

A Woman's Place

By Vicki Goldberg

Home Stills leave home or stick around. Bastienne Schmidt wanders, metaphorically or on foot, in and out of a woman's life and imagination, her own and by inference, many another's. At home and not-home, amid order and disorder, roaming and staying put, hiding out in plain sight, she builds narratives where multiple meanings glimmer below the surface and ambiguities fill the frame. The end papers propose the circle of (woman's) life with drawings of a child, a young girl who might be Dorothy in Oz, a man or two but more female types: sexpot, sophisticate, mothers with babies. The photographs expand the circle into concentric realms.

Photographers have an advantage. They can rearrange life for a moment or two. They can make visible what's on their minds while the rest of us are stuck inside our heads. Schmidt's photographs refashion the world that life's cycle has already remade for her. She stages images of a woman (the photographer, for she is her own model) at home, with children, as well as inside other people's homes and imagined lives. She wanders away from home for a day in search of the freedom to leave home for anywhere, anytime that came with an earlier part of the cycle, when she was single.

Once children came into Schmidt's life, another world did too: tiny toys that lived miniature lives. They beckoned her to imagine "an artistic reorganization...in the midst of the chaos of a household"ⁱⁱ (while most of us were merely imagining the toys being miraculously put away). In her photographs minuscule knights and warriors cascade down from on high behind a curtain and pint-size adults run purposefully across other curtains, defying reason in favor of artistic reorganization.

Disorganization makes itself at home. “Tax Time” has spewed papers over everything. In “Money Counter”, coins sit on a table, some in neat little stacks, others waiting for order. Life’s nagging repetitions discreetly present themselves: the floor needs vacuuming again, pieces of paper must be picked up. What’s really at work is entropy, the relentless decline of everything into disorder. In one engaging and distinctly feminine riff on the grid, that staple of modern art, Schmidt has imposed regularity on half-used soap: mathematically correct lines across a flower-patterned fabric. (Sol Lewitt would not approve.) The soaps have become muddled shapes in the service of cleanliness; regular or not, they are on the way to their own kind of death and disappearance because we are trying so hard to avoid exactly that.

Where Cindy Sherman has imagined herself as someone else – anyone, everyone -- Bastienne Schmidt imagines herself in other places. She inserts herself into places she does not live in, attempting to think herself into other lives. She tries on what it might feel like inside a mac-and-cheese residence: a cheap motel, or a place where you put on a dressed-up dress and house slippers to sit in a row of oversize, tacky armchairs. She tries out a grand Long Island mansion or two with vistas of still waters. For a thirtieth of a second, she inhabits another life, as if she were a subdued version of Woody Allen’s Zelig. Only artists, actors, a few people on reality TV swapping-lives shows – and a photographer -- get to act out the sense of being inside someone else’s life, though envy or compassion can stir that sense in anyone.

Schmidt wanders a lot in *Home Stills*, across her home territory, the fields and woods on the eastern end of Long Island. Years ago, when still a fairly recent immigrant, she wandered around the country with a camera in her hand in search of America, a search that produced a book called *American Dreams*.ⁱⁱ Once she had a family and so much less time, wandering without a fixed goal along the road to unexpected discovery turned in her mind “from a necessity into a luxury”. Her “roaming” photographs minimally reconstruct a period of her life and

comment on the kind of on-the-road photography that has produced books like Len Jenschel's *Travels in the American West*, Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, Burk Uzzle's *Just Add Water*, and Schmidt's own. [note: I wrote the introduction to Uzzle's book, which is not why I mentioned it, and it seems to me unnecessary to footnote that – if you think it's necessary, I'll footnote it, if the mention seems self serving, I'll take it out. It's a wonderful and neglected book.]

She thinks of herself in her *wanderbilder* as a lone housewife in the unlikely act of walking out of the picture into the proverbial sunset, a journey commonly reserved for cowboys in westerns. Her territory is too domesticated and suburban to fit the allusion: once she walks along the yellow do-not-pass lines of a tree-lined street, a middle-of-the-road path quite unlike the lonesome, flatland highways that Dorothea Lange and Robert Frank photographed. It must have crossed the mind of many a mother, faced with caterwauls and runny noses, dust balls and yet another dinner to provide, that it might be a relief to step out of the picture. The housewife and mother's need to be alone isn't a wild west restlessness but a temporary desire for respite, hardly the cowboy's solitary drive to write his own road movie by inventing his own road under his horse's hooves. A few women do up and abandon their children, a baffling notion for most of us, but in general women who leave have either been abused or fallen prey to passion. For the rest, there are pictures in the mind, which a photographer can transfer to paper.

