

## In Conversation: Melanie Schiff and Kendra Paitz

Kendra Paitz: You are so invested in all aspects of photography, not only in its history but also how the camera functions both physically and conceptually. Two examples that I think are particularly relevant are *Studio* and *Lemon Tree*. I mention *Studio* because I like thinking about the window of light at the end of a dark room as a camera obscura. And *Lemon Tree* celebrates an effect caused by a mechanical disruption.

Melanie Schiff: I really like that read of *Studio*. And there's also something about the ceiling in it that acts like a bellows in my camera. *Lemon Tree* was made because of a light leak. I use roll film and sometimes when it is rolled loosely, light leaks in. And then I played with it a little.

KP: Your explorations of light are so distinctive. You are able to pinpoint just the right time of day to achieve the desired atmosphere for the final photograph, and this has been consistent throughout your entire career. Can you talk a little bit about that process?

MS: Ever since graduating I really felt that I wanted to make work as easily as I could, and still feel authentic and true to my intention and aesthetic sensibilities. I think that's one of the reasons I became really interested in natural light. I had to do something that allowed me to experiment with making work. I became invested in using what I had, you know, using my surroundings and the light that I had.

I lived in a really cool apartment—it's where I made *Untitled (prism)*, the one with the CD cases—but the windows were really high and small, and in the winter there wasn't much light. There was a door onto the roof though, and I just used the door as a light source for photographing everything. Situations like that force a certain type of creativity, by default, in the same way that being in a smaller place or community does.

KP: At the time, you were making the work that you started to gain attention for—still life photographs of whiskey and beer

bottles, CD cases, and record albums connected with the lifestyle of people in their early twenties. In an interview with Brian Sholis, you talked about setting up those still lifes in a dialogue with painting.<sup>1</sup>

MS: I was looking at paintings as a reference for thinking about and composing my photographs. And I started thinking about the light too. Now I feel comfortable that that kind of language exists in photography as well. I also make references to photography more than I did initially, and that might just be due to how comfortable I now feel with being behind the camera or with making photographs.

KP: How did you respond to the interpretation of that work as "slacker aesthetic?" Some of those items were a part of your daily life...

MS: People labeled a lot of things in our generation that way; I think it's how they framed the work. That's organically changing though. A lot of those labels are less relevant and I don't think they mean the same thing as they were originally meant to. It's not what I'm interested in anymore. I still like the glass and the shape of a beer bottle, but I'm now more invested in the geometry of a beer bottle than what it represents. I was 23 when I started making that work, and I really felt this identification with albums and whiskey. Genuinely felt. Those things were part of my everyday. But now—it's not that I have new objects that have replaced those things—I just don't feel that way about objects anymore. There's less of a need to cling to things like that. It was probably the anxiety and insecurity of youth, the idea that something has to represent you and you represent something. And now, I just don't have the same kind of attachments.

KP: So how do you feel now looking at a body of work that encompasses ten years?

MS: My new work started to feel like it was so different, which was uncomfortable at first. But this is my work and it's not that different; the other work has led to this. It's more cinematic now and I'm creating an atmosphere and a place that's unreal