

The Sag Harbor Express.

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By Emily J. Weitz



It's one thing to look at the striking images that fill Bastienne Schmidt's new photography book, *Home Stills*. It's quite another to sit side by side with her and go through the book, one page at a time, and pick her mind about what she was thinking when she captured these moments, which stand alone almost as powerfully as they do together.

When Bookhampton hosts a book signing with Schmidt next Saturday, the public will have the opportunity to do just that. The artist plans to take guests through a guided tour of the work, revealing a multi-dimensional significance to each image.

Schmidt has work on exhibit at some of the most prominent museums and galleries in the world, including MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, and the International Center for Photography in New York. *Home Stills* is Schmidt's third book, and, like her other works, it addresses the concept of home. But each book is starkly different, influenced wholly by the different stages of Schmidt's life.

American Dreams is about trying to make this country — which was foreign to German-born Schmidt — home. *Shadow Home* is about Germany, “which I left when I was nine,” she says. “It’s about departure from home.”

But *Home Stills* offers yet another take on the recurring theme.

“*Home Stills* was this coming home, when you create a family you create a home regardless of nationality — you create a home with another person... I’ve come full circle,” she says. “I am now a mother and ‘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.”

It’s the way she looks through the camera that makes it fascinating. Schmidt finds beauty in a toy soldier, symbolism in the snake-like tube of a vacuum cleaner. But perhaps the most powerful technique that conveys her message is in the layering.

“My work deals with layers,” she says. “Looking through something and not being able to totally see it clearly... Women have a lot of different angles and complexities to understand.”

To achieve this, Schmidt often photographs herself as the “everywoman.” You never quite see her face, whether she’s looking away or obscured by some carefully chosen fabric like a doily, a sewing pattern, or colorful yarn, as seen in “Strings Attached.” This layering, she says, represents “hiding of the real personality because you only see a fragmented image.”

This fragmented image, the silhouettes and shadows she plays with, convey the woman that is there and not completely there.

“I think it touches a deep chord with women today,” she says. “The emancipated woman — we want to have our fulfilling careers and be with our children... I create a character that’s a stand-in for many women. Women need to be very flexible with their roles,” she says.

Schmidt explores these roles — the sexpot, the little girl, the career-woman, the mother — not only in her photography but with other forms of expression as well.

“I like the personal narrative you can create in a book. I incorporate drawings, photos and film stills. I collect sources and then use time as a process to distill things,” she says.

In order to capture the images she wants, Schmidt uses tripods and works with a digital camera and film camera side by side. She uses the digital camera as a reference point, and this way she can be sure she’s gotten the right angle, even when she herself is in the photo.

“I also love the half-bird’s eye,” she says, pointing to a shot of her “everywoman” in a white dress padding through the snow (*Walk in Snow*). “Elevate yourself to see the picture more clearly.”

Schmidy has been living in Bridgehampton with her family for the past nine years, since she and her husband built their house on a plot of farmland.

“Living here you are struck by the landscape,” she says almost as an admission. “And that’s part of it. The clear lines and the strong colors. But there’s a duality to life out here... We live in a place where a lot of things touch each other but you have to look carefully to see what it means.”

Schmidt references a photo where her “everywoman” sits on a funky old chair in a thrift store in Patchogue (“The Yellow Dress”), and another where she walks past a Latino man standing in a giant hole on a tree farm (“Tree Farm”). These are aspects of our culture that can’t be captured by landscape alone.

“Sometimes I just roam around looking for old beauty salons or laundromats, strip malls from the 1970s. I find reminiscences of popular culture that treated women in a certain way. Working with a camera, you know anything you document is going to be gone one day. I am just recording the pre-eminent death.”

Bastienne Schmidt will preview and sign her new book, *Home Stills*, on Saturday December 4 from 6 to 8 p.m. at Bookhampton in East Hampton. Visit her web site, www.bastienneschmidt.com, for more information.