

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



Melanie Schiff, *Two Candles*, 2016

MELANIE SCHIFF

FAIR IS FOUL, AND FOUL IS FAIR

OCTOBER 29 – DECEMBER 10, 2016

OPENING SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2016 FROM 6 - 8 PM

In Melanie Schiff's new photography exhibition *Fair is foul, and foul is fair*, she reprises a lineage of art historical genres—the portrait, landscape, and still life—from the vantage point of contemporary California: a woman's blonde hair glints in raking light, a bungalow nestles behind its overgrown garden, two candles burn. Like a low hum that you feel but can't quite hear, a lingering unease haunts the seemingly benign.

Schiff has long innovated from within, rather than against, a certain classicism. Strategic tweaks in subject matter or photographic technique, (she shoots exclusively in film), kindle quiet insurrections, blurring the lines between observation and dramaturgy, the scenic and the uncanny. Her recent works delve even deeper into inherited genre but rupture its placidity slightly differently: rather than invite idiosyncrasy, Schiff agitates through subtle shifts of light and texture, or via methods of repetition and veiling. Narrative is dispersed, so that the photographs appear together as modular elements in one long, elegiac verse.

In *White, Roses* (2016), a vase of fading flowers is captured with arresting clarity against a clean white backdrop. These same roses reappear in another work, rotated slightly and this time against a cavernous black (*Black, Roses*, 2016). Doubling is a staple of Schiff's oeuvre, occurring both between works and within single images. *Double Flash* (2016), for example, captures her reflection, twinned by multiple exposures and obscured by the echo of flash in mirror. This doubling and veiling resurfaces on a physical level in *Two Candles* (2016). What appears initially as a tranquil still life is complicated by an undulating haze clouding its surface—in fact a thin, almost transparent fabric suspended between the camera and the two candles it observes.

Schiff's use of repetition and haziness cleaves open a gap between subject and object of gaze, disturbing photography's promise of spatiotemporal proximity and eliciting from her viewer a literal second glance, a visual stutter. Her manipulations nevertheless remain within a staunchly material register: hanging a veil, or slowing a camera's shutter, sometimes twice. In a cyclical turn, the familiar is rendered strange by means of the *familiar*, suggesting the aching, mundane materiality of the most eternal motifs—even the rose. Seen twice, Schiff seems to suggest, the symbolic is returned to the real.

This deflated symbolism resonates in the natural elements that recur throughout. We're offered not only roses, but also ferns, leaves, a hawk. The focused botanical gaze of these images recalls that of Imogene Cunningham, but this nature is further gone, in fact quite literally *morte*. The plants are uprooted—dried up or displayed in vases—and the hawk lifeless. Here, as in the image of candles, Schiff invokes the ritual of the *vanitas*: paintings whose symbolic lexicon reminds their viewer of the transience of earthly life. She enters this tradition while keeping one foot in a definitively materialist realm, adopting allegory if only to push it away once again. If thoughts of mortality tug at the hem of these images, Schiff reroutes them to consider a lack at the heart of photographic process itself; as Roland Barthes has famously argued, photography cannot help but imply loss, insofar as it holds it at bay.

Melanie Schiff (USA, b. 1977 in Chicago, IL) received her BFA from New York University, Tisch School of the Art and her MFA from University of Illinois at Chicago. Schiff has held solo exhibitions at Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY (2016, 2014); LAXART, Hollywood, CA (2015); CAM Raleigh, NC (2013); Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL (2012, 2009, 2006, 2004); University Galleries of Illinois State University (2012); Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA (2009); and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL (2007). Her work has also been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, FL; and Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.