

## Fluid Encounters: Claudia Schmacke

by Deborah Everett

As continuous pulsing networks or deftly scattered units, Claudia Schmacke's liquid environments are unexpected and mesmerizing. Employing the element of water in both its flowing and motionless states, she explores the workings of the physical world and how we perceive it. Her sculptural installations are minimal in form and sophisticated in implication, expanding our awareness of the passing moment, our concrete surroundings, and the interconnectedness of the two.

Early on in her career, Schmacke realized that she wanted to work with something ephemeral. Her first foray in that direction involved paraffin, which simultaneously suggests both liquid and solid. This approach was fueled by her interest in the fluid realities of contemporary physics and philosophies of time and space. Later,

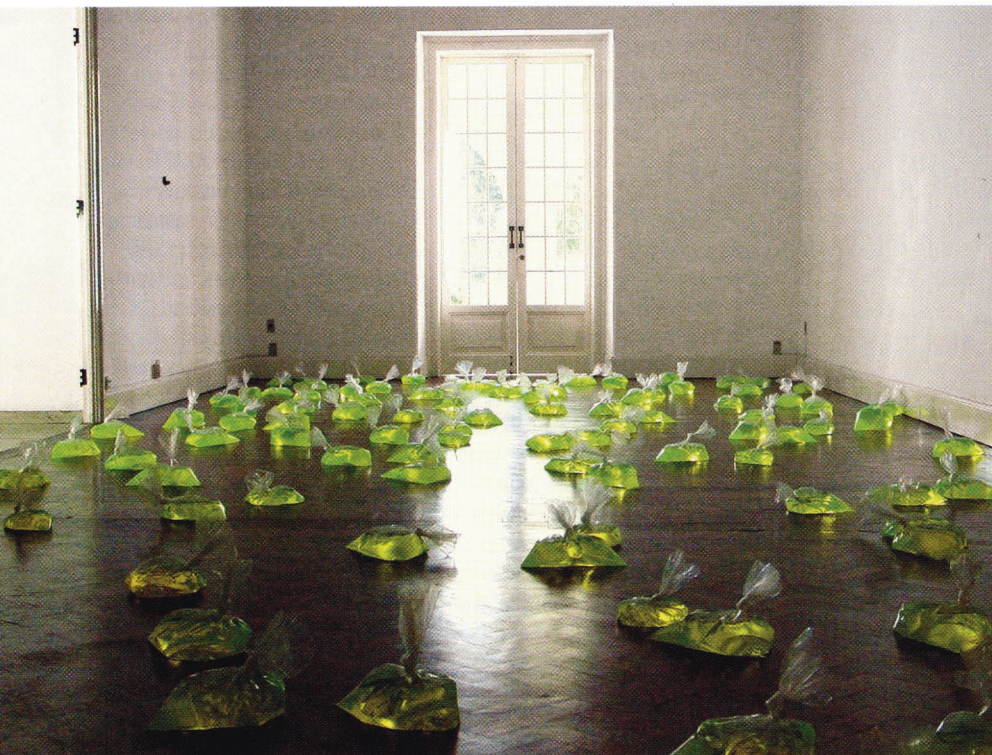
during a fellowship in Italy, Schmacke encountered Leonardo da Vinci's notes on patterns of movement in water. At the same time, she studied Renaissance gardens and natural landscapes and became fascinated with fountains, terraced streams, and the role of water in activating a space. She started to see water not only as a substance with immense sculptural possibilities, but also as a microcosm of the physical universe.

Schmacke soon began to work with aerated water pumped through clear tubing, initially building on the innovations of artists with similar sensibilities. *Corner* (1993) and *Hammock* (1995), for instance, present ordered rows of water-filled tubing—draped in a way that recalls Eva Hesse's trailing cords and tubes. A much larger piece from 1998 (*Untitled*) has ties to Walter de Maria's *Broken Kilometer*, covering the

entire floor of the exhibition space with parallel hoses of running water. Like her two earlier pieces, *Untitled* yielded a sense of the uncanny—in this case, a stream displaced to the gallery's interior—but it also suggested a kind of connecting fabric or network, with an all-over structure that was of growing interest to the artist.

