

# Picture

How do two artists create a happy home among the billionaire hedgerows of Bridgehampton, raise a couple of good kids, and still manage to create captivating work? **Bastienne Schmidt** and **Philippe Cheng** have found the magic keys.

By Mark Segal

**T**HE ARTIST COUPLE of Bastienne Schmidt and Philippe Cheng landed in Bridgehampton not because the East End was, historically, a magnet for artists, but because, like so many artists in New York City, they couldn't find or afford a suitable place to live, work, and raise a family. Or, as Schmidt put it: "It's the classic story of having a kid and trying to have it all."

Although she'd been raised in Germany and Greece, educated in Italy, and traveled all over the United States and the world, Schmidt had never spent much time on the East End, only coming out for an occasional flying visit to a couple they knew here. "You'd lie in their guest bedroom," Cheng said recently, "and realize how beautiful it was here. You could see the stars."

The air, the outdoors, the chance to have some space around them, an intangible sense of possibility drew them. Neither is a landscape painter, but light and landscape figure in their work, which share mystery and moodiness. Schmidt is a photographer, printmaker, and painter, and Cheng is a photographer. A poem by e e cummings is the epigraph in his recently released book, but it could apply just as easily to the work of both artists: "Nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness."

The book, *Still: The East End Photographs*, is more concerned with mood and light and color than with specific details of his surroundings, although you recognize eastern Long Island in the hues and feeling of the images.

"We live in this time where you have to know everything," says Cheng. "And I think we're both interested in

# This





Schmidt and Cheng at their home and studio in Bridgehampton, self-portrait





PHILIPPE CHENG

this other place, which is at the edge and which lends itself to more mystery or questioning or not knowing.”

The photographs in Schmidt’s *Still Lives*, one of her six books, aim for, in her words, “the atmosphere of a Vermeer painting, where certain scenes reflect the quietness of a woman’s life in the house.” Her images of places and people — most often herself, but seldom facing the camera — are glimpses into a world at once familiar and enigmatic.

Schmidt’s most recent book, *Typology of Women*, published in April, consists entirely of individual silhouettes made from cutouts and mixed media on paper. Each outline of a female shape has other figures and marks within it, encouraging the eye to move back and forth from the gestalt of the shape to what’s inside it, “reading” each image as a kind of narrative.

Theirs is a partnership in every sense, as collaborating and independent artists, friends, parents, a married couple. They share a tranquil, angular, modern-white house on a flag lot off Butter Lane with their sons, Max, 17, and Julian, 14. They make their art in separate studios that overlook fields, a nursery, and, at some distance, a few other houses. Several recent spring weekends have been spent visiting colleges with their older son.

Stacked against the walls of Schmidt’s second-floor studio are works on paper, photographs, mixed-media pieces, and paintings, the products of a focused intellect and sensibility that explores identity and space. Her husband’s studio is a

model of organization, with a few photographs on the walls but most of his work in flat files and on hard drives.

“It’s an ecosystem here,” Cheng said. “You try to be respectful of each other’s space and time, because sometimes you do need space to create without commentary so you can find your own way with whatever you’re doing. It is a challenge of course.”

The equanimity of their relationship emerges in their obvious pleasure at sharing their lives and their work. It isn’t surprising that they have worked on an unfinished project together, *Requiems*, a cross-cultural exploration of how Americans deal with death and dying that was initially funded by a grant from the George Soros Open Society Institute.

“We traveled across the country and did some video work and photography,” said Schmidt, who wears her hair in girlish braids but projects an aura of searching intellectualism. “That’s one project we would love to publish.”

While their domicile feels serenely removed from the hubbub of the Hamptons rat race, they have been deeply involved in the community since moving here. Indeed, soon after their arrival in 2001, Julian was born unexpectedly in their house with his umbilical chord around his neck.

**From *Typology of Women*  
by Bastienne Schmidt**

Schmidt at work, above





**Untitled photographs  
by Philippe Cheng,  
2005 - 2011**

## **TEAMWORK**

Independence and collaboration runs through Schmidt's and Cheng's lives. "Building our home was one of the best experiences for us a couple," Cheng said. "The soul of our vision, although fine tuned by mostly practical concerns, remained the same. This vision, of an open and light-filled space that connected us to our family and our art, was the core of the design and this is what informed our decisions."

Advice for couples working and living together? "Unequivocally, you need to honor and respect each other's space, and yes, hard work, and most importantly, a sense of humor," said Cheng. Schmidt added: "To see the overall picture. Seeing our children grow up and seeing our published art books on the shelf, makes me think, how blessed and lucky we are."



“We barely made it to the hospital,” recalled Schmidt. “But everything went miraculously fine. It was our introduction to the community — the E.M.T. workers, the police department, the hospital.”

The nearby Hayground School, which their sons attended, has enlarged their circle and further embedded them here. “The school is an interesting place,” said Cheng. “It’s a cross-section of working people, artists, and it’s a very progressive place. And, we’ve been quite involved with the school.”

One form that involvement took in 2008 was an event they organized with Kathy Engel and Toni Ross, who were both founders of Hayground. “We were sitting at a table having dinner before the election,” said Cheng, of those days before Barack Obama was elected, “and we were saying we’ve got to do something.” They decided to invite women to a field and film them as a “little campaign ad to show that Sarah Palin doesn’t represent all women in America.” More than 400 women showed up.

“The event was essentially a rally,” Schmidt said. “And we did a short YouTube video to draw attention to women getting together and standing up for something.”

After the shoot, they interviewed a few of the women at Tinka Topping’s house and decided the footage was so emotional that it called for a full-fledged film. The result, “On the Cusp,” a 33-minute documentary, features 175 women of all ages and backgrounds speaking about gender, class, race, and their hopes and dreams, in the end affirming that every voice matters.

Schmidt was born in Germany but moved to Greece when she was nine. Her father was an archeologist, and his work — “putting together terra-cotta shards and thinking about concepts of museology” — influenced the development of her art, much of which involves “piecing things together.”

Cheng attended the School of Visual Arts but lacked “the mind-set to really pursue a career as an artist until I was 29,” when he was connected by an educator at the International Center of Photography with Magnum, the photo agency. The couple met when they were both 33, in the darkroom of Gilles Peress, one of the Magnum photographers.

As much as he learned from working at Magnum, Cheng also discovered that the sacrifices made by Magnum photographers were at odds with a fulfilling and stable family life.

“After we got together,” said Schmidt, “we had this kind of clear vision that we wanted to create beautiful art but that we also wanted to have a family and share a good life together. We kind of knew what we shouldn’t do.” ■



Schmidt’s *Hokusai’s Dream*, 2013, top, and *Topography*, 2014, mixed media