Published in *Elisa Sighicelli,* Laure Genillard Gallery and Ffotogallery, London e Cardiff 1999.

24-hour twilight

Melissa E Feldman

As an art student in London, Elisa Sighicelli would go out at dusk, camera in hand, and look for houses with lit windows. You may have noticed the certain incandescence of a lit window against the violet skies of twilight and this is precisely what she wanted to capture. Sighicelli has remarked that, depending on your mood, this sight can stir feelings of comfort or apprehension. Tilted back and seen half way up, the looming façades present a voyeur's point of view, the view of one spying from the sidewalk, peering through trees or over a wall.

Pictures of lit windows brings to mind some paintings - most readily Edward Hopper's disconsolate clerks and bedsitters- but the image has cinematic references too, in particular the horror genre. The lit window in the night is what drew Frankenstein to the blind mans' cabin in the forest, and what kept the traveler wondering as he gazed at the Gothic mansion across the road from his motel. But Sighicelli manages to coax the drama from her subject without veering into the histrionics of horror or the pathos of Hopper. Her 'secret' is in the light box on which all her photographs are mounted: by painting the back of the Plexiglass support black everywhere but the area corresponding with the window, and by positioning a light bulb only in that exposed spot, she makes the light shining through the window much brighter. In other words, actual artificial light augments that represented in the photo- graph. This makes the light in her photographs warmer and stronger than the unadulterated c-print alone would offer, and exaggerates the contrast between the dim interior and the brilliance outside. The manipulation sounds extreme but appears surprisingly subtle. Itis as if the altered image is truer to the feeling or emotional memory of the scene than its less vibrant reality.

Subsequent to her street series of lit windows Sighicelli brought her camera inside where it has pretty much remained. Unlike the constructed images of Jeff Wal and artists like Thomas Demand of the generation that followed him, Sighicelli always photographs subjects as found, in natural light. But she is extremely deliberate in what and how she chooses to shoot. Her interiors are furnished but contain little else, devoid of personal effects, household clutter, and most notably people. They never reek of

class the way a Richard Billingham interior does, or suggest a frozen moment in a narrative in the filmic manner of Sharon Lockhart, for example. Circumventing the media-minded discourses of design and style that could easily attend such imagery, Sighicelli selects places with modest decor which, whether vaguely old-fashioned or modern, does not compete with her atmospherics and the dreamy, classical feel.

Whit al these elements subdued or erased from view, what then is left in these empty, shadowy, patently ordinary interiors? Their sole proprietor is light, a transformative presence that detects the sublime in the everyday. The cream-coloured bathroom in *LA II* (1998, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Turin), shot facing the sink from a tooth brusher's point of view, is a monochromatic study in space and light. It is one of several photographs made in unremarkable hotel rooms, an ideal location due to its natural impersonality, but these are not portraits of banality. From the window pours a light so uplifting that it becomes a metaphor for morning. It burns through the curtain pushed to one side and sets aglow the single white towel hanging on the rack, the chrome faucets, the bare *faux* marble counter. Bathed in light, this pristine, al white bathroom becomes baptismal, a shrine of purity. This is the kind of sublime that sneaks up on you, not sought from a mountaintop, one that strikes in the midst of performing household routines. A hidden fluorescent bulb placed to one side of the window not only augments this light but angles its rays to it to make it palpable, a presence in the room.

L.A. II (1998)
partially backlit C-print mounted on lightbox
30 × 30 × 7 cm

The familiarity of Sighicelli's work comes from our everyday lives, but folded into this imagery are the altered realities of film and representational painting. Often appearing nocturnal - despite the intrusion of daylight from the omnipresent window - Sighicelli's images recall the secretive spaces of film noir and Rembrandt's crepuscular domestic scenes; the brighter ones emulate a sundrenched Vermeer. As in a filmed sequence where everything from lighting to lipstick must appear consistent despite different takes

over time, the colour and tonality in a series such as *Varigotti* (1999) is kept the same from one image to the next by controlling these variables in printing. In *Varigotti: Front Room a* table and with chairs neatly pushed around it are seen through a doorway, lit by glazed double doors at the far end of the room. The camera's eye leads you through the amber space, focusing on these more distant objects and subsequently blurring those in the foreground. This is not at all how the scene would appear to the naked eye: the foreground with the open door would not eb blurred, the top of the far door would not be cropped out, the perspective would not be so narrow. As in a series of film stills, we tour the house through five selective vignettes shot through doorways with a slice of a room yawning behind or settling on simple details like a silhouetted armchair. These shadowy, restricted views create suspense or at least anticipation of what lurks around the corner.

Varigotti: Front Room with Door 1998
partially backlit C-print mounted on lightbox
30 × 30 × 7 cm

In its hushed stillness, Sighicelli's work represents a private realm of contemplation and sometimes revelation. *Levanto: Shutter* (1997) is essentially a seated portrait, monkish in attitude.

Baroque in style, personified by a threequarter view of an empty chair by an open window. A shaft of light from the window catches the chair sidelong, landing the internal edges of its graceful wooden carving and the upholstered seat. The rest of the object disappears in to the dark background as in Renaissance portraiture. The mysterious half-lighting is reminiscent of the candlelit interiors of the French 17th century painter Georges De la Tour, where forms are similarly rendered both simpler and more three. dimensional through strong directional lighting. But the dramatic portrayal of light - intensified by back-lighting only the strip of window appearing at the right edge of the

picture - appropriates iconography from Western religious painting in which God visits people at home as a ray of light through their window.

Other less classicizing works offer views that are atypical or incidental. Corners, edges where the wall meets the floor and other perspective markers are often left out, and objects make only fragmental appearances. A tiled stone floor, for example, fills the frame of *Senza Mondo*
IV: Kitchen (1998), emitting an unaccountable glow that illuminates the bottom of the stove and the radiator visible at its borders. *Curtain* (1997) shows part of a dressed window above a strip of the bed where it runs along the wall. Neither bed nor window are treated as objects, as things to inspect in and of themselves as in a still life or documentary photography. The former is reduced toa mere horizontal an- choring the bottom edge of the picture plane, the latter - its fittings cut out of the frame - a bright vertical rectangle holding the upper right hand corner. In another window of the same year, *Las Vegas: Curtain*, the composition again functions as a minimal abstraction - a head-on shot of the window centred on a bare wall - but here the effect is otherworldly. The glowing curtain floats like an apparition, its central portion dissolving into pure light (thanks to a bulb placed directly behind).

Las Vegas: Curtain 1997
partially backlit C-print mounted on lightbox
80 × 80 × 10 cm

Whether mystical, romantic, or plain spooky, Sighicelli's interior worlds occupy the outer reaches of experience. Visiting them makes you fell like a sleepwalker, tricked into trusting the unreal. Balanced on the cusp of inside and outside, night and day, the

credible and the uncanny, the uplifting and the eerie, the visible and the vanished, this is a world of all-day twilight where the ordinary quietly turns surreal.