

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

MODERN PAINTERS

Melanie Schiff "Sun Land" at Kavi Gupta

Beth Capper

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Schiff's most recent photographs are entirely unpeopled explorations of the world of things. The subjects of these works are the trees, flowers, rocks, mountains, and handicrafts that populate her hometown of Sunland-Tujunga, Los Angeles, which also gave the exhibition its name, "Sun Land."

Giving an account of the world beyond the human is a particularly apt endeavor these days, as the art world draws on the speculative turn in philosophy with its object-oriented ontologies and thing theories. Schiff adds her perspective to this conversation with conceptual rigor. Instead of positing herself as a human observer who can illuminate the natural world and the thingness of things, she emphasizes the limits of the human gaze. Schiff's photographs argue for opacity in representation. Many of them are taken at a distance that feels unnatural, almost clinical-though the ones in color retain a certain sensuousness. The tension between a desire to romanticize the landscape and a desire to represent romanticism and upend it is partly what makes these photographs so conceptually interesting. Landscapes are man-made observations that operate to make nature a container for human memory; Schiff refuses this and always points to a natural world beyond our ability to index it. In her works, nature has its own memories, and our presence or absence as observers makes no difference. In *Towers*, 2012, a group of trees rest on one another, evoking a kind of communal affection, but one that is inaccessible to us; while *Sun Land*, 2012, an island lingers across the sea, surrounded by trees, foreclosing its interior world.

Some of these works reveal a human trace either long or recently departed: one, *Clay Birds*, 2012, documents the red debris of clay-pigeon disks splattered on a mountain face, while empty shotgun cartridges litter the ground; another, *Chimney*, 2012, is of an old house destroyed by fire, with only a chimney and scorched trees remaining. These works, too, explore the relationship between nonhuman actors and their environment. The collision of clay birds with the landscape, and the trace they leave, endures as more than an index of human action – the clay becomes a part of the landscape, entangled with it. Likewise, the chimney exerts its own destruction on the house it was embedded within, perhaps out of a desire to be alone. The camera, itself an active nonhuman in this encounter, intervenes too, and simultaneously records and creates the atmosphere of the photographs. Schiff reminds us that she is on equal footing with these things.

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