

# Water treatment

*Reuel Golden introduces the work of New York-based Avigail Schimmel*

*'Some of her best images are taken on the Staten Island Ferry, which sails just south of Lower Manhattan. From this vantage point she photographs the flickering lights, haze and shadows of the city, set against the motion of the water.'*

→ *Rain, New York.*

IF THERE IS ONE CITY that has been photographed more than any other it is probably New York. Every aspect of the self-proclaimed 'greatest city in the world' slogan has been recorded from every possible angle and perspective. Think back to the great photographers of the last century: Alvin Langdon Coburn documented the rising industrial cityscape in 1910. Berenice Abbott, in large format, shot the booming architecture of the city in the 1930s. Weegee was renowned for his crime scene photos of the 1930s and '40s. William Klein and Helen Levitt, in the 1950s, brought their cameras up close and personal as they photographed vibrant street life in Manhattan. Diane Arbus shot portraits of eccentric New Yorkers in the 1960s and early 1970s. Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin photographed the alternative 1980s New York lifestyles. And then there were the sweeping majestic cityscapes of Robert Polidori in the 1990s.

It is a long list, and if you include great photographers such as André Kertész and Paul Strand, who also took compelling images of the city, it almost never ends. With such a legacy, it is therefore something of a daunting challenge for any photographer to come up with a fresh way of seeing New York. Especially so since every time a photographer points their camera up towards the skyscrapers or down towards the streets how can they not convey a sense of us all having been there before? One person who is offering an alternative view is the Israeli photographer Avigail

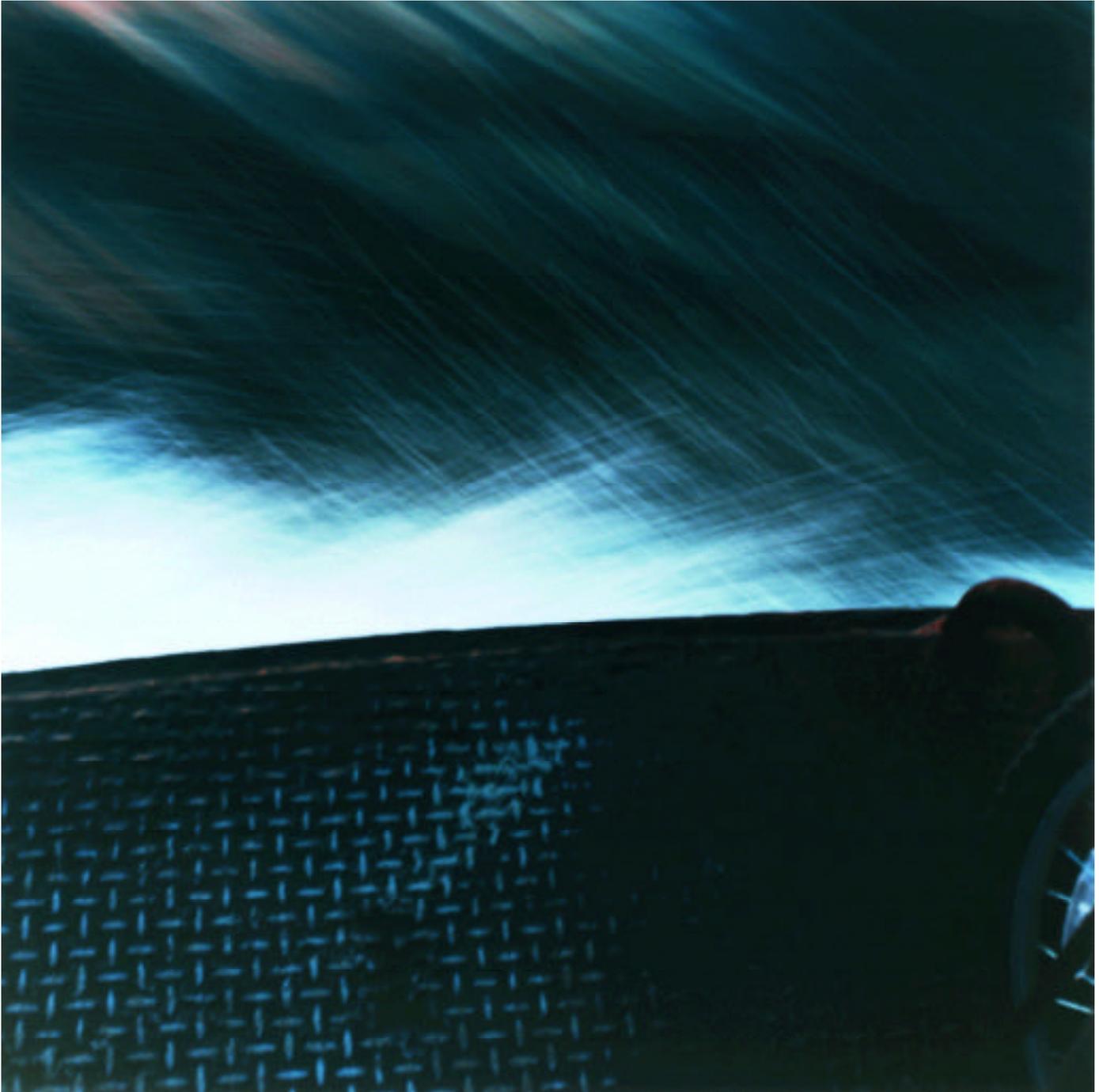
Schimmel, who has been based in New York for the last seven years.

