

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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Art Review:

Ishmael Randall-Weeks & Melanie Schiff

Jonathan T.D. Neil

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Since her first solo show at the Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago at the end of 2006, Melanie Schiff's photography has been received as that of a lackadaisical rocker, an easy producer of images that draw upon the tired life of places and things that are of little interest beyond their service as backdrops for late-night philosophising fuelled by beer and dope. We know this culture by the qualifier of 'youth'. It's a noncommittal, quasi-commercial life, one not exactly at odds with the world, but not exactly at peace with it either.

The problem here is that such readings do little justice to Schiff's achievement as a deft composer – or rather, compositionalist – of light and form. Her still lifes, light captures and other such composed scenes demonstrate a facility with 'that old thing' (analogue) photography that equals even Uta Barth's more technical gymnastics; yet Schiff manages to make her work appear as if it is somehow easily intuitive as opposed to rigorously worked through, which, in the end, it must be. Prints such as *Prism* (2005), *Cases* (2005), *Spit* (2006) and the much lauded *Emergency* (2006) – this last captures the distant fireball of the sun just as it caps a bottle of Jack Daniels in the foreground – reveal Schiff's supreme comfort with the registration of light and stuch. And her more recent work, black-and-white portraits such as *Natalie I* (2008) and *Sarah* (2007), and the masterful *Untitled* (2008), add to this comfort a *Las Meninas*-type dialogue on the circuit of the camera's seeing, here multiplied by the layering of windows, mirrors, and other reflective surfaces within the profilmic space.

On the whole it is elegant and, most important, intelligent work. Schiff's body-in-the-landscape pieces such as *Mud Reclining* (2006) and *Skatepark* (2008), too-self-consciously evoke the spectres of Ana Mendieta and VALIE EXPORT; but then again, these aren't the worst artists to channel. Nevertheless, it is composition that Schiff understands, apparently, to a very natural degree, and it is by composition that her work will rise or fall – I suspect it will be the former.

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