

ROCKY SCHENCK

PHOTOGRAPHS "FROZEN IN TIME"

by Tim Anderson



The Art Lovers, 1999, Paris

When going over a fine art photographer's résumé I am often taken aback when the listing of previous work includes a Who's Who of Hollywood. Often, that indicates a lack of the articulate eye that "art" photography requires. More than not, it is a snap-and-grab mentality that beefs up a promo sheet with images of box-office kings and queens, princes and princesses.

Not so with Rocky Schenck. Working with celebrities has enabled him to have the personality and patience to deal with the wide variety of situations that permeate his current work. Whether it's waiting in the woods for the perfect moment, or standing in the street until the patrons of a restaurant are "situated" correctly, Schenck knows that his perseverance will be rewarded.

In the forward to *Rocky Schenck: Photographs* (University of Texas Press, 2003), writer John Berendt talks of an image of Schenck's that he was viewing when "I suddenly realized I was looking at the black-and-white photograph for an inordinately long time." Berendt had gone into the gallery in San Francisco intending to spend a few minutes between appointments, but walked away with an appreciation of a photographer whose work "looked like a painting, yet it was hanging in a photography gallery."

Such is the case upon viewing Schenck's work. You are drawn into the image, into the space the photographer occupied when the image was seemingly "frozen in time." But that picture is not frozen, it moves with you, no matter where you go. Like the art of the early



Hollywood Party, 1998, Los Angeles

Pictorialists, his work maintains a strong narrative content. Among the 85 images selected for *Photographs*, many are unpopulated, leaving the viewer the option to populate the image, if desired or even necessary.

"Schenck's landscapes are frequently unpopulated," Berendt writes. "Again, the viewer supplies the people, and the viewer is invariably at least one of those people, if not the only one in the picture."

"In *Information* (overleaf) he shows us simply an information booth, but in his darkroom it becomes a heavenly, haloed, longed-for destination," Connie Todd writes in the introduction to *Photographs*, "where we feel the person behind the desk may very likely be able to tell us not only when to catch the next train, but also whether there is life after death."

Todd continues to describe another haunting image: *Daddy in the Woods* (page 12) is the figure of a man—the artist's father—standing in the woods and shining a flashlight that reflects off a nearby rock. The strong manipulation of the image brings us into another of Schenck's interior dimensions wherein the glowing figures of father and light embody solace and a refuge from a truly frightening and dangerous forest."

A filmmaker as well, his approach to the photographic craft is simple: he records on film what he sees and

experiences as he travels through life. "Although my photographs have been taken all over the world, there is a consistency to the imagery due to the manipulation of both the film's negative and the print's surface," Schenck said to Todd for the introduction to *Photographs*. "I consider my images to be illustrations of my conscious (and perhaps subconscious) dreams, emotions, and longings. I feel invisible when I'm taking pictures. I feel like nobody is looking at me and that I'm in a very private and safe world where I can observe and eavesdrop on whatever fascinates me and there will be no consequences. It's an odd reality, which I cherish."

The images seem like lost scenes from a silent movie, articulating a landscape that is at once threatening, yet comforting in its solitude, a place where loneliness and alienation are offset by moments of intense beauty. Seldom settling for an easy solution in his work, Schenck never quite closes the story, leaving viewers to navigate their own way back to the daylight world.

"Rocky's work is a magic door that allows viewers to access a place within themselves," says Paul Kopeikin who has shown Schenck's work in Los Angeles for many years. "His images are often described as 'dreamlike' and

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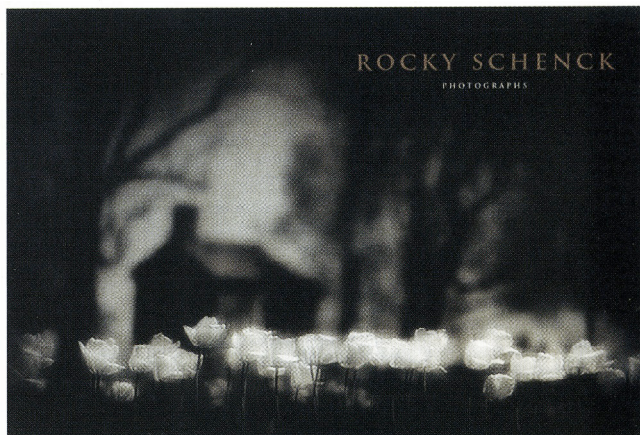
Dresden, 1995, Germany

they certainly are that: and like the best dreams, they are grounded in a reality that only the dreamer knows."

Coming from a lineage of artistry that predestined his stylistic qualities, Schenck's great-great-grandfather, the Romantic landscape painter Herrmann Lungwitz (1813-1891) and great-great-uncle Richard Petri (1824-1857) were each highly respected German immigrant artists, while both his parents were artists who were saturated with a great deal of imagination and enjoyed creating fantasy worlds for their children.

A self-taught photographer, Schenck is also well known for his distinctive portraits of prominent musicians (Diana Krall, Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Stevie Nicks, Sheryl Crow, etc.) and actors (Tom Cruise, Sarah Jessica Parker, Uma Thurman, Nicole Kidman, Nick Cave, etc.). But even with that recognition, his fine-art photography has, increasingly, garnered critical and popular raves as well as strong stature among important collectors with an eye for the dark, romantic, suggestive and intensely creative qualities of the images he nurtures from the start to the finish.

Schenck works with Nikon equipment, exclusively: the F100 camera; 35mm f/2, 50mm f/1.2, and 105mm f/2.8 lenses. He prefers to travel light, and as such limits equipment to what he can carry. ■



Connie Todd is the curator for the Wittliff Gallery at Texas State University-San Marcos.

John Berendt is the author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

Rocky Schenck's work can be viewed at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery, November 15-December 20 2003, with an opening reception scheduled for November 15, 2003 (6:00 to 8:00 p.m.). The gallery is located at 6150 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA. Call 323-937-0765 for additional information.