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## A World Slowly Liquefying

*Rocky Schenck comes home for celebrations of his dreamlike art photography*

BY KATHERINE CATMULL

The photographer says, "My approach is rather simple: I record on film what I see and what I feel as I travel through life." Whether this claim is disingenuous or alarming is for you to decide when Dripping Springs native Rocky Schenck returns home this week for two area exhibitions of his work -- at the Stephen L. Clark Gallery in Austin and the Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography in San Marcos -- and the release of *Rocky Schenck: Photographs* by University of Texas Press.



Schenck shoots in shades of charcoal gray, with a focus so soft that objects soften into diffuse silhouettes. The tonal quality is dim, as if you're seeing through cataracts. It's dislocating; there's no defined edge to cling to. Everything takes on a potentially threatening quality -- What is it? Is it animate? Inanimate? Both?

What's so unsettling about Schenck's fine art photography (he is also a successful commercial photographer and music-video director) is this uneasy sense of transmutation. Objects that should be concrete melt and stretch until they seem organic, pulsing with breath and blood.

To attain these effects, Schenck manipulates both his negatives and the surface of his silver gelatin prints, until he achieves the softened outlines of a slow-exposure pinhole camera -- but with much greater control and precision. Schenck shows us a world slowly liquefying, where reality has become uncomfortably plastic.

Speaking of comfort -- *Near Comfort* is a title that will have double meaning for Central Texans, who may guess that this photo was taken near that small town. We are looking across a field dotted with small white shapes (presumably flowers) toward massing black trees that lower over a small white cottage. It's a fairy tale, but of the darkest, Grimm-est kind. The picture has a glaucomic quality: The blurred central image makes a hole of lighter tones inside a round black shadow, as if we spy on this innocent cottage through a telescope or rifle scope.

In *Headlights*, a rain-sodden dirt road leads into an equally sodden gray sky -- the whole picture so blurred and wet, it's about to drip off the page. But the title draws our attention to the left, to two sharply defined pinpricks of light: an oncoming car.

Schenck has lived in L.A. since a brief stint as an art student at the University of North Texas. He has made a career directing music videos (for artists like PJ Harvey, Seal, Joni Mitchell, the Cramps, Alice in Chains, Annie Lennox, Rod Stewart, and Van Halen) as well as in commercial photography. The latter includes many heavily shadowed, stylized poses, self-consciously reminiscent of Thirties and Forties glamour shots, for stars like Uma Thurman, Diana Krall, and Babyface. In 1990, he began to show his art photography.

Though Schenck's commercial work and his art are certainly distinct (no liquefying edges for Uma Thurman), they do have one thing in common. Both are profoundly shaped, manipulated -- not "natural." There is no pretense of naive realism. It's an invitation into a carefully made dreamworld -- what Schenck calls "illustrations of my conscious (and perhaps subconscious) dreams, emotions, and longings." ■

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"Rocky Schenck Photographs" is on display Nov. 8-Dec. 20 at the Stephen L. Clark Gallery, 1101 W. Sixth. An opening reception and booksigning for the UT Press book *Rocky Schenck: Photographs* will take place Nov. 8, 6-9pm, at the gallery. For information, call 477-0828.

"Rocky Schenck Photographs" is on display through Feb. 15, 2004 at the Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern & Mexican Photography, 7th floor of the Alkek Library on the Texas State University-San Marcos campus. For information, call 512/245-2313, or visit [www.wg.txstate.edu](http://www.wg.txstate.edu).