

A Way of Knowing: The Recent Art of Karina Aguilera Skvirsky

Karina Aguilera Skvirsky is concerned with the ambivalent nature of information in the modern era. Her art explores the arbitrary and changing character of historical, geographical, and cultural understanding, and it questions the structure of collective memory. For such concerns, photography is the ideal medium. Despite theoretical discussions that date to the early twentieth century about the arbitrary nature of photographic vision, there remains a surprising tendency to equate the photograph with “truth.” In photographic and video installations realized over the last several years, Skvirsky often has used charged political imagery. These news images are appropriated by the artist from the common visual language of television, magazines, and newspapers that permeates our daily lives. By displacing such images with a variety of strategies, Skvirsky’s recent works such as *Blowback* and *Backyards*—pieces not included in the present exhibition—lead us to question the veracity and meaning of visual information.

For instance, Skvirsky’s *Blowback* (2005) shows news footage of victims of war and natural disaster. The artist has merged the disaster victims with scenes from Central Park so that they seem to be strolling along its walkways. As they move toward the camera, the figures become larger than life. The formula of disaster brought home to us is undermined by camp references, made through the choreography and soundtrack, to popular C-grade zombie films. Have such trite renditions of Hollywood violence and alienation so jaded us that we can no longer comprehend the horror of the disaster scenes? *Backyards* (2006) reenacted recent media images of ordinary Iraqi citizens caught in moments of prayer and reflection. Skvirsky removes these images from their wartime context and inserted them into American landscapes unscathed by war. As the viewer struggles to construct new narratives for these scenes, the inherently reflective and peaceful character of the gestures becomes apparent. The recreated images were presented together with their sources, further prodding the viewer to consider the meaning of their new context. Skvirsky’s works go beyond a simple commentary on the limitations and biases of the popular media. They also extend beyond the increased political awareness of her generation of artists. Skvirsky is concerned with this contemporary subject matter, but she also uses it to expose the larger implications of our abilities to gather and process information and, thus, to know in the modern world.

In the context of her previous pieces, Skvirsky’s latest project, *North•East•South*, embodies a raised level of intensity and new concerns. The project began when she was a 2005 resident at The McDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire. There, she met fellow resident Sherrilyn A. Iffil, a professor of law at the University of Maryland. Iffil was writing *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century*, a book detailing the effects of lynchings that occurred in Maryland.¹ In her own words, Skvirsky was “intrigued and horrified by Maryland’s racially polarized history” that extended into the modern era.² She grew up in Washington, D.C. near the Maryland border and summered on the eastern shore of Maryland. The towns of Salisbury, Crisfield, and Princess Anne, near where she had spent idyllic childhood summers, were lynching locations. The manner in which historical and contextual information changes perception of a place, which had been Skvirsky’s concern for a number of years, suddenly became very personal. Earlier, she had viewed the exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, shown in 2000 at the New-York Historical Society.³ One of her observations about the exhibition was that the close-up photographs, often taken at night, gave few clues as to where the lynchings occurred.

As Skvirsky began to research *North•East•South*, she revisited and photographed the sites of her childhood with a new focus on lynching history, and she collected newspaper accounts of the killings. (A particular focus became the lynching of Mathew Williams that took place in Salisbury, Maryland, in December, 1931.) She also became interested in the concept of the Mason-Dixon Line as a political and cultural boundary between the northern and southern states.

Skvirsky’s examination of the lynching sites revealed their banality and the lack of awareness of the public about what they represent. Her investigation into the three newspaper articles reporting Williams’ lynching—*Salisbury Times*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and *The Afro-American*—showed such radically different and racially charged accounts that it became impossible to establish the exact facts. The *Salisbury Times* refused to discuss the details, instead stating that “when Violence is done, it behooves every one of us to co-operate in speeding the return to absolutely normal and harmonious conditions.”⁴ *The Baltimore Sun* attempted to portray an orderly scene, whereas *The Afro-American* provided a graphic description of Williams, whose alleged murder of a white employer was unconfirmed by eyewitness accounts, being thrown through his hospital window, dragged through the streets in a semi-conscious condition, lynched, and then his body ignited with gasoline and burned.

As another part of her research, Skvirsky discovered that the Mason-Dixon Line was farther north than where she imagined, placing her childhood deeper in the South. The line which had had such political, racial, and military consequences for the nineteenth century and is still a dividing point in the national psyche, resulted initially from a land dispute between two families—the Calverts of Maryland and the Penns of Pennsylvania. Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon were simply surveyors who clarified the state lines.

From her investigations, Skvirsky has created *North•East•South* in four sections. As the first part, a group of attractive color photographs by the artist depict several sites where lynchings took place. The images of Georgian architecture in small town squares and tree-bordered fields undermine the American myth of rural arcadia; the very sweetness of the locales seems to defy their history. A second set of black-and-white images feature cut-out newspaper articles about lynchings placed in the interior of an abandoned building. The building, a former car garage in Easton, Pennsylvania, has absolutely no connection with lynching history. Yet, its spaces, once the articles are placed in them, seem forbidding. Shadows appear to be bars, walls are confining, and doors seem impenetrable.

In a third group of photographs, Skvirsky depicts locations along the Mason-Dixon Line. On one hand, these photographs reveal the completely arbitrary nature of this geographical barrier. In one case, it passes right through a church, leaving one-half on each side of the imaginary line. On the other hand, Skvirsky shoots her images from a low vantage point with the squat granite markers of the line dominating the foregrounds. From this viewpoint, the small cubic markers take on feelings of gravitas, looking almost like tombstones.

The fourth component of *North•East•South* is *Atta Boy Jim*, a video that features actors reading texts from the three accounts of the Mathew Williams lynching. Edited by Skvirsky, the racially motivated differences in the texts highlight the contingent and interpretive nature of history. To enhance the ambivalence of the readings, she back-lit the actors and filmed them in profile so that it is impossible to identify each actor's race. Skvirsky's videos often relate to classic film footage, giving the viewer an additional layer of meaning to contemplate. In this case, the anonymity of her actors references Jean Luc Goddard's *Weekend* (1967) in which similar cinematic effects are used to enhance his vision of an apocalyptic world.

For Skvirsky, the danger in choosing lynching as a theme was sensationalism. For some viewers, emotional outrage might overwhelm other responses. But she makes every attempt to limit such reaction. As a whole, *North•East•South* impresses one for its gravity and significance. Skvirsky transforms her personal reaction to learning about the locations and details of these horrific events into a meditation on the character of historical reconstruction, particularly as it relates to visual image, place, and narrative. *North•East•South* affirms the post-modern contention that history is an interpretation, one depending on both the teller and recipient. But her work does not participate in the nihilistic viewpoint, advocated by some postmodernists, that all versions of history thus have equal value. The information presented by *North•East•South* is intricate and sometimes ambivalent, but its very complexity represents a way of knowing that is essential to modern existence.

Robert S. Mattison
Marshall R. Metzgar Professor of Art History
Lafayette College
January 2008

Notes

1 Sherrilyn A. Iffil, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

2 Karina Aguilera Skvirsky, Conversation with the author, November 16, 2007.

3 James Allen, ed., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (New York: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000). New-York Historical Society exhibition, March 14 - October 1, 2000.

4 Jared Kreiger, "A Statement," *Salisbury Times*, December 12, 1931.