

Everyday Beauty

By Fred Camper
January 5, 2007

Melanie Schiff

When Through 1/28

Where Kavi Gupta, 835 W. Washington



*Spit Rainbow,
Lagoon*

MELANIE SCHIFF'S EARLY photographs were inspired by the music she loved -- the Jesus Lizard, Big Black, Sonic Youth. "There was such an emotional urgency to their songs," Schiff says. "You hear a sad song and you feel like it's your experience, and I wanted to make art like that, to make photos like that." But her initial efforts were naively literal, and when she started grad school in 2000 at the University of Illinois at Chicago, she made "melancholy" portraits of girls in their teens and 20s. "I assumed that sad young girls would be interesting to everyone, but I wasn't really making it interesting," she says. "My first critique was a disaster, and I thought I had made a giant mistake in coming here, in pursuing photography." She's come a long way since then. Her 16 photos and one video at Kavi Gupta are visually and conceptually engaging: she often realigns objects as if discovering a new, hidden order to things.

Raised in Glencoe, Schiff sought escape from the blandness of suburban life in sci-fi novels ("I was a pretty big dork about them"). She also wrote poetry and made art but was "really bad at drawing," she says. For a photography class at New Trier she attempted to duplicate PJ Harvey album cover photos with herself as the subject: "I was a huge fan of her and her albums. I felt music was more emotionally communicative than art." She didn't like Edward Weston and Ansel Adams when she was introduced to their work in high school -- but she loved Cindy Sherman. Schiff attended Colorado College, then transferred to NYU, where she took a course with artist Carolee Schneemann, whom she considered "kind of crazy but brilliant." Schiff was especially impressed by Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, a 1975 performance documented on video in which she pulls a scroll from her vagina and reads from it. "I thought, here is this totally gorgeous woman doing this really ugly, kind of crazed primal performance," Schiff says. Schneemann and other feminist artists, such as Hannah Wilke and Ana Mendieta, made Schiff think about "possession and self-awareness and connecting to the space around me." For her senior project at NYU she made a video of herself "committing suicide," then shot stills from it off a TV screen, using the layers of media to filter the scene's emotional impact. In grad school she did a series called "Sleeping Boys," which made men rather than women the subject of the camera's gaze: she photographed three different guys asleep in her bed, knowing it would raise questions about whether they were her lovers.

A year ago Schiff saw an early Sol LeWitt wall drawing in a Chicago home that inspired some of the work in this show. "It was really warm and delicate, like a Zen garden, and really domestic," she says. "These simple, thin lines almost felt feminine." Geometric abstraction might have seemed removed from the feminist approach that had previously interested her, but she'd already been making photos involving formal issues. In this exhibit *Lagoon* shows two glow sticks inside a beer bottle on the prow of a canoe. In *Cases* CD containers form a line at the edge of a rectangle of light on the floor. *Lights* shows three ceiling lights and an irregular, glowing burst of light cast by the reflective surfaces of CD cases -- a study in the modest beauty of everyday things.

In 2004, when Schiff was thinking about connecting the body with its surroundings, she saw a conceptual photography exhibit in Minneapolis that included impressive work by Valie Export. "She had one photo," Schiff says, "in which she lay her body on the city street mimicking the curved curb." In *Mud Reclining* Schiff lies covered in mud next to the rounded edge of a Florida sinkhole. In *Spit Rainbow* she spits water at the camera; her confrontational stance is typical of feminist responses to the camera's gaze while the frame's tilt underscores her taunting persona. But the water makes a rainbow. "Beauty is something that shouldn't be left out," Schiff says. 