

Interior

Jordan A. Schulman

Steve Harp

Exterior



Jordan A. Schulman, *Untitled (Being Patient)*, 2002



Steve Harp, *Ferry* — Bergen, 2002



Steve Harp, *Window, Raufarhofn*, 2002

Interior / **Exterior**

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space ... The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.
— Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1967)

Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positioning of things becomes possible.
— Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945)

There is a certain genius in the pairing of these two photographers. At first glance, their works seem so disparate, antagonistic, even. But this is above all an exhibition about place, and its abstract correlative, space. Steve Harp examines the "liminal zones," or, as he says, "the loci of meetings between the desolate and lush, the human and non-human, the beautiful and forbidding." Jordan A. Schulman, on the other hand, documents the crackling spaces of psychosocial negotiation in his pictures of therapists' offices. He wishes the viewer to "consider the possibilities and magnitude of emotional

dialogue housed within the spaces." The title of the exhibition, *Interior/Exterior*, invites binary thinking. Harp's work is obviously about the outdoors; Schulman's the indoors. Now confound this opposition, and switch it around. Couldn't we posit the reverse? The experience of being outdoors in vast landscapes compels one inward, forcing one to listen to one's mind. On the other hand, Schulman's therapy rooms are places where people act themselves out, presenting to caregivers their carefully constructed personae. The distinction between interior and exterior begins to blur.

In Steve Harp's *Window, Raufarhofn* (2002) the barely-visible glass pane that separates us from the landscape beyond complicates the image in wonderful ways. The glass might be read as the lens of our eye or the lens of the camera, or as a symbol of the photographic project in general. More formally, the murky band of white on the window seems to become part of the land itself. There is a gentleness about this picture that recalls some of the desert landscapes of Ansel Adams, or the Cape Cod imagery of Joel Meyerowitz.

What we are seeing in this exhibition are also historical spaces. The overwhelming reality of Iceland is the land itself, which registers those who have come from somewhere else. It is a palimpsest of arrivals, arrivals for all kinds of reasons, both venal and praiseworthy. The therapist's office, by contrast, is a place to consider the patient's psychic past, where any prognosis means successfully negotiating that history. There's a certain implied cultural evolution between the imagery of the two photographers: from the almost primeval landscape of Iceland, to the highly civilized (though no less savage) interiors of therapist offices. Both photographers engage the way we individually learn to perceive space itself. In his immensely important *The Poetics of Space* (1962), Gaston Bachelard claimed that the experience of intimate, indoor space shapes our mental life, and is even more basic than our awareness of a larger universe. On the other hand, the experience of the outdoors is an individual's first intimation of the sublime.

A lone house is set amidst the vast ocean of landscape in Harp's *House, Off the Ring Road*. Like a tiny boat set adrift (or run aground), it can be read as a symbol of uneasy



habitation. It suggests an ironic heroicism. Harp here demonstrates his ability to illustrate detail — pebbles, boulders, litoral ... the very stuff of the land — within a very tight tonal range.

One thing can be said of the pictures of both of these photographers: they were profoundly "there," which, admittedly, sounds like a truism. Photography is said to have an indexical relationship to the world. Its documentary capacity defines it as a medium. But these pictures demonstrate that their cameramen are staking out new territory, taking their cameras and sensibilities to land- and inscapes that have never before been shot, never seen quite like this. In doing so, Schulman and Harp are working from a venerable tradition of picture-finding-and-making.



Steve Harp, *House, Off the Ring Road*, 2002
Left Top: Steve Harp, *The Interior*, 2002



Steve Harp, *The Liminal Zone (iii)*, 2002



Jordan A. Schulman, *Untitled (Being Patient)*, 2002



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Harp's works are particularly appropriate for an Illinois audience. They recall the atavistic experience of the prairie, the vast, glacial spaces of the Midwest. They also remind us in a meaningful way about the qualities of the land even amidst peoples' fumbling stewardship of it. The tottering horizon in *The Liminal Zone* (iii) dramatically reveals cuts in the land itself. Such a picture documents the very physiognomy of Iceland, its physical identity. Intriguingly, Harp permits the vista to extend into deep space, one of the quintessential aspects of landscape imagery; one of its joys, in fact. Indeed, the success of Harp's pictures are, for all their documentary nature, expressive.

By contrast, Schulman's rooms achieve a different sort of drama. They abound with the profoundly bland (or blandly profound) bric-a-brac of institutional interior spaces. He carefully documents light switches, drop ceilings, light cords, and the like, in short, the invisible topography of professional therapy. In one intriguing picture, Schulman records the intermingling geometry of contours and edges

(corners of coffee tables, sofa arms, tissue boxes, planters, etc.) which together define the landscape of the therapist's office. Space itself seems tied together by these psychically "neutral" features.

That people do not appear in the works of either photographer suggests the importance of the spaces presented. But their absence seems only to confirm their implied presence. Harp's pictures suggest his own sojourn there as well as the history of Iceland's habitation. The title of the series from which Schulman's images are drawn is *Being Patient*, which casts the viewer into the implicit role of being a patient in the therapist office he portrays. The figure is there, alright, and it is the viewer.