Schimmel is not interested either in people or buildings and this immediately sets her apart from the rest. This is not photography with any sort of opinion; it is about making beautiful photographs. What inspires her is how the natural – particularly water – interacts with the man-made. She is also intrigued by the light and the sky, the shapes and colours that they yield, and how they play off each other.

Manhattan is a very dense, urban environment with its all-encompassing architecture blocking out everything, making it easy to forget that you are on an island. Not Schimmel. Some of her best images are taken on the Staten Island Ferry, which sails just south of Lower Manhattan. From this vantage point she photographs the flickering lights, haze and shadows of the city, set against the motion of the water. Her images are abstract impressions of New York; fleeting, understated moments that slowly entice the viewer.

All of Schimmel's work is done using a tripod, ISO100 film (Fuji Reala), long exposures, and a 6x6 Hassleblad. She insists on natural light, and relies on the old-fashioned virtue of waiting patiently to see what comes into the viewfinder. Significantly, she says that she is more inspired by the 'decisive moment' *modus operandi* of Henri Cartier-Bresson than the carefully planned and pre-visualized landscape photography of, for instance, Ansel Adams.





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Since her subject matters are fleeting-light, shadow and motion, there is a strong element of chance to her images. She recalls that she once tried to recreate an image of the Brooklyn Bridge and went back to exactly the same spot where she had shot a year previously, but the sky was different and it just didn't work. 'I've always been drawn to certain subjects such as motion and haze that are hard to record with a camera,' she says. 'I also like the way light can come in and out of the viewfinder – the light say from a flashing car – and I'm always anxious after I've taken the photo to see whether it has registered.'

Schimmel believes that she can control the random element of her work better if she prints her own photographs. 'My contact sheets are hard to read and I feel that I'm the only one who can understand what is hidden there, not because they are technically problematic, but because of the conditions in which I shoot. The colour is very subjective and it's impossible to recreate exactly what light was out there; it depends on me to choose the color from the range of possibilities so I can get close as possible to what I saw when I pressed the shutter.'

She does not develop her own film, but apart from that she is totally hands-on with not a computer in sight. From the contact sheets, she first makes 10x8 prints, typically around three per image. She then hangs them up on the wall and stares at them for a long time. Once she has seen something that she likes she will enlarge the prints, which can of course change the look of the image, and then produce editions of her 20x16 prints limited to sets of 10.

Rather than printing and endlessly reprinting an image, Schimmel will work with great intensity with what she's got and then move on. She tends to divide her work into three genres: travel landscapes; abstracts with water; and cityscapes. When she prints, she is conscious that there must be some kind of consistency in the tonal range according to the subject matter, so there is a coherent narrative in the body of work.

