

ART

Seeking the soul behind the mask

BY VICTORIA GAIL-WHITE
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Gary Schneider takes the medium of photography outside the box of his camera and darkroom and into intimate realms that renovate the familiar before our eyes. Our external characteristics of face, hands and other body parts as well as our internal biological identity of chromosomes and genes are magnified in this, his first major exhibition. "Gary Schneider: Portraits" spans his career from the 1970s to the present.

This provocative exhibit was on display in Cambridge, Mass., until mid-June and traveled here from the Harvard University Art Museums. Organized by Harvard's Fogg Art Museum and curated by Deborah Martin Kao, it addresses the rarely explored psychological aspect of portraiture.

Born in 1954 in East London, South Africa, Schneider's life struggles, passion for science and relentless fascination with looking at things up close piloted his unique method of processing how he sees the world through the diverse projects he undertakes.

Revering material that at first glance might be considered commonplace, his methods of photographing his subjects and his enlargement and developing processes shift the focus from traditional portraiture to a more conceptual art form that echoes the performance aspect of picture taking.

"The great thing about photography," said Schneider in a recent docent walk-through, "is that, as an audience, you presuppose fact. With a painting you start with a blank canvas, you make it. But with photography you start with information, even if you are doing a light drawing. You're starting with something actual."

His earliest work on exhibit is the fragmented, postcard-sized sections of "Portrait of Ralph" (1975) and "Assisted Self Portrait" in black and white. This beginning of dissection and fragmented body parts flows throughout Schneider's work in various directions, chronologically mapping his artistic journey.

Combing through a flea market in New York City, Schneider discovered a large collection of 19th-century studio portraits. "Carte de Visite" (1990) is a series of nine life-sized portraits of women from that collection.

"The negatives are the size of a card," says Schneider. "These must have been at least twenty-second exposures — just long enough for us to read the unveiled quality of the subjects be-



