

## Women's Studies **HOME LIFE**

**BASTIENNE SCHMIDT** EXPLORES SUBURBAN LIFE WHILE USING HERSELF AS A STAND-IN FOR THE UNIVERSAL FEMALE. **BY JACQUELINE TOBIN**



For the past five years documentary and fine art photographer Bastienne Schmidt has explored female identity by incorporating drawings, photographs and film stills into a project she calls *Home Stills*. This month Berlin-based publishing house Jovis releases a book of the same name in which Schmidt explores various domestic roles and gender stereotypes through her own character portrayal of a housewife.

"This work deals with layers," Schmidt explains. "It's about looking through something and not being able to see it clearly.....Women have a lot of different angles and complexities to understand."

Schmidt's photographs, are set along the stretch of U.S. Route 27 that spans from Patchogue to Montauk on New York's Long Island, near where Schmidt lives currently with her family. The series was motivated by two factors: "One was that me and my family moved out to this incredibly beautiful landscape from Manhattan nine years ago," she says, "and the second was this notion of suburbia and following the American Dream, where you have your house, you have your car and you have your family. It was really a shift in terms of how to see the world through artistic paradigm versus how it really shifts."

This is not the first time that the German-born Schmidt who arrived in America as an immigrant at age 25, has explored changes in her own life through project on identity, belonging and displacement.

Her first book *Vivir La Muerte* (1995) focused on how Latin American societies deal with death and dying after she experienced the passing of her own father. *American Dreams*, (1997) she says, was about



trying to make this country home after she left Germany. And the award winning *Shadowhome* (2005) explored what it meant to return home after she documented several trips back home to the country of her birth.

In *Home Stills*, Schmidt appears in a variety of domestic scenes- including in a laundromat, a beauty salon, and even someone else's home- as a way of conveying the idea that "as women we need to blend into different roles and we have been very well trained over time to accomplish this duality."

This past September the Daytona State College in Daytona Beach, Florida, debuted 70 pieces from Schmidt's project, including 14 drawings. Says museum director Kevin Miller, who saw first some of Schmidt's images of the project in 2008 and was familiar with her award winning *Shadowhome* book, "This project has a logical continuity conveying Bastienne's (ongoing) notion of examining identity."

He continues, "*Home Stills* is a very deeply felt and personal examination of her life, but at the same time it is a curious thing that she is in the images because these are not really self portraits.... She assumes the role of the protagonist here, depicting the role of Everywoman of society."

Many of the works draw on historical art as a reference point. An image that shows Schmidt sitting in a kitchen as the light shines through from the outside- a world she is isolated from- was inspired by Dutch artist Vermeer, who painted domestic interior scenes of middle-class life.

In another photo, "Laundry Spiral," which borrows from Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty", Schmidt depicts herself trapped within a coil of brightly colored, rolled up laundry. "Smithson's jetty was built of stones and is a very impressive piece of land art," she explains "but I've taken that and translated it into the domestic realm while using the ironic commentary that women have to deal with laundry every day." Schmidt's dual role as home maker and mother also enter into the frame as her son Julian is shown running towards her as she tries, somewhat unsuccessfully, to reach out and embrace him.

"I like the idea of creating a narrative where you remove yourself a little bit from the scene so you see it from a half's bird's perspective," says Schmidt of the image, which she made by photographing from the



second story of her house. Her home ,in fact, is used as a prop in many of the images as life's " nagging repetitions," as critic and curator Vicki Goldberg writes in the book's forward,"discreetly present themselves:The floor needs to be vacuumed again, pieces of paper must be picked up. What's really at work is entropy, the relentless decline of everything into disorder."

Schmidt used tripods and worked with a digital camera and film camera side by side to make her images . She uses the digital camera as a reference point for framing and angle ,even when she herself was in the photo, which was most of the time, though photos of her were taken mostly from behind, or do not reveal her face. I a few cases she set up the shot and her husband took the shot; for the rest she used a timer.

She also used a digital camera for the 'Film Stills" she incorporated into her project. To create those images Schmidt re-photographed scenes from movies depicting women in a series of minor roles, though she'd rather not say which ones because the whole point ,she says, is to have them remain anonymous. "I photographed through patterns of fabrics, sewing patterns and tracing paper as a way of underlining the invisibility of these characters," she explains. "You cannot really see their faces, you can only intuit a kind of emotional presence of them through the fabric or layer I chose to use." Schmidt's own drawings, which adorn the end papers of the book, depict female faces and figure in various stages of life, and forms of dress.

"I've come full circle", Schmidt says "I am an artist , a mother and a housewife. The goal of *Home Stills* is to show that a life close to home can be as fascinating ,strange and alienating as anywhere else.

March 2011