



"Four Shacks"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

Stills from Unmade Movies: *The Haunting Photography of Rocky Schenck*

By Thomas Dworetzky

Schenck's visual style is rooted in his personal past, family roots and the beginnings of photography itself. He was born in Austin, Texas into an artistic family. When he was five, the family moved to a ranch outside of Dripping Springs, a tiny town, now with a population of about 1500, in the hill country west of the State Capital.

He describes his father as a part time cowboy and a full time postman; his mother as a part-time worker for the IRS. They maintained a family tradition as artists, and enjoyed life, parties and the "occasional drink or two." His parents created fantasy worlds for their two children, Schenck and his sister Becky. He got the his name "Rocky" when he was three days old from his sister, who was confused by his full name: Richard Davis Botho Arthur Schenck.



"Gazing Ball"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

Painting ran in the family, so at age twelve he began to study oils, encouraged by his parents. His early work was heavily influenced by the romantic landscape paintings and portraiture of his great-great grandfather Hermann Lungkwitz (1813-1891) and great-great uncle Richard Petri (1824-1857), both German immigrants and artists who moved to the Texas Hill Country in 1851. At age 12, Schenck started selling his paintings.

Schenck became fascinated with both movies and photography and began writing, directing and photographing low budget experimental films. A self taught photographer, he developed his skills taking production stills on the sets of his movies

He attended Dripping Springs School (300 students 1st grade through 12th grade) and a year and a half at North Texas State University (where he was an art major). He quit college to go to Los Angeles thanks to the "fantastic, wild" letters from a close friend, who told him to "stop studying", come to LA and "start doing". "Good advice," he recalls. Today, he still lives a block from his friend in Hollywood.

His big break came in 1987, when a New York gallery owner, looking for new photographers, found him through friends and gave him his first one-man exhibition, which won raves in *Artforum*. A second New York exhibition was equally well-received and reviewed in *Art in America* and *Aperture*. Since then, Schenck's works have been shown in galleries worldwide, and are in various prestigious collections. He also has a book of his work, "**Rocky Schenck: Photographs**" published by the University of Texas. As a professional commercial photographer, he is in great demand for CD covers, celebrity photographs and magazines.



"Daydream"

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"Endless"

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The real story of his mysterious work is as elusive as Schenck himself. While he will not go into any detail, his experiences in a small town led him to yearn for the faster pace and greater artistic freedom afforded by a large urban area. It proved a draw that he could not resist.

"Small towns," says Schenck, "are small towns."

"A lot of things happened during my childhood that provided a context that colored everything about my thinking and vision. I escaped into movies and obviously, into my photography. I learned to keep things to myself and that pushed me into my dreams and fantasies. I started creating worlds to escape to."

Rocky Schenck: The Exclusive BowHaus Interview



"Tuscany"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

BH: How did you become a photographer?

RS: I was introduced to painting at an early age through the work of my great-great grandfather and uncle, who were romantic landscape painters and portrait artists that immigrated to America during the mid 1800's from Germany. They also experimented with photography during it's infancy. I was raised with a great respect for their art and for their lives on the early

American frontier, and began studying drawing and painting to follow in their footsteps. About the same time, I started making short films and shooting photographs on my sets with a Yashica twin lens camera that my father had bought me. I spent hours and hours watching and studying classic black-and-white movies on TV, and I would dissect the lighting in them frame by frame. It fascinated me. This early obsession with painting and film guided me toward photography.

BH: For years other photographers have been trying to analyze your technique, and you are famously reticent to disclose any details. Would you like to tell us now how you achieve your distinctive other-worldly look?

RS: [laughs] A lot of photographers assume I do heavy airbrushing or "Photoshop" on my images! Not remotely true. It begins with being patient and finding interesting things to photograph and then enhancing what is already there on the negative... I don't add different elements. I do some manipulation, but I am not going to tell you exactly what. [laughs again].



"Savannah"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

BH: Just some hints?

