

***Silhouette Vessels* at Ricco Maresca Gallery, NYC**

To take in Bastienne Schmidt's latest painting project, *Silhouette Vessels*, without considering it in a wider context would be a disservice to both the artist and the viewer. Seeing the world as she does—through a broad but uniquely personal metaphoric and symbolic 'lens'—results in work that is both reflexive and reflective. It is *reflexive*, in that she allows herself to enter the framework of a project as both the portrayer *and* the portrayed. In her published photography series, *Home Stills*, she places herself before the camera in the context of mother, wife, domestic worker, naturalized citizen, traveler, feminist symbol and faceless proxy for 'everywoman' in similar multi-faceted roles, bringing drama and political impact to her work. It is *reflecting* on those very life memories, associations, abstractions and extensions of logic that allows her to serve as an artistic 'bridge' between her interior world and the larger one outside—realigning and layering meaning as she creates.

And, that larger world outside—the familiar landscape of her domestic surroundings on eastern Long Island—serves to transport Schmidt to settings that evoke contemplation and isolation, as a counterpoint to her hectic, demanding domestic life. Claiming influence by 19th century German Romantic painter, Casper David Friedrich and the 20th century landscapes of Edward Hopper, the artist's association to contemporary performance photographer, Cindy Sherman, has also been drawn. Schmidt also cites the work of German photographers, Bernd and Hilda Becher, as another point-of-reference in her work. The Bechers' exploration of manmade pre-industrial forms and water towers as sculptural typology serves as a reminder that iconographic art can be found in everyday objects.

In her recent collection of mixed media works, that extension of domesticated logic is applied to a wide-ranging series of historically-based, culturally-charged feminine themes. Schmidt explores the image of women in commercial advertising, in their links to domestic tasks like knitting and sewing, as well as culturally-sanctioned definitions of beauty, fashion and "appropriate" female social norms. Abstracted, layered works on various surfaces convey both the ritual and repetitive tedium of certain household tasks. Drawing significantly on iconic magazine images from pre-feminist America of the 1950s, Schmidt's work clarifies that it's no longer your father's neatly parsed world of objectified women, where they are acculturated to assume ornamental, subservient roles.

That infusion of memory and acculturated role-modeling in Schmidt's work led logically to her latest series of paintings, *Silhouette Vessels*. Grounded in her interest in the shapes and functions of common household objects, she visualizes narratives focusing on humble objects, like used bars of soap, scraps of paper or slanting shadows on a wall—taking time to investigate the shards and fragments of these things that might otherwise be discarded or ignored—and lending their sculptural form a new, surprising dignity. It is this emotionally-based, conceptual view of everyday objects, often reduced to fragments lost by time, that has inspired this most recent series.

She clearly recalls her years as a child, growing up in Greece, and of her father, an archeologist. She remembers, too, the hours he spent patiently puzzling together hundreds of small clay shards to reconstruct an ancient vase, bowl or dish. Schmidt was moved to create a series of watercolors on

paper to symbolically represent those beautiful objects, tied in her mind to memories of childhood and themes of history, a sense of time and place, and loss. This body of work is evocative of her series, *Evolution of Women* (2007) and *Faces* (2008), when feminine identity had, in centuries past, been portrayed as simple, black forms in profile—some full-body, some merely head and shoulders—here rendered to look like historically-authentic cut-paper forms. With this new series, *Silhouettes*, the utilitarian forms of cultures long gone—perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years ago—have also been reduced to stark, abstracted outlines against white backgrounds...but with an important difference.

Based on images of ancient vases, such as *lekythoi*, *amphorae* or *kylixes* in tones of red earth, Schmidt feels an innate connection to the idea of ‘vessel.’ For her, as an artist, these myriad shapes form a typology of a specific object, transmogrifying into infinite shapes and colors. In this exhibition, twenty-four variations on the theme of ‘vessel’ are presented. Schmidt explains, “I am exploring a dialogue between exterior shape and the clear outline of an object against a white background—a figure-ground exercise, as it were. A part of the project is the installation of these vessels in a series, where the eye of the viewer can go back and forth between the vessels and notice similarities and differences.”

“The technique that I use is watered-down polymer paints, mixed with pigments and espresso coffee, on paper. The coffee impedes or exaggerates certain color fields and leads to an impression of depth, resembling maps of certain topographies,” Schmidt says.

This method of wet-color blending achieves another dramatic effect—differing from past series—by creating a range of organic, spontaneous color blending, suggesting swirls and pools of life-matter—a life-supporting, primordial ‘DNA soup,’ as it were, breathing a unique character and profile into each work. Though Schmidt’s *Silhouettes* are now encased behind glass, much like her father’s ancient objects, these *vessels* can easily be imagined as once part of a vibrant, living culture.

Understanding the rich symbolism in Schmidt’s *Silhouette Vessels* is to embrace the difference between object and meaning. The trajectory of this multi-media artist remains one of self-reflection and discovery, her most-recent series on paper a revelatory exercise in the layering of memory, identity and symbolism. Once again, Bastienne Schmidt’s work speaks sensitively about her journey of self-exploration and empowerment through color and form, to directly convey a depth of emotion.

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