

Irony Bastards Try Harder Please

Poet Peter Cully on artist Kevin Schmidt's music performance as artist talk

BY PETER CULLEY



DETAIL FROM FOG, KEVIN SCHMIDT

*so irony bastards try harder please
a vacuum can bring on despair*

—Kevin Schmidt
“Whistle Blowers”

A few hundred yards out of Nanaimo, the ferry was locked in a thick mist, the ship's horn (muffled inside, deafening/thrilling on deck) sounding every two minutes with a quick decay, until—an equal few hundred yards off Tsavassen—the fog cleared, revealing the last few seconds of a mother-of-pearl and pink sunset. Ten minutes before that, I'd gone upside for a smoke to find that some perceptual aspect of the horizon's complete disappearance had caused the emerging orange lights of the Deltaport to hang a couple of hundred yards higher in the air than they should have. Very Miyazaki: like some kind of airship perhaps, or the suburban edge of a vast floating city. An hour after that, wandering through the labyrinths

of Presentation House into the velvety alcoves containing the two large projected forest landscapes of Kevin Schmidt's *Fog*, some persistent geographical discontinuity caused the carpet of fog at the bottom of the images to seem to move slightly, to roll. Doubtless the late Jerry Pethick would have known the word for the phenomenon. But there is no doubt that *Fog*'s immediate impact is powerfully perceptual, visceral—the projected image, bright as a cave entrance, enters the brain as in an eyedropper, a little faster than thought. The viewer is drawn in. And there is also little doubt that Schmidt—whose sublime *Long Beach Led Zep* of last year (which has the artist blasting “Stairway to Heaven” on a beach at sunset) allowed the briny tang of the open Pacific to sweep into the musty parking garage of the Contemporary Art Gallery—knows how to work a room, to control gallery space rather than submit to it.

*the critics hound you down the halls
lead them in behind
the gallery walls*

KS, “The Best Way to Start”

Schmidt's prowess was confirmed when, at the other end of Presentation House, I found the performance space where the artist's talk was to take place. It was the cave's other entrance: a brightly lit stage, instruments arranged, awaiting a rock and roll band. I had known since a few seconds after my arrival that Schmidt's “talk” was going to be in the form of a short concert, but the drama and formality of the set-up were still surprising—the steeply banked seats, (cramped, metallic, high-sided in

a regional theatre way), the audience mostly plunged into darkness, the basket of earplugs beside the entrance, an expectant nervousness. Thus before even stepping on stage, Schmidt seemed to have the entire building's *gestalt* sussed out. Rather than registering as an aberration or stunt, the form, space and content of the lecture/concert were linked with the work on display through the use of the bright lights dramatically introduced into the dark, enclosed space. This before—roughly halfway through the set—a carpet of fog started drifting across the stage. Though not yet literally present, the saturated glades of “Fog” floating in some retinal space from the beginning. Walking out under the bright lights to face the audience, it was as if Schmidt were emerging from the communal dreamspace of his images.

*a picture in the dark to pleasure your eyes
so sharp sharp sharp
pretend that it's real*

KS, “artificial supernatural”

Dressed in shirts and ties, with the bassist in a modest dress, Schmidt's group resembled an ensemble from that long-vanished era when punk and new wave had not yet calcified into rigidity, and the shock of seeing short-haired musicians in *Creem* magazine had not quite worn off: a temporary stage of co-operative modernity, modestly evoked. The group's two-Fender also evoked the era, especially during the couple of occasions when the chicken-walk riff of Television's “Marquee Moon” threatened to break loose. The guitar was the core of the performance, its bright, un-

distorted chime evoking “Fog”'s seamless projected surfaces.

*the moon is rising over shoulder
follow the trees along the river
bring on the fog
obscuring all
KS, “On Photographs and Transcendence”*

Schmidt's lyrics, sung earnestly while being calmly projected stage right, echoed many of the concerns and complaints of young artists unfortunate enough to occupy our present unhappy historical moment: a sense of late arrival (*of course you've seen this before/hey where'd the visionaries go?*), a distrust of language (*all the world's a stage/and language's a whore/writing's no good*), educational credentialism (*i faked my escape/from the academy*), and most of all, a desire to return to values of communal spontaneity (*i find myself camping with friends and a fog machine*). But, backed by a number of works of real accomplishment, rich interest and a seemingly effortless command of technical resources, Schmidt's manifestos carried undeniable resonance. At the point in the last song when Schmidt and his projected self invoked the term “irony bastards,” I couldn't help but crane my neck and pan through the crowd to see if I could spot the reactions of any of the numerous irony bastards present (myself, of course, excluded) but as far as I could tell through the darkness, their faces showed little change. But we can be sure that something of Schmidt's bracing iconoclasm clung to them as they got up to leave, even as earlier the fog had swept around their feet.