



-Conference Room-



The painterly lens work of Rocky Schenck

## Eye to Eye

by John Berendt

lets the viewer decide the mood.

Some years ago, I ambled into a photography gallery in San Francisco intending to while away a few minutes between appointments, when I suddenly realized that I was looking at one black-and-white photograph for an inordinate long time. The title of the photograph was, simply, "Conference Room." It showed a boardroom table, some chairs, and what seemed to be a piece of white paper on the table in front of each chair.

spotlight, and it was seen from slightly above and to the right of one end so that it extended diagonally from the left foreground to the middle distance on the right side. In some respects it also resembled a highway or an airport runway going off into the distance. Depending how you looked at it, it also suggested a theatrical stage seen from the mezzanine, with the window on the far side of the table being the proscenium arch.

But those were just subtexts and very

psychological expression of one's confrontation with priorities, obligations, things to be done, decisions to be made, consensus to be arrived at. The uncertainties were palpable, so it was slightly intimidating, at least for me.

The picture now hangs in my house, and in addition to its psychological subtleties, it is visually appealing. Everyone who sees it is arrested by it and comments on it. That is quite an accomplishment for one photograph that is quiet to the point of being silent. This is typical of Rocky Schenck's remarkable and highly original work.

Schenck's style blends photography and painting. When "Conference Room" first caught my eye, I did a double take, because it looked like a painting and yet it was hanging in a photography gallery. Painterly photography. Schenck's work as a whole falls squarely within the Pictorialist tradition, because his pictures have a strong narrative content. Each photograph is like a still taken from a movie that exists not on film but rather in one's memory, with all the fuzziness typical of remembered impressions. The viewer, willing or not, fills



-Edvard Munch's Yard-

That doesn't sound terribly exciting, does it?

But let me go on describing. The photograph was shot in soft focus—or manipulated in the darkroom to look like soft focus, it doesn't matter which. The effect strongly suggested a dream state or at least a deep psychological exploration. The table top, which was really all you saw of the table, was bathed in a linear

personal interpretations. The subject of the photography was, after all, a conference table, and those sheets of white paper meant that an agenda was about to be taken up. The participants of the meeting were absent (their identities left up to the viewer's imagination or memory), and the agenda was not even suggested (also left up to the viewer).

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-DJ-



-Hollywood Party-



-Memory Lane-



-London Hotel Room-



-Mother Playing Solitaire-



-London Dress Shop-

in the frames that precede and follow it. As for Schenck's style in relation to film, I would say early-twentieth-century black and white, and definitely silent. There is no noise in Schenck's photographs; his images are steeped in a luxuriant hush. His scenes are dark, even murky, and intentionally lacking in detail, which frees the viewer to supply his own specifics. The viewer is directed by Schenck but not channeled rigidly into his visions. The movies *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* come to mind, and if those two horror movies seem more sinister than Schenck's photographs, consider his interesting choice of subject matter for

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the photograph titled "Edvard Munch's Yard, Norway." In fact, on the painterly side, Schenck's style is reminiscent of certain aspects of the deeply psychological Munch.

The one characteristic common to all of Schenck's pictures is loneliness, and in that regard his work also puts one in mind of Edward Hopper. I'm thinking of "London Hotel Room," with an empty bed (a single bed, mind you), the TV on, and what seems to be a remote control device lying

on the bedspread; "Hollywood Party," with a silhouetted group of men on one side of a glass wall and a single pensive figure on the other; "Mother Playing Solitaire" showing an old woman alone at a kitchen table, head bent, with the TV set off, a bright overhead light on, and a drink of... something... on the table in front of her.

Schenck's landscapes are frequently unpopulated. Again, the viewer supplies the people, and the viewer is invariably at least one of those people, if not the only one, in the picture. "Asylum" is a lone

house on a small point of land jutting into a lake. It is a lovely scene that would normally evoke serenity, except that the shadowy murkiness of it suggests something is much more unsettling. Here, Schenck's title is especially important. The word "asylum" is freighted with meanings that include such things as flight, secrecy, enemies, danger, hiding, and even a change of identity. Given the picture and the title, one's mind starts filling in the rest. Likewise, "Memory Lane," with its winding road and its big, arching tree; it comes across as anything but pastoral. The twilight setting and the tree's spidery limbs reminded me of an illustration by Arthur Rackham for the story "Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman," which was read

#### THE TICKET

**Rocky Schenck: Photographs (U of Texas P)** is available in bookstores or through [utexas.edu/utpress](http://utexas.edu/utpress) on the Web.

to me when I was a child. Just as I loved Rackham's illustration because it was spooky and at the same time beautiful, this photograph could easily impress a small child as being enticing and yet inhabited by hobgoblins—and it's just a picture of a tree

and a winding road. It seems to me that the challenge—and the choice—in all of Rocky Schenck's work is that the viewer is invited to supply the missing details. This is not terribly taxing; quite the opposite. When confronted by such compelling and seductive images, the viewer can hardly help but respond reflexively, amplifying, expanding, and otherwise making the photograph his own. This compulsion to respond, together with the lovely elegiac mood in all his work, is the real power of Schenck's photographs. ★



-Trouble-