

Only the Lonely

Solitude suffuses the photos of Rocky Schenck, while unease creeps through paintings by Daniel Martin Diaz.

By [Margaret Regan](#)

Born in rural Dripping Springs, deep in the heart of Texas, and now decamped to swank Los Angeles, photographer Rocky Schenck charts the lonely byways in both kinds of places.

An alienating "Hollywood Party" gets the same treatment as the desolate "Highway to Independence, California" in photographs on view at Etherton Gallery. Schenck's suite of 16 pictures is part of the three-artist show *Subverted Realities*, which also offers Joel-Peter Witkin's dark photographic tableaux (see "Turning a Prophet," February 2) and Daniel Martin Diaz's painted heresies.

Photographed in black and white, and divorced from hard reality through darkroom bleaching and toning, Schenck's real-life places become psychologically charged mindscapes, soft-edged and shadowy. The Hollywood picture, like many of the others, slides into the sinister. It depicts a media soiree of the cool and rich, to which Schenck evidently gained entrée by virtue of his music video work. The in-crowd in trendy black gathers inside a glass house. These insiders are separated from the outsider on the patio by an ominous white blossom rising surrealistically over the standard-issue California sliding doors. The outdoor man sits alone, his head cupped in his hands, a solitary Rodin "Thinker" in this land of glitz. A brooding counterpoint to Tinseltown's brightness, "Hollywood Party" delivers a Hopper-esque commentary on solitude in the city.

Country roads, as every Nashville singer knows, are no less lonely. "Highway to Independence" is the classic road image, its empty blacktop curving away into the future, or maybe into nothingness. Schenck's darkroom machinations have pierced its dark sky with light, but it's unclear whether a rosy dawn or a blazing inferno awaits the driver.

This sense of unease permeates most of Schenck's pictures. The woods are lovely in "Barcelona," but they're also dark and deep. The forest is of the Hansel-and-Gretel variety, its tree trunks blocking a traveler's passage; danger seems to lurk behind every one. Darkroom bleaching has turned the earth among the roots a soft and woolly white, alluring yet treacherous. A tiny figure in the distance is alone.

Schenck's neo-pictorialism harkens back to an earlier era in photography, when pioneer Alfred Stieglitz sought to establish the newish scientific medium as a true art by making it more painterly. In marked contrast to Witkin's finely etched photos, Schenck's are pictorialist, all soft edges and blurry lights and darks. One deliberately nostalgic picture, "Memory Lane," complete with winding metaphorical road and stately oak, could have been made by a pictorialist 90 years ago. But for all their elegiac quality, the photographs' sense of alienation is wholly contemporary.

Schenck builds his eerie narratives from a visual vocabulary of inhuman architecture ("Hoover Dam" is a study in overwhelming concrete), manipulated nature and isolated figures. Painterly he may be, but it's unlikely any of the fathers or mothers of photography would have come up with a picture as unnerving as Schenck's "Daddy in the Woods." A big man, a fire and a dark forest add up to psychological shorthand for terror.



"Barcelona," a gelatin silver print by Rocky Schenck

There's a sense of creeping unease in the paintings of Tucsonan Daniel Martin Diaz, too. The ostensible subject matter, the holy retablos of folk Catholicism, is intensely familiar to residents of the Southwest. Burning hearts, holy saints, angels and thorns float across his big flat canvases, painted in mixtures of sand and pigment. But in his hands these familiar symbols are hardly benign. They're violent and far grimmer than even the bloodiest of Penitente visions.

The baby Jesus in "Christ with Stigmata" suffers long before his time has come. His hands have already been lacerated by the nails of the cross, and his winding umbilical cord connects him not with a beatific Mother but with a giant heart in flames. Diaz's "Infant Christ" is in danger of being smashed to bits by the malignant angel who holds him. Religious symbols are arrayed like so many instruments of torture around a Sacred Heart in "Nature's Fire," echoing Witkin's S&M Madonna across the gallery.

Diaz is not so much bent upon subverting reality here as he is on demolishing religious myth, pushing it to its absurd extreme. The artist has written Latin phrases in sacred letters around the borders of his pictures, borrowing the authority of the Roman church at the same time that he flails its orthodoxy. Going beyond Hispanic folk traditions, he gives his paintings the flatness of Byzantine icons and his stiff figures the unsettling stares of those Eastern European saints. But the art sometimes gets trapped by its own rigidity. Diaz has been at this project for a long time, and though his pictures continue to disturb, their forms can be unbending, as lifeless as the most inflexible of dogmas.