RS: I saw a photograph that changed my life. It was a gum bichromate landscape by early pictorialist George Seeley, and it looked like a beautiful watercolor painting or charcoal drawing. The texture of the print was extraordinary.

After doing some research, I learned that the gum bichromate printing technique was very labor intensive, and I knew I didn't want to go that route. I started



"Prairie"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

experimenting with different filters and homemade diffusions in front of the camera lens. Through trial and error, I discovered a combination of elements that I placed over the lens gave the images an extremely painterly quality with as little manipulation in the darkroom as possible. I had found the right balance.

For my most recent show at the Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles, I wanted to experiment with oversize digital enlargements of

my images that retained the same texture, tones and contrast levels of my photographic prints... Joe Berndt at BowHaus came up with a wonderful solution and I was extremely pleased with the results.

BH: You use color in your commercial work, but your fine art work is black and white. Any reason?

RS: Well, it's true, I do no fine art in color. I might someday, but I am still interested in this road I'm on. When I get to the end of that road, maybe I'll start working in color, but now I still feel like there's a lot left to explore in this particular body of work. If I ever get bored with it, I'll try something else.

BH: You are very busy with your commercial work. How do you market yourself?

RS: I just shoot. I've never had an agent for my commercial work. I've done several hundred CD and album covers, many advertising campaigns, and editorial work for various magazines. All my jobs come from word of mouth or from recommendations. For example, I got a call from Australian Vogue to shoot a spread and cover with Nicole Kidman. It was a referral from David Fahey, the art gallery owner, who recommended me to Baz Lurhman, the guest art director of the magazine. Vogue wanted me to do a history of the movies starring Nicole, in the fashions of different eras. That's usually how it happens - people call me up out of the blue and I send them my portfolio.

BH: Your latest show at the Paul Kopeikin gallery in LA was your first venture into digital printmaking. Can you talk about working with BowHaus for the exhibition giclée prints used for this show?

Nicole Kidman Vogue Fashion Spread



©2001, Rocky Schenck



"Pinnacles"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

RS: I was familiar with BowHaus through my friend Nick Brandt, who has worked with them for quite a while. He had nothing but great things to say, and I was very impressed with the quality of the prints that they had made for him. BowHaus did all the exhibition printmaking for my last show. Joe [Berndt BowHaus Vice President and master digital printmaker] is great to work with. We had to experiment a lot to get

the look I wanted and he was very helpful in finding the right paper and getting the tonality right. Maintaining the original film grain in the final digital exhibition print was also very important to me, and the grain you see in the final prints is from the film; it's not manufactured in Photoshop. Manufactured grain looks manufactured. I enjoyed experimenting with the digital process and will probably fall in love with it like everyone else. I am teaching myself Photoshop... but I've got a lot to learn.

BH: What camera and film format do you shoot with these days?

RS: I use Nikons and the Mamiya RZ67 for medium format. All the work in this latest show was 35mm.

BH: What do you look for when you go shooting?

RS: I'll hit the road and try to be very open to whatever I happen to stumble across. Usually, I'll see something and a story will emerge. Sometimes I'll research places where I think I might find something interesting to photograph, but most of the time I just accidentally happen upon an environment or "found reality" that is instantly compelling to me. I can't explain it, but I suppose it's fulfilling some kind of subconscious agenda of mine. I really don't know. I just know when it is a picture for me.

People often see my images as tranquil and peaceful, while I will see it as something altogether different. But I don't like to intrude on their experience of my photographs, so I try to keep my mouth shut, like I probably should be doing right now. [Laughs] And then, a lot of people also don't like my pictures because they think they are too creepy.



"Suddenly"

©2005, Rocky Schenck

BH: Your photographs draw viewers into fantastic worlds, and into a story. How did that approach come about?

RS: I think my early experiences created my style. At the time I escaped into the worlds created by great filmmakers. I feel my pictures are like stills from some old film. But what is the plot of the film? I don't know. But then, aren't we all pursuing self-revelation?
