

IN PRINT

BOOK REVIEWS, INCLUDING A ROUND-UP OF SOME OF THE YEAR'S MOST INTRIGUING PHOTO BOOKS.



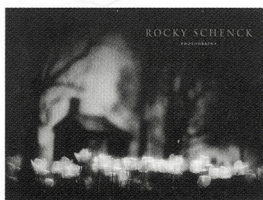
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ROCKY SCHENCK: PHOTOGRAPHS

160 pages/84 quadratones/\$45
University of Texas Press

It is a measure of the curious strength and unity of vision of the photographs in Rocky Schenck's first collection that after you've examined all 84 of them, you feel simultaneously that they're enough alike that you couldn't bear to look at another one, but also that there is no other way of seeing the world than his, that there is no other photographer you'd rather be looking at. Schenck manipulates both the negatives and the prints of his heavily toned black-and-white photographs, which are dark, moody, mysterious, indistinct images of a world where all sharp lines have been blurred, along with the boundaries between waking vision and dreams, this world and the next. In her introduction, editor Connie Todd puts it more eloquently, calling Schenck's world "a fragile country filled with mystery, longing, grace and solitude."

John Berendt, author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and a collector of Schenck's work, adds, in his own introduction, that "there is no noise in Schenck's photographs; his images are steeped in a luxuriant hush." In attempting to name similar artists and sources, Berendt invokes the work of



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Edvard Munch, Edward Hopper and Arthur Rackham and movies like *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. And both he and Todd put Schenck firmly in the Pictorialist tradition, a successor to the Post-Secessionists. To those names, I would add artists as diverse as Edgar Degas and Albert Ryder and movies like Werner Herzog's *Kaspar Hauser*. All this name-dropping is not to say that Schenck's work is derivative, however, but that it is richly allusive.

It turns out that Schenck's painterliness is not surprising; he started as a painter as a teenager, and his great-great-grandfather was a painter of Romantic landscapes. What is surprising is that Schenck has produced an entire other body of work that is the direct opposite of these images. He also has a successful career in Los Angeles, shooting clean-lined color portraits for the albums of artists like Al Jarreau, Diana Krall, Melissa Etheridge and Zebrahead, and directing music videos for Alice in Chains, Van Halen and Donna Summer, to name just a few of his clients. He's also made low-budget experimental films, which would explain the cinematic overtones detectable in his work. I find no way to explain the dichotomy except to say that Schenck is clearly a talented man. And *Rocky Schenck: Photographs* is a fascinating first collection from the Wittliff Gallery series of photography books, published by the University of Texas Press, which has also given us Keith Carter books and 2001's small treasure *Small Deaths* by Kate Breakey.

—Julie Gray