Without trying very hard, Schulman's images sometimes bewilder. An image of a glimpse into a consulting room is very strange, indeed. One sees an upturned therapy doll — the only "figure" to be seen in Schulman's work, and for that reason, significant — the golden light and furniture within surrounded

by the smudgy white blurred focus of the window frame. This picture-within-a-picture recalls the visual sleights of hand of photographers such as Lee Friedlander and Ken Josephson. This photograph, however, is clearly more dangerous.

Schulman's interiors are soaked with the evidence of contact. His worn couches, pillows and chairs bear the impress of countless bodies. The air is permeated with human breath, with sighs and anxious breathing. One particularly powerful image shows the intersection of two leather couch cushions. As a trope for human contact it exudes warmth and sensuality. It recalls the tradition of abstract "couples" in modern art, including Brancusi's *The Kiss* (1908) — two blocks of stone, two crude figures, embracing in such a way that they become one. This is a highly charged picture, one that demonstrates how Schulman can infuse the topography of his rooms with a pulse.

The work of each artist elegantly finds its place in the history of photography. Harp's images, though they are of Iceland, recall the



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tradition of American western photography: Watkins, Muybridge and even a bit of Ansel Adams. One even senses a bit of the symbolism of Stieglitz's *Equivalents* in the expressive skies. His art shares something of the aims of the New Topography photography in Europe and America in the 1980s. But as it takes Iceland as its subject, comparisons might be made to the contemporary

photographers such as John Davies (b. 1949, U.K.) and Werner Hannappel (b. 1949, Germany) who depict the same kind of boundaries Harp explores, places where housing and frontier meet, and the limits of visual/political projection into the landscape. Harp's project shows him to be a citizen of the world, as well, not just someone with regional concerns.



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Schulman's photography recalls the clever inversions and self-conscious interiors of Lee Friedlander, as mentioned above. They can also be read as the stage-sets for Garry Winogrand's social landscape, arenas for an infinity of potential situations and interactions. The warmth of his colors brings to mind William Eggleston (b. 1939) and William Christenberry (b. 1936). Fortunately, though, he has resisted that all-too-easy trap when shooting

in color, that is, to go out looking for brightly colored objects. The banal muted teals and beiges are subtly registered, and though the interior design of his offices looks quaintly out-of-date, Schulman admirably avoids lapsing into a mere hunt for kitsch. His almost anthropological interest in human interaction with interior spaces also has a predecessor in Walker Evans' Depression-era photographs. He counts among his influences the

contemporary photographer James Casebere, whose light-filled images of miniature table-top rooms have the same cool light as Schulman's. He also admires the work of his mentors, the Chicago photographers and teachers Alan Cohen and Laura Letinsky.

In the work of both photographers, one senses two mature artists fully conscious of photo history, trying to say something new while masterfully utilizing a rich and venerable language with which to do so. Formal, but with more conscience; social without the shrill agenda. And both artist's works — Schulman's lush but carefully modulated C-prints, and Harp's tight black-and-whites — do not seem to reject the move towards digital photography as much as they make claims for what can still be said and done with more traditional means. They remind us that technology does not necessarily change the most profound questions about what to shoot and why. The sensitive viewer can see the slight shake in some of Schulman's pieces, an effect that adds to their nervous energy, or the fact that he uses only available

light. And one senses that Harp's prints have been chosen from among thousands of kindred images on contact sheets, that what we see is the result of an infinite number of decisions.

In both artists' imagery, there is a willingness to let the viewer have the last word. Like provocateurs, they lead the viewer to certain conclusions without explicitly stating them. As the photographer W. Eugene Smith once said of himself, these are the works of compassionate cynics. Indeed, there is something almost sacred in the works of both photographers. The wide spaces of Iceland suggest ancient ritual sites and the wide spaces of the cathedral, whereas the intimate interiors of the doctor's office make us think of the private chapel and the confining spaces of the confessional. In the end, one senses a funky humanity permeating these pictures, one that is located in the conceptually shimmering qualities of interior and exterior space.

Mark Pohlard is an associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History at DePaul University in Chicago.

Steve Harp is an assistant professor of photography and media arts at DePaul University. He received a B.F.A. in film from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, an M.A. in communication studies from the University of Iowa, and an M.F.A. in photography from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He works in photo media, film, video and installation and his work often deals with questions of travel, place and history. He recently published a book of photographs of the former Soviet Union. The photographs in this exhibition were taken while traveling in Iceland in 2000.

Jordan A. Schulman currently teaches at Columbia College in Chicago. He received a B.F.A. in photography from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an M.F.A. from the University of Chicago. He divides his time between teaching, photography, printing professionally for other photographers and collecting books and music. The photographs in this exhibition were shot inside psychotherapist offices in Illinois and New York. They are part of an ongoing series that will hopefully, in time, represent spaces across the country.

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Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator
Gahlberg Gallery

***Interior/Exterior:
Photographs by Steve Harp
and Jordan A. Schulman***

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