

Kevin Schmidt

ACCESS ARTIST RUN CENTRE
February 1st to March 1st

Kevin Schmidt's *Small Waves, Cold Water* was inspired by his experiences at various beaches in Toffino, BC, where he painted and sketched in the cold, fall months from October to December in both 2001 and 2002. His previous work, *Long Beach Lead Zip*, also explored the beach. It was an audio and video piece of a looped song, "Stairway to Heaven," with a backdrop of a deserted beach at sunset.

In this exhibition, at Access Artist Run Centre in downtown Vancouver, Schmidt explores the commodification of surfing. He presents traditional watercolour paintings on seven, identical, laminated white-surfboards with no titles. He breaks away from traditional painting, not in subject matter, but rather in his innovative choice of painting directly on the surfboards. Each of the paintings is positioned on the top half of the surfboards and depicts different scenes of surfers before and after surfing. All of the boards lie flat against the wall, not hung, but on an angle and face outwards. It is almost as if they are a part of the pictures that make them, laying there waiting to be used at the beach. *Small Waves, Cold Water* depicts an exterior setting, yet it is contained within an interior space. Thus, in taking pieces of outdoor sports equipment and bringing it into a gallery setting, Schmidt transforms the ordinary into art. He also comments on how surfing has been commoditized by advertisers and corporations who make surfing a commodity by displaying the boards in a way that transforms them into a sexy product that sells.

Schmidt, in putting these painted surfboards in a gallery is attempting similar practice as advertisers. The way he puts these boards on display and creates painted logos reflecting a surfer-way of life, may comment on advertising tactics, however it also mirrors their actions. Just like advertisers and corporations, Schmidt is taking plain surfboards and creating them into something of greater value and turning it into art. This goes back to Duchamp's *Fountain*, where a toilet is turned into art. With this added touch, the original retail value of the surfboard has dramatically jumped in price from the hundreds to thousands because it is now an art object.

By painting imagery on surfboards, Schmidt, explores the relationship between surfer culture and the commodification of sport, issues that he is interested in. Surfing is much more than just a sport; it is also largely tied to the world of consumerism, through the surfboard as a commodity. Surfing is no longer as simple as a surfer riding the waves, but has become subsumed by consumerism where more importance seems to lie in which brand name board the surfer owns than in the surfing itself. Schmidt's aim is to expose the marketing strategies that are at play in surfing

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11/16/2004

By placing them in a gallery where the boards are not for sale, since they are displayed in a non-commercial gallery. This is a statement of its own, since he challenges the notion of surfing as commodity - where his surfboards are not meant for use, but rather are to be viewed. The way that he uses the painted images on his surfboards comments on this use. He also presents surfers with genuine love for the sport and utilizes that love to lure in consumers. What his work comments on is that on one hand there are these dedicated surfers who live for the sport, and on the other, there are the advertisers who sell this very image to the average consumer who may or may not possess the talent or skill. The advertisers are not just selling the equipment but the preconceived identity of a real surfer.

Schmidt marks his work with water colours and his choice of imagery is not of the surfer as hero, but as an ordinary person caught in the act of preparing or departing from their sport. He is presenting a lifestyle that extends beyond the actual surfing. Instead of portraying these surfers in the water catching a wave, he features his subjects from the view of the parking lot, displaying them loading and unloading gear, changing into and out of wetsuits, or taking surfing lessons on the beach. In creating such images of surfers on the beach and in parking lots, Schmidt appears to be commenting on how advertisers try to sell this way of life through their products. Here the surfer is far more than an athlete, but he is part of corporate marketing and sales. However, Schmidt's way of life is more based in reality than those of advertisers. The glimpse of reality he depicts speaks of achieving a true surfer's identity through hard work and devotion to the sport, not buying the idea of it.

In focusing on logos and the promotion as a way of life, Schmidt is also interested in investigating constructions of identity and nature within capitalist society. Athletic companies tend to draw upon the experience of being in nature and how people spend their life within it are perceived. They create these stereotypical descriptions and create their own perfect athlete and sell this image. The strong theme of man vs. nature that exists in literature, movies, etcetera, where in terms of surfing and other sports, there is something about overcoming nature's obstacles and becoming a part of its power, but this is not presented in *Small Waves*, *Cold Water*. Surfing companies do that a lot, by presenting these fabricated, man in nature conquering the world scenarios, but what Schmidt seems to be commenting more about how they use this theme of getting back to nature. There is something romantic and idyllic about hanging out doors, getting back to nature. Again, it is about being a part of something greater than oneself and leaving the stress of the life we have made behind, the lack of company branding is a statement in itself, since Schmidt is not promoting surfing gear and this is what they are really selling an escape from the routine 9 to 5 rut.

Schmidt sketched these surfers in the fall, when the water was especially cold, and the waves were small. The corporations are experts at creating huge waves of popularity around products that consumers ride on. What Schmidt is doing is trying to draw attention to that and create his own waves,

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smaller but still some sort of movement. His waves are smaller and this brings attention to fact that the ideal waves and weather conditions are quite the opposite.

Schmidt's imagery and medium represent a kind of authenticity, however, he rejects the validity of such corporate imagery through his use of watercolour paint. For example, if these surfboards were placed in the water, these images would fade away and disappear because they are water-soluble. Then each of the surfboards would be a mere replica of one another with no distinction or individuality. Schmidt's choice to laminate the surfboards suggests his wish to preserve his reflections, perhaps as a symbolic gesture towards preserving the sport in its pure form. By laminating his surfboards with these images this work becomes a part of the problem of consumerism because these boards could be bought and sold for use not just as an art piece.

In branding his boards with representations of surfing lifestyle, Schmidt is commenting on how advertisers try to create a kind of authenticity that says if you really want to be a part of this you need to buy our product. As manufacturers and advertisers realize the profit to be gained, sport cannot go unaffected. Schmidt has much to say about this and he says it loud and clear. He challenges the idea of surfing as something that can be bought and sold and helps us to revision this sport in light of the lifestyle and real surfer culture that runs much deeper within it. His choice to paint his images on the surfboards successfully captured this. Schmidt in presenting surfer culture in the everyday has succeeded in bringing the genuine love of the sport back into surfing.

- Ingrid Lass