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Schmidt's photographs are composed of light, color, geometry, and secrets. Light is the soul of the medium; the word *photography* means "light writing". Schmidt creates geometries of light, as that elusive, formless element responds to the rectilinear rules we have laid down for our right-angle homes. In *Home Stills*, rectangles of light blaze in doors and windows, strict shapes of light hover on walls and floors. In one picture, windows cast three light squares across three solid rectangles (a mirror, two pictures) that hang on the wall, as if the squares in a painting by Joseph Albers had decided to get up and dance. And in the

darkness just before night definitively clamps down on earth, a black house at an odd tilt has four small squares of light cut out of it like features in a jack-o-lantern. Light can subvert geometry as well: looking down a staircase in a house that is probably white but registers as gray in the photograph, the camera angle skews the perspective while sunlight throws blurred reflections and clouds like splotches of paint across the walls, turning a rational interior into a Frank Gehry experience.

Schmidt's color can be as punchy as an exclamation mark: the normative yellow staircase in that irregular white house, a bright red dress atop a haphazard mass of gray cut logs, and most striking of all, Schmidt's red skirt and stockings above her green shadow. (Uncommon as it is to take a picture of one's own standing feet, this photograph commemorates an uncommon occasion, the day that Bastienne Schmidt became an American citizen.) Other times, other palettes: a room may turn monochrome, like the white room with a white bed covered with white pieces of paper, the room with turquoise walls that impose a turquoise aura on everything, the green glaze coating a hallway and glancing over a figure's clothing.

And then there are the secrets, first and foremost the photographer herself, hiding in full view. Though there is a thread of autobiography here, the protagonist remains essentially unseen, faceless, unidentifiable. She turns her back to us. Typically a viewer is expected to identify with a person seen from the back, as both look in the same direction. Here, though the experience is shared, the back becomes a denial: you shall not know me intimately; I will only let you into my ideas. She hides behind and blurs behind sheer curtains, behind a screen, behind a complicated, spider-web like pattern of threads, behind her *hair*. Light obscures her as surely as darkness does and sometimes only a shadow describes her.

The story in *Home Stills*, about a woman imagining other homes and an earlier life with its freedoms, is a story that extends too many women's lives. Maintaining a private face, a kind of physical anonymity in the cause of widening the reference, is nonetheless an anomaly in an era when millions of faces (and bodies) are unveiled on the Web every day and ordinary folk scramble to achieve their fifteen minutes of fame in one visual medium or another. Schmidt is not just protecting her privacy but saying that women even today are not fully visible but seen through a mesh of perceptions. She presents images from cinema too -- women portraying women in a medium that projects popular notions of women's roles in society -- but renders them hazy behind diaphanous flowered fabrics. This is not an entirely outmoded notion, much as we'd like to think so. The preliminary report of the Global Media Monitoring Project in 2010 found that only 24% of people seen, heard, or read about in the news worldwide are female, only 16% of news stories focus specifically on women, and fewer than one out of five experts interviewed is female. In effect, the news presents a world in which women are largely absent – or invisible.^{iiiiiv}

Not exactly secret, nor always readily apparent, are multiple layers of meaning. Photograph has an uncanny ability: a single photograph can encompass almost as many types of expression within its borders as a library does -- fiction and non-fiction, short story and document, history, sociology, theater, history of art, fantasy, myth, poetry. Every photograph that hasn't yet met Photoshop, as well as most that are not pure abstraction, qualify as both fact and fiction. Whatever is in the picture is a fact of sorts – it was *there*, in front of the lens, and looked very like that at one particular angle and in a particular light. But photographs are now acknowledged as fiction more readily than fact: excerpts – the eyes would have seen more than the viewfinder did – and obviously not the real thing but a representation and version of reality, however that is to be defined in these doubting days.

Schmidt's *Home Stills* are almost as variously informed and informative as a card catalogue. Take *Laundry Spiral*, a picture of a woman standing in the center of a spiral made of rolled-up laundry, her child running toward her across the lawn. Non-fiction, yes; the woman, the child, the lawn, the autumn tree, and the spiral were all where the photograph says they were. Fiction, yes, or theater: constructed, staged, and invented. Autobiography too: her son, her lawn, her tree, her environment. And her laundry. Married women, mothers, women living with male partners generally do more of the household laundry than men do (even today), so add to the other elements a statement about women. She looks trapped in the middle of that spiral, as if the dirty or unfolded clothes had her in their grip. (I remember that when my children were very young it occurred to me that I might be suffocated by the weight, the sheer quantity, and the fierce repetitiveness of the wash.)

