

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

## ARTFORUM

[Artforum.com](http://Artforum.com)

**Critics' Picks: Melanie Schiff "The Mirror" at Kavi Gupta Gallery**

**James Glisson**

**September 23, 2009**

Melanie Schiff's new series of photographs are called "narratives" in the gallery's press materials, yet her pictures lack figures or anthropomorphized objects that might function as characters, much less any obvious sense of duration. The concrete viaducts and forlorn landscapes that Schiff captures are the functioning detritus of a normally invisible infrastructure that supports vast conurbations. (Perhaps these are part of the web of waterworks that service the parched Los Angeles area, where Schiff lives.)

Unit after unit, mile after mile, the viaducts are gigantic, yet in Schiff's photographs these bland and imposing structures dematerialize. Take *Hellroom*, 2009, where the walls and floor of a huge drainage culvert are covered with mostly red graffiti so densely layered that the concrete surface transforms into something akin to intricately tattooed human skin. Further, the square shape of the culvert self-consciously mirrors the square format of the photograph, and the white-and-orange spots in each lower corner of the structure resemble overexposed patches on a negative. The photograph pulls in two directions: to the print's surface and to the shimmering spray-painted cement. The man-made canyon nearly disappears between these competing poles. It is a ruin of sorts, not from long ago, but instead the recent past or even the present. Ruins manifest narrative in their decrepitude: how much their present form differs from what had once been pristine and new. Perhaps the narrative then resides in that gap and in the taut pull between surface and skin.

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