

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

MODERN PAINTERS

Melanie Schiff
Barry Schwabsky
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Everyone knows that the word photography means writing with light, but few photographers make this etymology as apparent in their images as Melanie Schiff does. While others use light to show people or things, Schiff is more likely to make you think that she is using people or things to show the light around them. Her images are so intimate with the experience of luminosity that they even know how to make a joke of it, albeit a serious sort of joke. For example, *Emergency* (2006) shows a nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniel's on a table that, I'd guess, is set on a porch; in the background is the woods, blurred with distance, and white sky, and right in the center of the picture, the glaring, haloed light of the setting sun coming through the branches. The sun is just at the point where its light seems to be resting like a ball on the mouth of the bottle.

It's like a picture of a miracle, or at least of some sort of magical manifestation. And it's also the fakest miracle you could possibly imagine—that's what makes the picture as funny as it is ravishing. And yet the light is golden around this counterfeit apparition, the true and inimitable light of sunset, a woozy, honeyed radiance. Why is the picture called *Emergency*? It's named after the word scrawled across the side of the label on the bottle. Which means, I can only speculate, that the whiskey's owner had set the bottle aside not for everyday use but for some particularly urgent situation. Like this sunset, maybe.

Perhaps this is what's so fascinating about *Emergency*, and about a good many more of Schiff's recent photographs: their ability to show the construction of their own effects—the banality underlying the romance—in order not to undermine the effects but to make them all the more powerful. Coming across an image like this without warning—an image so rich with space and light—can induce a peculiar reaction. Notice how you take a deep breath, an inhalation that coincides with a distinct widening of the eyes, as if taking in the image were somehow like taking in more oxygen. It's an experience these photographs offer repeatedly, and it's about as far as possible from the flat affect deliberately cultivated in so much contemporary photography. While Schiff's work constitutes an aesthete's witty, seductive, and highly self-conscious meditation on photography as a medium, it is rooted, as the artist takes pains to clarify, in “a dialogue both inside and outside of photography.” In the best tradition of modernist formal reflexivity, her work turns inward, not to close itself off as a hermetic monad but to find out where form breaks open to admit the light of the world.

Bottles and light come up elsewhere in the work of this 30-year-old Chicagoan, who has been selected for the 2008 Whitney Biennial. In *Lagoon*, also from 2006, a pair of glow sticks form a chemiluminescent X inside a beer bottle poised on the nose of a canoe surrounded by calm, shadowy water—almost seeming to contemplate the inlet's blank expanse in the manner of the protagonist of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Perhaps Schiff conceives of the photograph as a bottle of light—a way of storing it for later consumption. She certainly treats light as fluid, most ravishingly in *Reflecting Pool* (2007), with its partly drained swimming pool filled with autumn leaves and Joni Mitchell's 1971 album *Blue* floating on top of the water, amid the dappled reflections of the suburban house to which the pool must belong. *Spit* (2006) and *Rainbow* (2006)—variants on one idea—present this fluid medium as distinct in setting and composition. Both pictures show the artist herself spitting a mouthful of what appears to be water straight at her camera. In *Spit*, her visage is completely obliterated (and much of the rest of the image veiled) by the tiny droplets that here function as so many infinitesimal mirrors broadcasting the light in all directions; in *Rainbow* the stream of fluid from Schiff's mouth is less

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prominent, all the better to let the viewer perceive the spectrum of colors produced by the refraction of light through the spray, a specter without definite location in the space between the figure and the lens.

Although one sometimes catches sight of Schiff—and other people too—in her photographs, a face or figure is something that's often just out of reach or about to disappear: the face hidden by the camera in *Underwater Photographer* (2006), the body turned away and passing through the curtained glass doors of the diptych *Cannon Falls (Cobain Room)* (2007). This last picture recalls certain imagery by Annika von Hausswolff, perhaps the contemporary photographer with whose sensibility Schiff's has the most in common. Schiff seems fundamentally mentally to be a photographer of still life, and this is confirmed by an image such as *Neil Young, Neil Young* (2006), in which a young woman—perhaps the artist?—poses for a portrait by holding up the cover of the Canadian singer-songwriter's first solo LP, from 1968, with its lurid psychedelic portrait of him at once concealing and standing in for her own face. Where we expect the image of a person, we get the image of a thing. As ever with Schiff, the sleight of hand, the old switcheroo, is patent. Much has been made of her recurrent use of references to rock music—both *Neil Young, Neil Young* and *Emergency* were recently included in the exhibition "Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (the latter work, according to the show's curator, Dominic Molon, "evoking the bottle's role as one of the classic totemistic objects on rock concert stages")—but it's clear that Schiff uses these references not so much to evoke the music itself or its attendant lifestyle but rather as a form of surrogate autobiography.

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