



Robin Schwartz's daughter, Amelia, poses with a dog in one of her photographs at the Johnson & Johnson gallery.

Evolving from pets to people

PHOTOGRAPHY

Robin Schwartz: Amelia Photographs

Where: Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters Gallery, One Johnson & Johnson Plaza, New Brunswick

When: By appointment only through Nov. 15

How much: Free. Call (732) 524-6957

BY MITCHELL SEIDEL
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For years, Robin Schwartz's *raison d'être* as a photographer consisted of subjects small and cute, doted on by their families and viewed with fondness by strangers. They were pets.

Schwartz has an amazing affinity for animals. The Hoboken resident chose dogs and simians as her subjects, photographing them both in homes and outdoors. Her early black-and-white studies of strays and junkyard dogs show an uncanny ability to communicate with her subjects, who seemed to treat her as a friend. When she moved on to shooting pet simians, the results were equally affectionate yet disturbingly anthropomorphic — the owners dressed their little friends like humans.

Having photographed animals, considered some of the most difficult subjects for portraiture, Schwartz has moved up a level, tackling a subject that, depending on the circumstances, can be just as difficult: a human child. Schwartz's subject is her own daughter, Amelia. A selection of poster-sized prints is now on display at Johnson & Johnson's world headquarters in New Brunswick.

The species of Schwartz's subject matter isn't the only thing that has changed. Whereas many of her animal portraits were shot in black and white with direct strobe, her new works are in vivid color, often in natural light. The images still display Schwartz's keen eye as a documentarian, and her daughter is as cooperative a subject as anything on four legs.

It would be simplistic to call these images family snapshots taken by a proud mother — who also happens to be a fine art photographer. By her own admission, Schwartz is reaching back to her schooling in art history as a source of inspiration for her works. They are composed more like paintings than photographs, the goal being not so much to freeze a moment in time as it is to render the essence of a subject or set a scene.

"Amelia in the Flowers" has the little girl standing in the midst of bushes that practically envelop her, the pointy green leaves coming up to her shoulders before giving way to narrow magenta and purple blossoms. Blue and white sky takes up about one-fifth of the image at the upper right side of the photograph, its limited exposure making the plants seem even taller.

"Amelia and Nora" hearkens back a bit to Schwartz's canine work, her white-clad daughter placing her left arm around a dog that looks straight at the camera. The girl's serious face is framed by curly brown hair, the dog's hairless pink and gray snout framed by long strands of gray and white fur.

The girl emerges from water with jewel-like sparkles in "Amelia and Hope," a backlit image featuring concentric circles around both her and the dog to her left. The reflected sunlight seems to bounce off the water just below Amelia's shadow, as if she is its source.

In lesser hands, these images might come off as a vanity production, but Schwartz manages to maintain a sense of neutrality in the presentations.

In her daughter, Schwartz may have found the perfect vessel for her artistic expression. "My daughter, Amelia, is my priority in life and art. She is my muse, my co-conspirator, my tormentor, and my bliss," she writes in her artist's statement. As Schwartz's partner in crime, she is the ideal foil.

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