Then there's mythology or symbolism: the spiral is frequently said to represent the Goddess, the womb, femaleness, fertility, female sexuality – and/or the evolution of the universe. On top of that the photograph explicitly points to art history: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, which in its subdued, stony palette is almost as multi-colored as Schmidt's conglomerated shirts and trousers. She says she chose soft materials because women artists often use them: another statement about women. It's possible to infer in addition a subtle psychological conundrum: her child runs toward her, and she begins to raise her arms as if prepared to receive and embrace him, but if she is indeed trapped in her own female nature, can he trespass on the spiral or negotiate it? The photograph very quietly hints at the difficulties of motherhood.

Or take *Woman in the Field with Watertower* which refers to Andrew Wyeth's *Cristina's World*, that famous painting of a young paralyzed woman in a brown field yearning toward a house on the horizon. Art history again: Schmidt freely borrows ideas or images from painting, photography and film, a practice entirely appropriate to an era of appropriation and a time when the media have put the

history of all manner of imagery before our eyes. *Woman in field* rings a number of changes on Wyeth; Schmidt always reworks the sources of her inspirations. We know the woman in question is not blind; she is, after all, a photographer. What stands on the horizon is not a house, not a home, but a water tower, one with a particularly efficient shape that always strikes me as a vague sort of female symbol. The woman not only does not lean hungrily toward the tower as Cristina does toward the house but walks in another direction, and the dry stalks on the left lean away as well.

Woman on red Daybed makes an even more obvious reference to Edward Hopper's *A Woman in the Sun*. The changes are many – light room vs. dark, clothed vs. nude, sitting vs. standing. Facing left vs. right -- but the respectful nod to the Hopper is unmistakable. The stillness, the air of contemplation, and the power of light are more than close enough. Hopper's influence on art has been immense, on artists as disparate as Eric Fischl and Red Grooms and myriad photographers from Harry Callahan and Robert Frank to Robert Adams and Stephen Shore. A recent and much more exact rendition of *A Woman in the Sun* was exhibited at the 2010 Whitney Biennial: R. H. Quayman's *Distracting Distance, Chapter 16*, an installation with a monochrome image of a nude woman standing in the light by an image of one of the Whitney Museum's distinctive windows.

Several photographs of Schmidt, a.k.a, *the woman*, looking out a window reprise a theme that was common in nineteenth century painting (and occasionally appeared in the twentieth; see Salvador Dali's *Woman at the Window*). This subject had a lot to do with the way women were regarded in the past, as domestic creatures who did not belong outside but may have longed for something beyond the hearth. More than two thousand years ago, Euripides wrote, "A woman should be good for everything at home, but abroad good for nothing", a sentiment that reverberated across centuries. Schmidt's photographs

pick up on the history of women's roles and how they were seen, commentary informed by both art history and sociology.

At the same time they can be seen as metaphors for photography itself. Looking, looking – what else would a photographer do? (Coincidentally, the first known photograph is an 1826 view out a window by Nicéphore Niépce.) From the beach Schmidt looks out to sea, a subject practically owned by Caspar David Friedrich in the nineteenth century. From the corner of a house Schmidt looks out at a field. What is beyond our constricted personal compass, or beyond even our vision of our little life? Earth-bound photography does not, cannot answer, nor can painting (which tries hard); a camera can only pose the question and picture the wish to venture farther than the place where our feet are planted.

Schmidt's extensive catalogue of implied genres includes mysteries aplenty. In *The turquoise Room*, she hides behind mosquito netting, her child is practically deconstructed by movement on film, and the very pictures on the wall are carefully wrapped and entirely covered from view. Whatever goes on here, and why? And what is Schmidt doing in the picture where she is dressed in red on a heap of sawn-up logs? She can scarcely be wandering across this hassle of wood. Her large, bright figure rising into the sky and her wide-spread legs declare her dominance, yet she has no arms: a conqueror without adequate means.

The narratives these photographs propose are open-ended, even open sided, half a story without a perceptible closing half. They raise questions they do not deign to answer. If the scenes that go beyond a mere snippet of autobiography into the region of ideas sprang from her imagination, they ask to enter ours. We may fill in the blanks ourselves or accept these as stories that end with a comma rather than a period. Yet one cannot miss the sense that a woman is mostly seen through a screen [of preconceptions] that clouds her image; she is

unmistakably there but not often fully present. Working on the edge of ambiguity, Bastienne Schmidt can drive a point home still.

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ⁱ Quotes are either from notes that Schmidt herself made or from interviews with VG in May, 2010.

Full disclosure: I wrote the introduction to this 1997 book published by Stemmler.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=23064> The information is from a preliminary report, based on a sample sample of 42 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, and Europe. Retrieved May 20, 2010