



Bastienne Schmidt: Still at Home
By Isabel Carmichael

(March 17, 2011) “I am an archaeologist’s daughter, with different boxes all with project ideas in them,” Bastienne Schmidt said recently of her arsenal of future work plans, which range from researching old-fashioned beauty salons to exploring cemeteries and regional American funeral rituals.

Ms. Schmidt, an artist, has been living in Bridgehampton with her husband, Philippe Cheng, a photographer, and their two sons since 2001.

Born in Munich, Ms. Schmidt has, in a sense, been excavating the trajectory of her own life through her photography and painting. Because her father spent so much of his working life as an archaeologist in Greece, she, her mother, and her four siblings spent every summer there with him from the time she was 3 years old.

Traveling so much with her family helped teach her to observe things from different sides, which gave her the flexibility to adapt to different situations. She finished school in Greece, studied anthropology in Munich for a year, and then went to Perugia, Italy, where she studied painting for four years and lived for another three.

When her father died at 58, Ms. Schmidt was deeply shaken and, even though her own family had an intense two days of intimacy during which they washed his body and prepared it for burial, she felt she needed to understand how other cultures dealt with death. That resulted in her researching and writing “Vivir la Muerte” in 1996, her first book. Although she was fluent in Spanish, which helped her get permission to photograph some fairly gritty scenes of funerals and Day of the Dead celebrations in Latin America, it was a bit sketchy at times to be a young woman traveling alone there, she said.

“I wanted to prove to myself,” she said, “that I could be as tough as a man by looking at certain things. I had to find my own challenges.”

Her second book, “American Dreams,” published in 1997, dealt with her move to this country at 25, and her attempt to make it home. Years after the wall came down in Germany she published “ShadowHome” in 2005, which explored her impressions during several trips back to the place she’d been born.

Her photographs, which reveal her own thoughts and feelings about identity, home, and displacement, are reminiscent in a way of Diane Arbus, whom she was inspired by, she said. “The camera is like a prop and you put yourself in situations you wouldn’t have without it; the camera becomes an excuse to put yourself in those places and learn about something you’re curious about.”

Since she and her husband moved to the South Fork, she said, “It was the first time I felt I really settled down to build a house together and have children together.” She met Mr. Cheng through a colleague at Magnum Photos and, after being friends at first, when they met five years later, they stayed together and married.

“I thought it was an advantage not to have roots, because you’re not in this spider web of responsibility, but then you see it’s really a nice thing.” This year Ms. Schmidt’s fourth book, “Home Stills,” was published. It is partly an ironic commentary about popular culture, she said, in which the concept of housewife is portrayed in an unreal way, like the movies in which women are depicted as marginal characters.

Not that much has changed, Ms. Schmidt said, in terms of social structures or society as a whole where female identity is concerned, even if a lot may have changed in terms of intimate family life — for example, men’s increased involvement with chores and in their children’s lives.

Ms. Schmidt dances a bit in this book between the cozy aspect of women’s lives at home — the idea of domesticity as portrayed by Vermeer — and the “escapist fantasy of a woman to leave, to step out of her life for a while,” she said. The reality, as she sees it, is that women spend much of their day alone and that they have a lot of ambivalence that is not supposed to be talked about. There is a thin line: “We don’t want special treatment because we want the same opportunities as men; on the other hand. . . .”

In “Home Stills” Ms. Schmidt shows the division between public space and domestic space. “Once you’re in that domestic territory,” she said, “you rediscover the value of the objects you have to deal with in your daily life.” She said that even though she is the woman pictured in most

of the photographs in the book, they are more like conceptual self-portraits in which she is standing in for the universal female. Permeating the book is the duality of being inspired by the items in daily life and feeling trapped by life's bleakness and repetition.

When she was living on Staten Island just before moving to Bridgehampton with her family, having her studio in a separate place made her feel much more pressured. When she and her husband built their house in Bridgehampton, one of their goals was to "create a place where we could work and have a family," she said.

In addition to her work on this book, Ms. Schmidt has been painting and drawing a lot in the last eight years. She uses acrylics and fabrics she collects — used sheets — and incorporates them into her paintings. She has also done silhouette drawings using monotypes on top of tracing paper and acrylics and espresso, which produces a nice sort of bleed.

There is a lot of layering in this work. It starts out as one thing, and through a slow progression, something else is revealed. It's a theme that she carried over from her "Home Stills" photographs, she said, "thinking you are seeing an apparent reality, but if you look more closely, you'll see something else."

Each of her projects takes four to five years to finish. A dummy for her latest book, "The Topography of Quiet," includes more of her paintings and drawings. The book is a redefinition of her own sense of topography, "condensing all the different places I've lived, and compressing and reinterpreting the experiences I've had," she said.

"I had to go out and discover by trial and error that a nice little garden can be satisfying. I have come full circle: If I wouldn't have been able to have those other experiences, I wouldn't have been able to appreciate rootedness."

A show of photographs from "Home Stills" will be on exhibit at Harper's Books on Newtown Lane in East Hampton from March 26 through May 8.

