

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



Melanie Schiff: Kavi Gupta

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Given the tsunami of images that flood us daily, it seems more difficult than ever for photographers to develop a point of view that is fresh and startling enough to stand out. Yet Melanie Schiff, a Chicago native who moved to California in 2008, has managed to do just that—not in any kind of revolutionary fashion but in a quietly mysterious, subtly subversive way. She is riding a wave of attention that gained momentum after her inclusion in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, and it has not yet crested.

A dozen of Schiff's 2012 images—all inkjet prints from 120mm film—were featured in her third solo exhibition at the gallery. Differences from some of her earlier work were immediately visible, none more obvious than the change of setting. Most of these land- and streetscapes (all without people, unlike many of her previous works) were taken in or near her home in Sunland, a community in the far northeast corner of Los Angeles. Nowhere is this L.A. milieu more vivid than in *Towers*, a disorienting, upswept image shot at the base of a tall hedgerow.

Jutting up behind is a clump of cypress trees that suggest the Watts Towers, likely the source of the work's title. They are set against and slightly shrouded by the ghostly, smog-filled sky so common in this city.

To help shape her slightly off-beat aesthetic, Schiff seeks out unlikely, unexpected subject matter, giving us glimpses of little worlds most of us wouldn't even know exist in L.A. The compelling *Clay Birds*, for example, depicts a shooting range, with shell casings littering the foreground and the fragments of the clay targets giving the hillside in the distance a strange, alluring reddish hue. At the same time, Schiff puts her distinctive stamp on some familiar approaches that other photographers of the last several years have used to break with tradition. These include nuanced manipulations and even the creation of what in the past might have been deemed a "bad" photograph. In *Lemon Tree*, she capitalizes on a light leak in the camera to create saturated, translucent streaks of color that gently stain this image of dense backyard flora, while *Pale Queen* is an off-level, deliberately washed-out image of spindly roses that are hardly photogenic in any conventional sense.

Despite the strength of many of the individual images, the show had its weaknesses, starting with the intermingling of mostly color images with a few scattered black-and-white photos. Not only did this result in some jarring juxtapositions, it also made Schiff's choices feel arbitrary. In addition, three photographs of houses and structures in parks suggest a different direction in her work, perhaps toward installation art, but not enough to get a full sense of that turn. The uneasy mix of these photographs with the atmospheric landscapes undermined the coherence of the show. Those concerns aside, it's hard to deny the oddly compelling originality of Schiff's photographic vision.

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