

MERCER UNION

Kevin Schmidt *Fog*
Matthew Suib *Cocked*

9 March - 16 April 2005 Opening: Wednesday, 9 March, 8PM

Artist Talk **Matthew Suib**, Wednesday, 9 March, 7PM

Artist Talk/Performance **Kevin Schmidt**, Friday, 8 April, 2005, 7:30PM

Images Festival Closing Party **Friday, 15 April, 2005, 9:30PM**

Front Gallery

Kevin Schmidt *Fog*

Fear and Falsehoods

Despite the number of times I find myself in the woods on camping trips with friends, or on an afternoon run alone, without fail, a twinge of fear is evinced in me at a rate directly proportionate to the setting of the sun and onset of darkness. Like a Pavlovian response, induced at an early age by scary tales and horror films, I will forever irrationally link the woods at night with potential threat. The movies have won.

Since the late '70s, Vancouver has been known as Hollywood North, in part because of its chameleon-like ability to offer urban, rural, ocean, lake, and mountain settings all within an hour's drive. That such a striking diversity of 'sets' are available within a close proximity, and at considerably less expense than its namesake further south, has led to Vancouver and its surroundings masquerading as various American locales in films (primarily low-budget B-movies) and television series.

Fog, Kevin Schmidt's nod to Hollywood North and the Vancouver School is clear in the overlapping investigations into light and nature, employing narrative film language to exaggerate the West Coast's postcard perfect-ness, and the dichotomy between real and artifice. In particular are the associations to Rodney Graham's 'lighting events', his *75 Polaroids* (a photo series taken of a woods at night with the camera flash as the only source of light), and *Illuminated Ravine* (that invited participants to walk down a forested valley path late at night illuminated by high-powered lights situated in the treetops), and resembling a movie set, was turned into a representation of itself. *Fog* also recalls Jeff Wall's oversized transparency light boxes and the uncanny quality of filmic production that defines his precisely staged tableaux.

Fog is presented as a series of photo transparencies of the woods at night projected life-size onto floating walls. The night's blackness dissolves into the gallery space, leaving the viewer unable to locate where the wall begins or the forest ends, as the overall effect of the piece destabilizes all sense of depth perception. An intense light in the foreground emphasizes the lushness and saturated colours of the wilderness, and illuminates a dense fog that unifies each scene by creeping along the forest floor, enveloping brush, and convincingly lures the viewer to walk directly into the wilderness with the promise of a continued journey. The West Coast landscape, once more, appears picture perfect and frighteningly real.

Like both Graham and Wall, Schmidt's choice of location, and the use of filmmaking tools, combine to establish a disruption between the real and staged representation, a disruption that only gradually and progressively comes to the viewer's attention. On closer inspection, *Fog* reveals itself to be too perfectly constructed, too eerily artificial: the fog is out of place, and the rear lighting, too forceful and unwavering, that seems to draw from the wilderness a palette of glowing colours that are unnaturally vivid and luminous. Yet, through the use of dramatic lighting and a fog machine, Schmidt not only emphasizes the artificiality of film, but the tendency to augment nature, or what is real, to craft a more 'realistic', hyper-real. Like the special effects in



Kevin Schmidt. *Fog*, Medium Format Slide, 2003

science fiction and horror movies, the more artificial and exaggerated, the more dramatic and frightening nature and the woods become.

The 'woods at night' is a key recurring theme that calls upon the history of horror films, suspense thrillers, and the Grimm Brothers Fairy Tales, among other legends that conjure up associations of isolation, ostracism, monsters and the madness and violence of those who live as social outcasts. In addition, silence, shadows, unfamiliar sounds, and suspenseful music are employed in film and television to cue and amplify the feeling of horror. The success of these efforts depends not only on how well that dread is cued, but also on how well it can draw parasitically from the power of deeply-held anxieties created by these social constructions.

Terror often resides in anticipation more so than in the event itself. The trailers for the 1999 film, *The Blair Witch Project*, were enough to frighten me to seriously consider never again visiting my parents in their country home. The movie was presented as 'real found footage', constructed in such a way that it was difficult to distinguish the film's real fiction from its fictive reality. Creating anxiety prior to its cinematic release was integral, and, along with the film's terror-stricken, hyper-realistic, shaky hand-held filming, led not only to its credible feel, but a visceral sea-sickening one.



Kevin Schmidt. *Fog*, Medium Format Slide, 2003

That the woods, in all its calm, transcendental, and joyful forms, has been so easily transformed through legends, tales, and cinema, gives new meaning to nature's sublime. No longer the 'set' or location where frightful stories occur, the 'woods at night' has become the source of fear itself, eliciting dread through an anticipation of the unknown.

Fog has a sinister, ominous face that elicits a sense of anxiety, yet the lusciousness and illusion of reality still remains inviting. There is an appeal to the adrenalin rush of feeling scared, one that leads protagonists, time and again, to return to the source of danger and fear. In this respect, Schmidt's *Fog* reveals its central contradiction: the closer the viewer attempts to enter the woods, the more their body blocks the projection by casting a shadow that disrupts the image, increasing the amount of darkness and creating a black hole that denies further penetration.

Schmidt masterfully fabricates *Fog* to reinforce these conventions, and supported by horror films' terrorization of the woods at night, his wilderness activates fear and mounting anticipation. Part of the appeal of cinema is the relinquishing of control to a suspension of disbelief. The seduction of horror is, for a brief time, allowing the anxiety of the unknown to assert itself.

Natalie De Vito