

Melanie Schiff BY ELIJAH BURGER

Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago IL
December 1, 2006 · January 28, 2007

In her recent solo show at Kavi Gupta, “Underwater Photographer,” Melanie Schiff reflects on today’s around-the-clock lifestyle and its hangover. In *Emergency* (2006), a bottle of Jack Daniels sits on the edge of a table inside a screened porch. The sun blazes through distant foliage, its warm orb positioned at the mouth of the bottle, like an escaping genie of light. However transcendental in appearance, though, with its dusky sunburst and out-of-focus grid of trees and sky, it is still just a bottle of Jack, snapping our attention back to its humorous “Emergency” marker tag.

Untitled (bottles) (2005) goes one further, showing two beer bottles balanced on each other in a largely empty room traversed by patches of sunlight, with shards of broken mirror littering the floor. The play of reflected sunlight between the mirror shards and green bottles makes obvious reference to the medium of photography, but here Schiff parses such technical aspects of chiaroscuro and transparency with metaphorical overtones, all contributing to the melodramatic effect of two fragile vessels precariously tipped end to end in a field of sharp jagged edges.

Looking at Schiff’s pictures makes one keenly aware that space is never quite empty, but filled with light, air, time—not to mention dust motes, rain drops, and other particles flecked on the lens of our vision. In two separate self-portraits, *Spit* and *Spit Rainbow* (both 2006), she sprays water out of her mouth at the camera, making the in-between space visible with water spray in the first photograph, and a rainbow in the second. Seeing the rosier side of spit counts as a particularly ham-fisted gesture, but a shade of irony acts as final amulet against Hallmark sentimentality.

A similar conceit can be found in two photographic references to Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* (1809-10), frequently used in art history classes to illustrate the sublime. In *Lagoon* (2006), a beer bottle containing two glow sticks is perched on the stem of a canoe, beyond which is the shimmering lake surface. The absence of a horizon line combined with the silvery, sky-reflecting water generates a mystical, Turner-esque impression, which, though partly offset by the beer bottle, remains true to romantic feelings of intoxication before a spectacular vista. In *Underwater Photographer* (2006), the artist stands chest-deep in a sea-like expanse of Lake Michigan, aiming a camera back at the camera taking the picture (and by extension, her imagined viewer). Like Friedrich’s monk, she is dwarfed by the vastness of sea and sky, but this time, not content with merely being a spectator, the figure is turned toward us, having waded far out into the water. The sublime, Schiff seems to say, is to be found in the froth and fret of experience, not across some unassailable gulf.

Perhaps most emblematic of the power of wide expanses of water over the human (and photographic) imaginary is Schiff’s *Perfect Square* (2006), a looped DVD shot underwater, the camera aimed upward where a small figure attempts to swim a perfect square. At the center looms the blinding sun, imparting an overall cosmological tone to this green underwater world. The swimmer’s imperfect square draws a frame around the burst of light, fashioning an apt metaphor for both Schiff’s photographic practice and her light-searing quest for spiritual communion.

JULIA PAGE, /Waiting for (), 2006, VIDEO INSTALLATION DETAIL, 11:52 MINS. COURTESY LIZABETH OLIVERIA GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

Julia Page BY JACQUELYN DAVIS

Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery, Los Angeles CA
November 4 · December 22, 2006

Julia Page

Through three video installations, Oakland-based artist Julia Page formulates a compelling hybridization, inter-splicing—word for word—CSPAN footage of speeches on the floor of the U.S. Senate with the final act of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1954). Page’s “Waiting for (), a tragicomedy in three acts” thus reflects or protracts an off-kilter, stifling era-in-waiting. The title video eschews presidential donkeys or elephants, instead choosing to adore—perhaps to appear docile at a time when America no longer risks open government but blindly embraces the violence of the absurd—an oversized, crooked, if somewhat heroic tree standing alone in the middle of the gallery. In an obvious Beckettian parody of Bush and his talking-heads entourage, behind this solitary barked figure lie two vertical rectangular monitors—the left representing Estragon, the right Vladimir—displaying confused yet pseudo-confident vestiges of multiple tele-voters to come. Apparently senators are re-elected based on recent CSPAN appearances, questioning whether any of them are ever thrown out for purely political reasons.

Accompanying *Waiting for (), a tragicomedy in three acts* (all work 2006) is the video projection *Oration*. In Oliveria’s peripheral space, words from Senator Robert Byrd’s 2002 speech regarding the Homeland Security Act are projected onto a large screen, accompanied by their imagined musical equivalent, the totality translated into a MIDI score for the viewer. In addition, Page has composed various audio experiments, inter-splicing more recent political speeches for a take-home compilation.

Page admits to being influenced by the performance methodology of Anna Deavere Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and*



Other Identities (1993), that of simultaneously playing a diverse range of characters while also staying in dialogue with oneself. Yet Page deliberately constructed “Waiting for (), a tragicomedy in three acts” with the conceptual inverse in mind, that of a collective coalescing to form one universal character. It is questionable whether or not both creative techniques reflect the same existential conundrum, for what can one possibly think of established ends and means, of the classical victim-hero dialectic, when perceived tyrants can still be summarily hanged under the cloak of a videophone “streaming”?

Page pays homage to John Cage, the sound avant-garde, and Theater of the Absurd, endlessly sampling those politico-cultural byproducts that disgust the aware and placate the compliant. Added to her target list is the uniquely American politician-as-puppet (and/or trickster).

One can’t help but connect the biological term “rogue” to Page’s eBay-style politicians. At the same time, her rhetorical focus conveys a sinister message for those looking to an imaginary collective for convenient answers, to Godot’s much-anticipated arrival. For those sensitive to a larger, more complex picture of violence as dictated by techno-political phonemes and morphemes, one will be waiting in vain for any prepackaged solution from Page.