

ROCKY SCHENCK

by Bill Lasarow

([Paul Kopeikin Gallery](#), West Hollywood) One of the oldest painter's tricks in the book is to squint. In this way details are blotted out in favor of general centers of visual interest, thus providing clues to compositional structure. Rocky Schenck plays out this cliché to fresh purpose. Schenck picks out extreme contrasts of lighting and powdery soft tonalities to expand the range of responses sparked by an image. The softening of edge historically associated with pictorialist photography, coined a century ago, is attenuated here so as to fire the imagination on a variety of levels. A row of *Nine Trees*, *Hoover Dam*, or guests at a *Party* around together because the central objects are reduced to silhouettes or ghosts. Titles focus the identity of the images, though the images themselves are shrouded, never obscured.

Why ground your subject so specifically when the visualization is rendered so dreamlike, so malleable?

Take *Asylum*, in which a single distant building barely rises into view above a spit of land jutting onto a body of water. The light of dawn or dusk washes most of the detail out of the water, providing intense contrast to the silhouetted peninsula. Above, the sky displays a rorschach test grouping of suggestive shapes. You may read distinct meanings that are intimated by the title: The building may be seen as a retreat, a safe haven; or the landscape may personify an unbalanced mentality housed inside it's confines.

Clarity gives way to ambiguity, just as the pleasant, soft sensuality of surface gives way to a sense of isolation. *Party* makes this explicit. Three shadowy figures stand together on a balcony, while a fourth sits inside, his back to the group, in a chair that is stylized jarringly into the shape of a flower. He doesn't emerge gracefully, but leans tensely forward as though to avoid being swallowed. Or to make a point to an unseen conversational partner.

One more example is *Installation*. A familiar experience for regular art viewers is the passage through a gauzy fabric entry to a darkened gallery in which a single work occupies the space. A solitary figure faces horizontal bands of alternating light and dark in this *Installation*. Considering the lack of detail and volume, there is a stunning sense of space between the visitor and the object (or wall) at which he gazes. The arm and leg of a second figure is just parting the fabric "door" to enter the space--to either share in or break up an encounter that is echoed by your own viewing presence.

These images are adept at the game of open-ended narrative. Schenck's psyche is personally embedded in each of these reverie's, transformed in the darkroom from a "significant moment" into a robust narrative. While they too routinely depend on the feeling of a waking dream, the effect is palpable and there are decided rewards for playing along. You might even try squinting your eyes after visiting Schenck's show--the better to see the stories waiting to emerge from just beneath the surface of the prosaic.



"Installation", gelatin silver print.



"Asylum", gelatin silver print..



"Party", gelatin silver print..



"Nine Trees", gelatin silver print.



"Hoover Dam", gelatin silver print.