

Avigail Schimmel: The Art of Reticence and Permission



**Avigail Schimmel
Beachcomber, 2001.
C-print, 24" x 20".
Courtesy the artist.**

David Shapiro

The quietness of Avigail Schimmel's work has a woman in it, to change Frank O'Hara's phrase, and the works are tracking time full of melancholy for the present tense. Such photographs work in all the tenses, moreover, and are only as clear, to render homage again to a certain poetics, "as her natural reticence permits." Reticence is not opacity, isn't whimsy, and avoids evasion.

These are lyrical ballads unashamed of the moon, inexhaustible horizons, sand disturbed by the index of the human, and water undisturbed by anything more bodily than itself and some drowning weeds.

Schimmel's work is a New York debut, but it is actually the patient accumulation of a mature artist. She has, for example, illuminated her poet-father's strangely hand-bound library with a brilliant systemic work not exhibited here, and her work, two years ago, of portraits of Rudy Burckhardt (shown at Tibor at the time of a memorial) and others is among my favorite studies of the lability of the face and hands. Rudy is so alive that we know he "carries his own eyes" and his hand is mobile always as his gaze. Perhaps even Schimmel's landscapes are portraits, in this sense, or learned from the same zeal for the body and its "internality."

Schimmel's colors are almost inflammably vivid. We cannot however be unimpressed by the way in which these saturated images are always anchored to the real. She has indeed remarked to me that she is consciously avoiding the sentiment of the merely Infinite. (Heschel said the prophet holds man and God always in the same grammar.) Her work is always striated and pierced by the repoussoir of something finite, particular: "the cry of the particular." If the East River swirls, it is next to a boundary line. If the waves flow, there walks past a stately beachcombing dog. If the dog has his humor, it is bittersweet like the "mad dog" about to turn truly mad and bite you to death in the vast prose of Agnon.

This work, concrete and sexual as a song, is international in its diction and subtly unresolved. In each case she has been tough on herself and held to the highest standards of photographic hallakah or law. She tells stories, moreover, in each square, and stories without spite. Therefore, I find her work is neither

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meretricious nor cloying. I once praised the landscapes of Rudy Burckhardt to the artist himself, and he modestly remarked, "I try not to exaggerate." This unexaggerated tradition of Porter, Burckhardt, Freilicher and James Schuyler, is part of the freshness of Schimmel's work. She finds this Nature everywhere, like God or a starry cracked pavement.

What one wants in photography is an avoidance of all the stupor associated with its casual contingencies, but with the intelligence that can always emerge from the most casual contingencies. Somehow, the snapshot aesthetic must be married again to something musical, grand, and restlessly durable: "feminine marvelous and tough," as Berrigan put it about the street style of O'Hara rising to a surrealist convulsiveness. When Kafka's poor stoker sees the Statue of Liberty holding a sword, we receive an image of canonical caution to those looking for an easy discursiveness. The sword now exists and the angry matriarch. Idol-worshipping has always been one part of the photographic tradition, even the central idol of the city itself. Schimmel's three Liberties are as hilarious and hallucinogenic as Kafka's sword. She is rigorous here about the horribly wonderful oxymoron of our idols. Three Elvis Presleys are even less uncanny than her three Statues of Liberty, democratic toys in the palpable distance. What is next? The plural of Joan of Arc?

With her second-hand Hasselblad, and not mesmerized by techne or technique, Schimmel has built up a very learned series of "natural" images. Her viewpoints are not the dashing worm's eye or bird's eye of Rodchenko or much baroque rhetoric. (One thinks of how architecture is now completely trivialized with mannerist diagonals, as if computer flows would save us from gravity.) She knocks us out with some very unexpectedly modest dislocations.

Walter Benjamin is our born philosopher of the photograph, and I place next to his "History of Photography" his creation of a rabbinic comment that Heaven is like earth, but a little different. This little difference is Schimmel's forte -- the off and on of a beeping boat, the amphitheatre which is simply light and doesn't exist any more than Rimbaud's "arctic flowers." The beach in Schimmel has turned into a mental structure, and Coney Island is concrete with an ocean and an ocean of snow nearby. Her moon is unmoved by the traditions of Romantic worship. Schimmel keeps telling her fresh stories because she, like Burckhardt, is also carrying her own eyes, and we underline the (erotic) power that such (religious) independence permits. A photograph can be a meteor.

She is a person who likes to meet Nature. We know how late it was (1804 or so) that Luke Howard, amateur nephologist, named the clouds and influenced Goethe and Constable, and thus all subsequent skies. But we also know that Caspar David Friedrich hated the schemata and thought Nature should be left alone to multiply without names. Why reduce the whole free sky to three types? It's important to forget Names and to win through to the radical optical strength of the revolutionary Impressionists. Schimmel is not beguiled by Warholian glamour. Neither is she violated by fashionable concepts. She is entangled with the tangle of particularity, before names, almost. This namelessness is perhaps the most exciting quality of these works of color.

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Footnote: See K.Badt's studies of 1947 on Constable's skies and R. Hamblyn's recent *The Invention of Clouds*, for further discussion of classification and Nature.