Extending this startling sense of a captive yet flowing liquid, Schmacke developed a broad spectrum of cyclical arrangements and self-generating systems. In *Ripple* (2000), for instance, the tubes formed a closed loop of wavy concentric circles, whose luminous bubbles pulsed in endless circuits within the dark interior of the gallery. For her solo show at Plane Space (2003), the hypnotic rhythms shifted into overdrive, as aerated green water coursed through large bundles of tubing at high speed, causing them to shake and wobble in place. These dense coils were connected by tubing, so that the installation struck a note somewhere between articulated biological systems and procedures within a laboratory. For *Drawing the Flow*, shown last fall at the Aldrich Museum, Schmacke created a corridor with a glass ceiling over which water gently streamed. At the end of the corridor, the water fell from the ceiling into a seven-foot glass tank. Viewers entering the space walked under a horizontal veil of water as they were drawn toward the dazzling cascade at its end—where the sense of plunging release implied both abundance and waste. These remarkable encounters with water in unexpected situations make Schmacke's works visually powerful; the overlapping levels of content give them their subtle complexity.

Throughout the variety of forms that Schmacke uses, there are recurring elements of duality and paradox. The juxtaposition of flow and containment is the most apparent opposition, but her work also explores the sensation of time either passing or seeming to stop—and



**Light Spots, 2003. Plastic bags, water, fluorescent tracer dye, and black lights, 222 bags, each 30 x 50 or 20 x 30 cm.**





Clockwise from above: *Quintet for washtubs*, 1999. 5 galvanized tubs, 5 tin funnels, black rubber hose, and water, installation view. *Ripple*, 2000. Transparent vinyl hoses, water, air, 2 pumps, and 2 water tanks, installation view. *Drawing the Flow*, 2003. Wood and sheetrock walls, tempered glass, acrylic tank, pump, PVC pipe, and water, 31 units, installation view.

the relation of each state to physical movement. Schmacke's work includes rushing streams, as well as silent pools, as in a work created in 1999/2000 at the Chinati Foundation, where mirrored "bowls" of water were set in the ground, suggesting timeless repositories of the sky's reflected image. In other works, the rhythm fluctuates as the viewer encounters a gradually changing, or alternating, cycle—as in *Splash* (2002/2003), where a high-powered water jet inside a room suddenly shoots spattering liquid against a window. This jarring action alternates with rest periods when the water stops and the room goes dark—so that viewers perceive the slippage of time in phases, as one step leads to the next. These varied circumstances reveal our tendency to sense temporality—or not—depending on the conditions that fill each time-frame.

The spaces in which Schmacke's work appears are often integral to the overall effect. *Ridge* (2001), for instance, was installed in an internal passageway in the center of Cologne's Deutzer Bridge—a long, tunnel-like space that duplicates the arching shape of the bridge. Here, the water moved through parallel hoses at walking speed, so that viewers could advance along with it in what appeared to be an endless *pas de deux*—the end of the installation was hidden by the floor's curvature until one traversed the entire length of the work. Another engagingly site-specific piece, *Light Spots* (2003), at the Galeria do ICBA (Salvador di Bahia, Brazil), included 222 clear bags of fluorescent-dyed water placed on the floor,

where they gathered and concentrated the gallery's ambient light. During the day, sunlight entered the space from two sides, creating a natural graduation of color and radiance in the water. At night, the room's black fluorescent lighting was reflected by the dye, so that the darkened space was dotted with pockets of glowing liquid. At the Chinati Foundation, Schmacke created an almost opposite effect by installing her work in a cold, bare room with pale silver walls and meat-locker doors.

Schmacke is also concerned with sound or, conversely, with silence, and the ways in which they can redefine their surroundings. In several of her works, the action of the pumps creates a softly droning periodicity. The tempo varies from tranquil and chant-like to the industrial undertones of a more aggressive and relentless regularity. The sounds are entirely natural in *Drawing the Flow*, where the moving water creates a sloshing cadence that builds toward the dramatic crescendo of its descent into the tank. The psychological resonance of these varying aural components sometimes amplifies the work's visual effect and sometimes creates ambiguity through counterpoint.

Schmacke's explorations are probing and highly original, re-casting the elemental in terms of the contemporary. Ultimately, her water-work systems bridge multiple levels of experience, illuminating the essence of physical realities within a world of virtual appearance.

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