

REVIEW

One of its youthful model's favorite photos is "Amelia, Elmo and Abu (Jumping Lemur)," shot by Amelia's mother, Robin Schwartz, and on display at the Hunterdon Museum of Art in Clinton.



Feelings of intimacy

ART

Portraits of Amelia

What: Photographs by Robin Schwartz; also, "The Elements: Earth, Fire, Air, Water," an annual show of artist-made books, and "Folio 2X12"

Where: Hunterdon Museum of Art, 7 Lower Center St., Clinton

When: Through Oct. 16, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays

How much: Contribution requested. Call (908) 735-8415 or visit www.hunterdonmuseumofart.org.

BY DAN BISCHOFF
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

If there is a quality that unites the three disparate but oddly complementary shows of contemporary art now at the Hunterdon Museum of Art, it would have to be intimacy.

Large-format photos taken of a little girl by her mother, a show of books made by artists, and prints made by a dozen artists each from New Jersey and Germany may sound like very diverse subjects, but they are all about human intimacy, a homey exchange of tender feelings.

Well, pretty tender. Robin Schwartz, who lives in Hoboken and teaches at William Paterson University, is showing 22 chromogenic prints taken of her now 6-year-old daughter Amelia shot over more than half her life, most of them posed with animals. Many are of easel-portrait size, like "Amelia and Jacob" (2003), in which the little girl holds a hairless Siamese in her lap that looks out at us with ancient, pitiless red eyes.

It helps that Schwartz has such a poised and ready model. Amelia has one of those round little heads that are lit with big blank blue eyes that look like matter-of-fact wisdom. Her response to the animals lends a mythic quality to the pictures. That, and Schwartz's sharp and pristine photography, with its remarkably clear depth-of-field that

catches the glints in Amelia's baby-blues and the ruffled fur on a deer's rump or the scraggly eyebrows on a chimpanzee.

Most of these pictures also have a kind of narrative aura because of the animals, as if they were taken on a tightly controlled, choreographed set. "Amelia, Elmo and Abu (Jumping Lemur)" is a personal favorite, probably because we see Amelia's deep eyes from beneath a fringe of fur on a lemur's belly — and, as it happens, it's Amelia's favorite, too.

"Amelia tells me her favorite pictures, and it is usually because she's holding a particular doll or something in it," Schwartz says. "She says she likes this one best because Abu (that lemur) is in it, while to me it's an old, documentary-style photo."

To look at a photograph you are in and not see yourself but the monkey or doll or bird with you — it's the very definition of being 6 again. There is something compositionally 19th-century about these pictures. Schwartz is an unusual talent.

The annual artists' book show, "The Elements: Earth, Fire, Air, Water," fills the second floor of the museum with some 54 takes on the theme of intimacy, ranging from a hard cover book with a single page printed with a single poem inside to a knitted, glittery fabric stretched on a frame. No matter what they are shaped like, artists' books are an intimate form. They imply the leisure to enjoy a compact, unfolding art experience you can hold in your hands.

Like any readable book, they imply an interiorized dialogue between the audience and the artist, because artists' books do tend to make direct statements. The truth of this is obvious in pieces like Upper Montclair artist Catherine LeClerc's "Women of War," a scroll silk-screened with pictures of women killed in the War in Iraq on Terror (each is given wings) and partly unrolled on a low-lying pedestal. Or with Watchung artist Jean Stufflebeem's "Burning Book," whose ruffled scarlet pages are cut to spell the word "Passion."

Artists' books can be unfolding sculptures, too, like Clinton bead artist Donna Lish's "Subtext: Eruption," the stitched synthetic fabric mentioned above that is stretched over its own armature in one corner of the gallery. There are several striking examples of this formal freedom, none more total than Sayreville artist Julie Harris' "Banished Book," which consists of many blank pages of handmade paper spined by an armadillo's shell.

Forgoing print altogether is clearly the most radical interpretation you can make of an artist's book. Like "Jersey Tomatoes" by Rocco Scary of North Caldwell, a sort of disassemble-able box made of handmade paper, steel and found objects that unpacks to create four symbolic fragments of the Jersey landscape that correspond to the elements: fire at an oil refinery, a water tower, farmland and air pollution.

The first artists' books, arguably, were studio notebooks. They evolved into bound volumes about vision and anatomy, and then became spiritual diaries. Contemporary artists' books are very much in the spirit of this last trend, but eager to do so in pure form, without text. Looking at Stuart and Susan Topper's "Personal Journals, 1970/2000" — a sealed glass vessel filled with the ashes of the Metuchen artists' notebooks — you feel they've already gone through the whole process and come out the other side.

This is only a sample of the more than 60 objects in "The Elements," juried by Maria Pisano, all worth a look.

"Folio 2x12," on the museum's third floor, started when artists from the Printmaking Council of New Jersey in North Branch visited their counterparts at the Berlin Arts and Cultural Exchange in 2001. The New Jersey council then invited the Germans to work with them in North Branch in 2004. That cultural exchange produced 200 prints from which this show has been drawn.

This show is also definitely worth the trip up three flights of stairs.

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