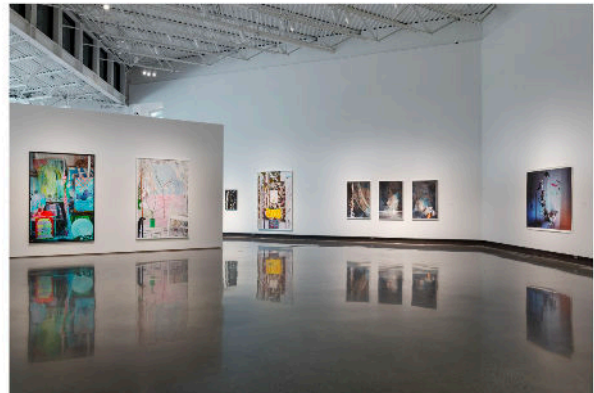
INTRODUCING

## A Queer Wish for Other Worlds

David Gilbert's colorful studio photographs feel intensely private, like a scrapbook for a tightly knit circle of friends.



Installation views of *Flutter* at the North Carolina Museum of Art, 2024  
Courtesy the North Carolina Museum of Art, Winston-Salem



By **Evan Moffitt** February 28, 2025



The light hits differently in Los Angeles. They say it's an effect of smog, as sunbeams refract through toxic gases and radiate lurid colors. Whatever the case, that light has brought countless artists to the Golden State. It cuts across many of David Gilbert's photographs, captured as it glances through the window blinds of his LA home and studio. Sunset is a favored time for the way it paints things with a warming glow, like the cartoonishly bright, yellow paper stars in *Solar System* (2022) or the violet window pane in the aptly named *Drama at Sunset* (2013)—a moment of magic before the world goes dark.

Photographs are comprised of three essential elements—light, fixative, and ground, usually paper—which freeze-frame the ever-changing world in simplest matter. Since Henry Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* (1844), the medium has been understood as an index of loss. The simple stuff that Gilbert photographs isn't meant to last: drawings and collages on paper that are usually destroyed by the time their image circulates. Instead, they're preserved in the paper stock of his photographic prints. In Gilbert's studio, the lens always comes last, even though it's the first thing we see. "The camera is the glue that holds things in place," he says. This recursive tendency is part of what makes his photographs more than they seem.

# KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY

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Fox Talbot's first photograph was of the slanting light through the window at Lacock Abbey, transferred from paper negative to salted paper. Conforming to the pictorial standards of his time, he composed his images like Dutch genre paintings. There's a similarly Vermeer-like quality to Gilbert's window photographs, several of which appeared in *Flutter*, the artist's first solo museum exhibition, which was presented last year at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Winston-Salem. The checkered wallpaper in *Hereafter* (2021) recalls the floor patterns in old master scenes of domestic life, while the play of natural light and shadow endows the photograph with its alluring sense of depth. The light is much flatter in *Stencil* (2021), but in this respect it mimics the titular paper cut-out at the picture's center, and the way that photographs themselves are produced from negative images. The chiaroscuro in *Window Frame* (2023) is so intense that it's difficult to tell negative from positive, solid from air.

In contrast, other photographers have used paper to render architectural features as simulacra. The meticulously constructed paper sets of Thomas Demand, with their flat, matte surfaces, mimic the photo paper upon which their images are printed. Casting no shadows, they appear unnervingly real. James Casebere's paper architectural models are dramatically illuminated with studio lights, but are likewise too perfect to be entirely convincing. Such analog art, situated in an uncanny valley, seems to predict the advent of AI-generated imagery. And then there's Gilbert's *Night, Night* (2015), with its crudely-painted cardboard building model sitting before a set of clashing curtains decorated with butterflies and stars. Such assemblages, by contrast, are full of jagged cuts, curls, and other hand-hewn imperfections, which lend them an almost comical pathos. Gilbert's work wears its heart on its sleeve.

Its decorative elements are the marks of a tender obsession. The unapologetically kitschy *Cloud Clutter* (2018), with its tableau of fake birds and flowers, colorful mugs and tins, straws, feathers, marbles, and a wide variety of store-bought art supplies, could be a queer bedroom collection or the aftermath of a crafting party. Several of his photographs depict sets with painted or patterned backdrops and bright footlights—*Constellations* (2020), *Full House* (2019), and *Center Stage* (2019)—like living room theaters where the performers have just left the stage. They recall Jack Smith, who used mass-produced materials to transform his East Village apartment into a queer fantasyland for renegade films and performances, or James Bidgood, whose long-lost cinematic masterpiece *Pink Narcissus* (1971), remastered this year by the Museum of Modern Art, made horny harems, docks, and country idylls from cut-up prom dresses, tinsel, and beads.

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In Smithian spirit, Gilbert scatters camp, erotic Easter Eggs throughout his pictures, like painted penises both big (*Pink Thing*, 2019) and small (*Small Erotic Picture (Spring)*, 2013). *Gone Girl* and *Grande Dame* (2019) could be portraits of Harlem Renaissance queens by Carl van Vechten, but with no bodies, just drag. As critic Matthew Schneier observed in the catalog for *Heaven and Earth*, Gilbert's 2023 exhibition at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery in New York, "Gilbert is a consummate squirreler of set pieces, and the studio is a stage."

Nick Mauss echoes this notion in *Body Language* (2023), his recent study of the photographs of George Platt Lynes and PaJaMa co-authored by Angela Miller. "The early twentieth century artist's studio was a site for the creation of queer 'counterpublics,'" he notes—a place for collaborative performances, discussions, and intimate exchanges of albums and other ephemera. The gently curling paper cutouts, tinsel garlands and fake flowers in Gilbert's photographs recall the cellophaned interior of artist Florine Stettheimer's Manhattan salon, or the studio sets built by Platt Lynes and van Vechten, where both men photographed countless models, lovers, and friends. "A resistance to the effects of market-based public circulation led these artists to specify the terms of their work's access to a limited 'inner' public, not unrelated to the gesture of sharing the contents of their scrapbooks," Mauss writes. This may be why Gilbert's work feels so intensely private, like a scrapbook for a tightly knit circle of friends. Its cut, torn, and folded surfaces carry a queer wish for other worlds—or utopias—to emerge from the waste-paper of this one.

That wish takes full form in *Castle* (2024), a tracing-paper schloss which Gilbert photographed in beguiling shadow and printed at larger-than-life scale, enhancing its architectural illusionism. But unlike the artificial light in photographs by those architectural illusionists, Demand and Casebere, the slanting glow imprinted on Gilbert's works is almost always natural, illuminating traces of the artist's hand that seem just as evanescent. As that light changes and fades, so too will these constructions be dismantled and repurposed to make something new. They bear an entwined melancholy and hopefulness often shared by works that can be characterized as "queer," in the sense that theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz used it to signify "a horizon imbued with potentiality," something which has either recently gone or "is not yet here." These photographs aren't indexes—they're dreams.