Schimmel says that there are no great mysteries when it comes to colour printing. She argues that if you have a strong sense of colour and a clear vision of what you want, then after trial and error, with the right chemistry and paper (she favours Fuji because of its high contrast) the print will essentially take care of itself. 'For me with colour photography it is more to do with the moment when you take the picture, what film you use and what you do when you expose the negative. Here you can really control the colour filtration, but generally it is not like black-and-white photography where something entirely new can be recreated in the darkroom.' Nevertheless, she does admit that getting the right print requires a lot of work.

If there is a signature to Schimmel's work it is the way she uses colour. It is very saturated and at times, almost monochromatic with very little contrast. It is what gives her photos that haunting beauty, but it is a beauty that makes demands on the viewer. Take her photograph *Ferry in Motion*, one of her most compelling images (overleaf). There is so much going on here with the shapes and movement of the water, the blues and greys, set against the eerie cityscape of lower Manhattan

← *White wave, Staten Island Ferry, New York.*

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with its lights twitching in the distance. It is subtle and some of the detail may not immediately be apparent to the viewer. However, once the viewer takes time to look at the picture, patterns and shapes begin to emerge. It is a little like seeing in the dark, when you can't see anything at first but slowly you adjust and start to see shapes and make out objects.

There is an innate purity to work which offers an interesting counter-point to so much photography being produced at the moment. Schimmel, who is in her early 30s, is too softly spoken and modest to be any kind of spokesperson, but in her own subtle way she is beating a drum for pure photography. She won't manipulate an image out of principle and rejects any kind of digital post-production in her personal work. As she asserts: 'I can't imagine working that way with an image, something is either there when I shoot it, or not'. Similarly, she has little time for digital photography for her landscapes: 'I just can't see it working for the kind of landscapes that I do. A digital camera – as far as I can tell – would have a problem with motion and long exposures.'

Her views on digital are interesting because although she is a fine-art photographer, one of the ways she supports herself and finances her personal projects and travels (she has just come back from India) is by shooting still life and art objects for Sotheby's in New York. The auction house is 100% digital so she shoots using 4x5 cameras with a digital back. She says she respects what they can do in this particular field, but could never imagine using them while perched over the Staten Island ferry waiting for the right light.

Schimmel sells her work and has gallery representation. As well as group shows, she has had three solo shows in New York: one at a gallery in downtown Manhattan in SoHo, one at a more uptown, fine-art gallery, and one at the Alice Austen house in Staten Island, which is appropriately right on the water.

Paul Moakley, a photo editor with *Newsweek*, who curated Schimmel's Staten Island exhibition, says of her work: 'Avigail doesn't just make ordinary photos of what's in front of her. Like a painter, she really crafts a landscape using all the possibilities on a sheet of film – such as colour, grain and blur. Her work is done in camera and it's so impressive to look at her contacts. The work is very much about patience, about waiting for the perfect light and experimentation. It is the opposite of the stark, crisp realism that's popular right now in photography.'

Ultimately that is what makes Schimmel such an appealing artist. In a city which is all about instant gratification and where the latest is somehow equated with the best, her old-fashioned virtues are to be treasured. Especially now in this digital age and where snapshot photography is being produced by people such as Juergen Teller and lauded as high art. Schimmel's images may often be about motion, but she remains still, even timeless, in the way she makes pictures and in the tools she uses to get the final print.

Photography has always been a craft – we need people around like Schimmel just to keep on reminding us of that.

**Reuel Golden**

→ *Ferry in motion, Staten Island Ferry, New York.*

*Reuel Golden is a senior editor of Photo District News in New York, and former editor of British Journal of Photography.*







← Ferry deck, night, Staten Island Ferry, New York. ↑ Ferry porthole, Staten Island Ferry, New York.





← *Blue Shadows, New York.* ↑ *Blue Bridge, Verrazano Bridge, New York.*  
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