



ISHMAEL RANDALL-WEEKS & MELANIE SCHIFF BY JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

(Critic)

ISHMAEL RANDALL-WEEKS

One could chalk it up to my background in, and so weakness for, architecture, but it is not every artist who invokes the legacy of at least one of that quartet of high modernist masters – Mies, Aalto, Terragni and, of course, Corb – who manages to pay homage to, while extricating himself from, the suffocating weight of that architecture's worldview, one which took as gospel the idea of 'making' one's own reality. But Ishmael Randall-Weeks, a Peruvian based in Lima, treats that legacy with both a seriousness and a lightness that one has come to expect from the best artists hailing from South and Latin America – where, as we're wont to forget, Modernism found some of its most fertile ground.

A recent series of Randall-Weeks's untitled photo-transfer drawings return to some of Le Corbusier's masterworks, namely his *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles, France, and to the Palace of Assembly and Secretariat Building for Chandigarh, India (as well as to the Carpenter Center on Harvard University's campus, one of Corb's duds). The transfer technique alters the images of the brutalist architecture into rather delicate surfaces that Randall-Weeks then scores and cuts, creating both literal and suggested interventions. That such architectural traditions are present to the artist's mind is equally evident in other collages that draw upon work by Oscar Niemeyer and upon Lima's Palacio Municipal, a mid-twentieth-century recreation of Peru's colonial past.

But it is important to remember that what Randall-Weeks traffics in here is images, not architecture, and this is what speaks to the large-scale constructions that make up another facet of his practice. Pieces such as *Progreso* (2006), *Capsule* (2006) and *Nomad* (2007), all conveyances – carts, carriages, chariots – of one sort or another, invoke the mobility that artists such as Randall-Weeks (like the images of Corb's masterworks of modernist architecture) have come to rely upon. For three or four years now he has moved from residency programme – Maine, Ecuador, New York, Bolivia, Mexico – to residency programme. And as opposed to trying to defy this itinerancy, Randall-Weeks has embraced it; his work is of its place, we might say, given that its materials and ideas are contingent upon wherever the artist happens to find himself that week or month. Little wonder, then, that his most recent work, to be exhibited at Eleven Rivington in New York this April, in the artist's first solo exhibition in New York, has begun to resemble landscapes (carved from stacks of book pages and architectural plans) viewed from 30,000 feet.

MELANIE SCHIFF

Since her first solo show at the Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago at the end of 2006, Melanie Schiff's photography has been received as that of a lackadaisical rocker, an easy producer of images that draw upon the tired life of places and things that are of little interest beyond their service as backdrops for late-night philosophising fuelled by beer and dope. We know this culture by the qualifier of 'youth'. It's a noncommittal, quasi-commercial life, one not exactly at odds with the world, but not exactly at peace with it either.

The problem here is that such readings do little justice to Schiff's achievement as a deft composer – or rather, compositionalist – of light and form. Her still lifes, light captures and other such composed scenes demonstrate a facility with 'that old thing' (analogue) photography that equals even Uta Barth's more technical gymnastics; yet Schiff manages to make her work appear as if it is somehow easily intuitive as opposed to rigorously worked through, which, in the end, it must be. Prints such as *Prism* (2005), *Cases* (2005), *Spit* (2006) and the much lauded *Emergency* (2006) – this last captures the distant fireball of the sun just as it caps a bottle of Jack Daniels in the foreground – reveal Schiff's supreme comfort with the registration of light as such. And her more recent work, black-and-white portraits such as *Natalie I* (2008) and *Sarah* (2007), and the masterful *Untitled* (2008), add to this comfort a *Las Meninas*-type dialogue on the circuit of the camera's seeing, here multiplied by the layering of windows, mirrors and other reflective surfaces within the profilmic space.

On the whole it is elegant and, most important, intelligent work. Schiff's body-in-the-landscape pieces, such as *Mud Reclining* (2006) and *Skatepark* (2008), too-self-consciously evoke the spectres of Ana Mendieta and VALIE EXPORT; but then again, these aren't the worst artists to channel. Nevertheless, it is composition that Schiff understands, apparently, to a very natural degree, and it is by composition that her work will rise or fall – I suspect it will be the former.