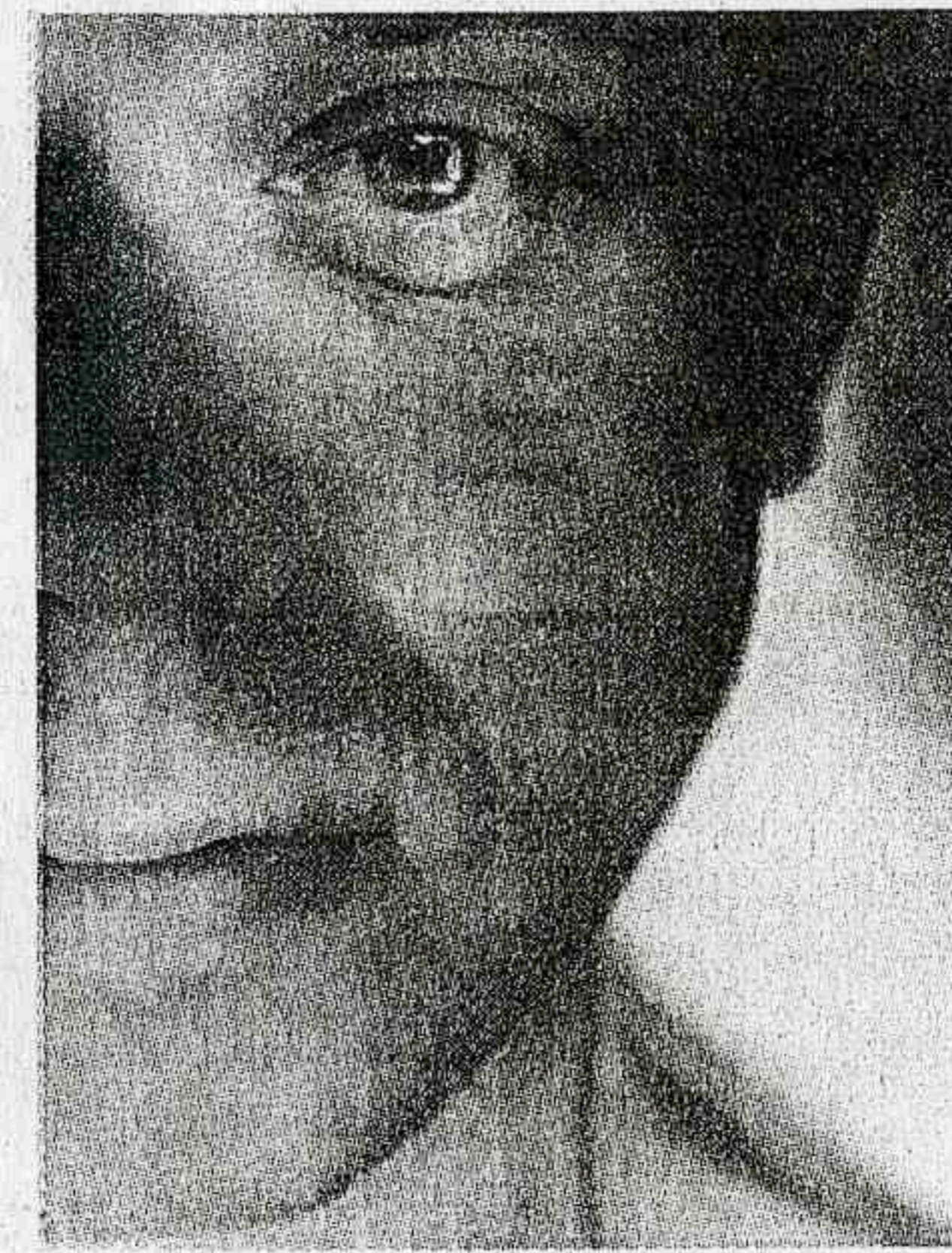
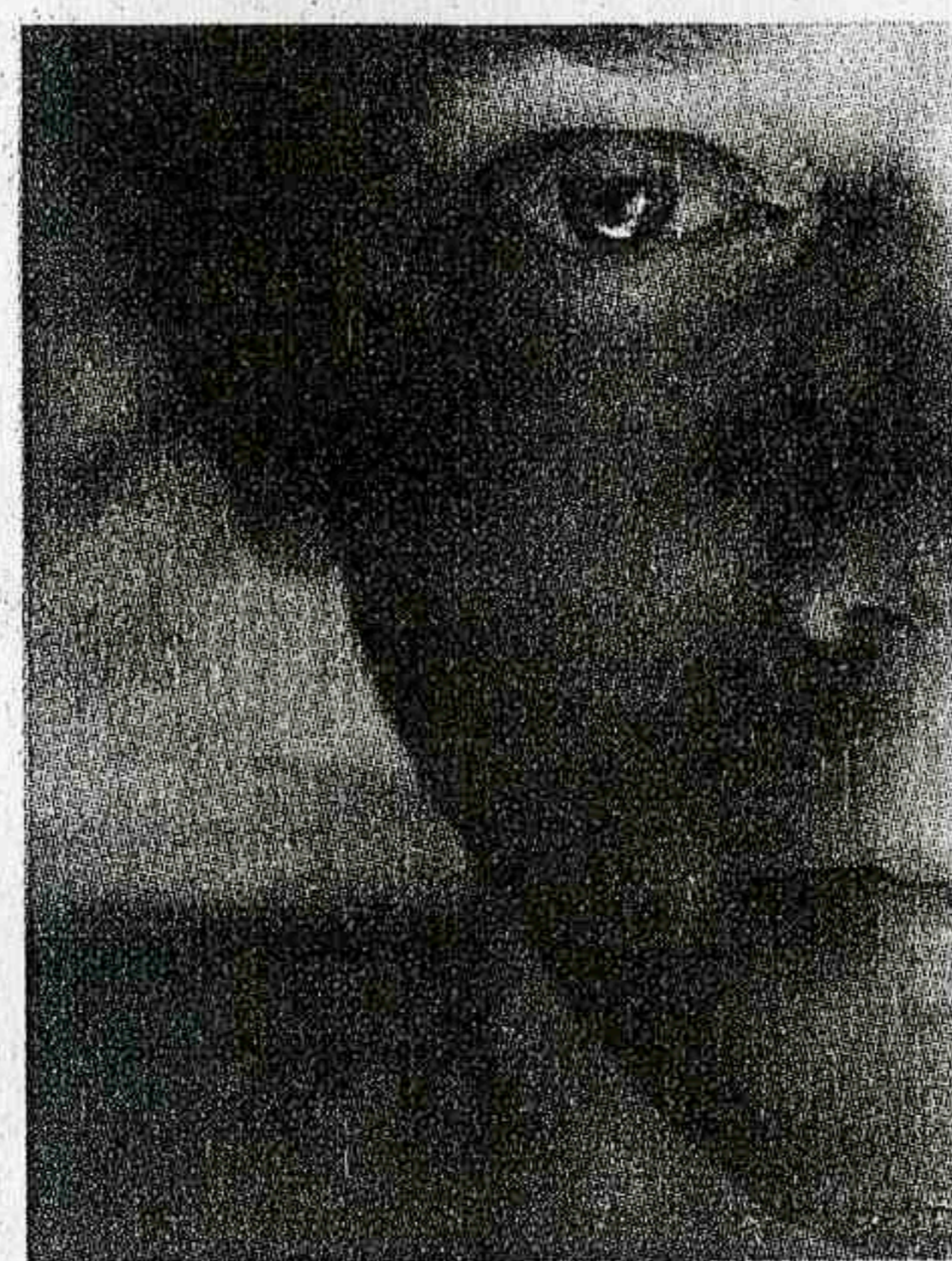
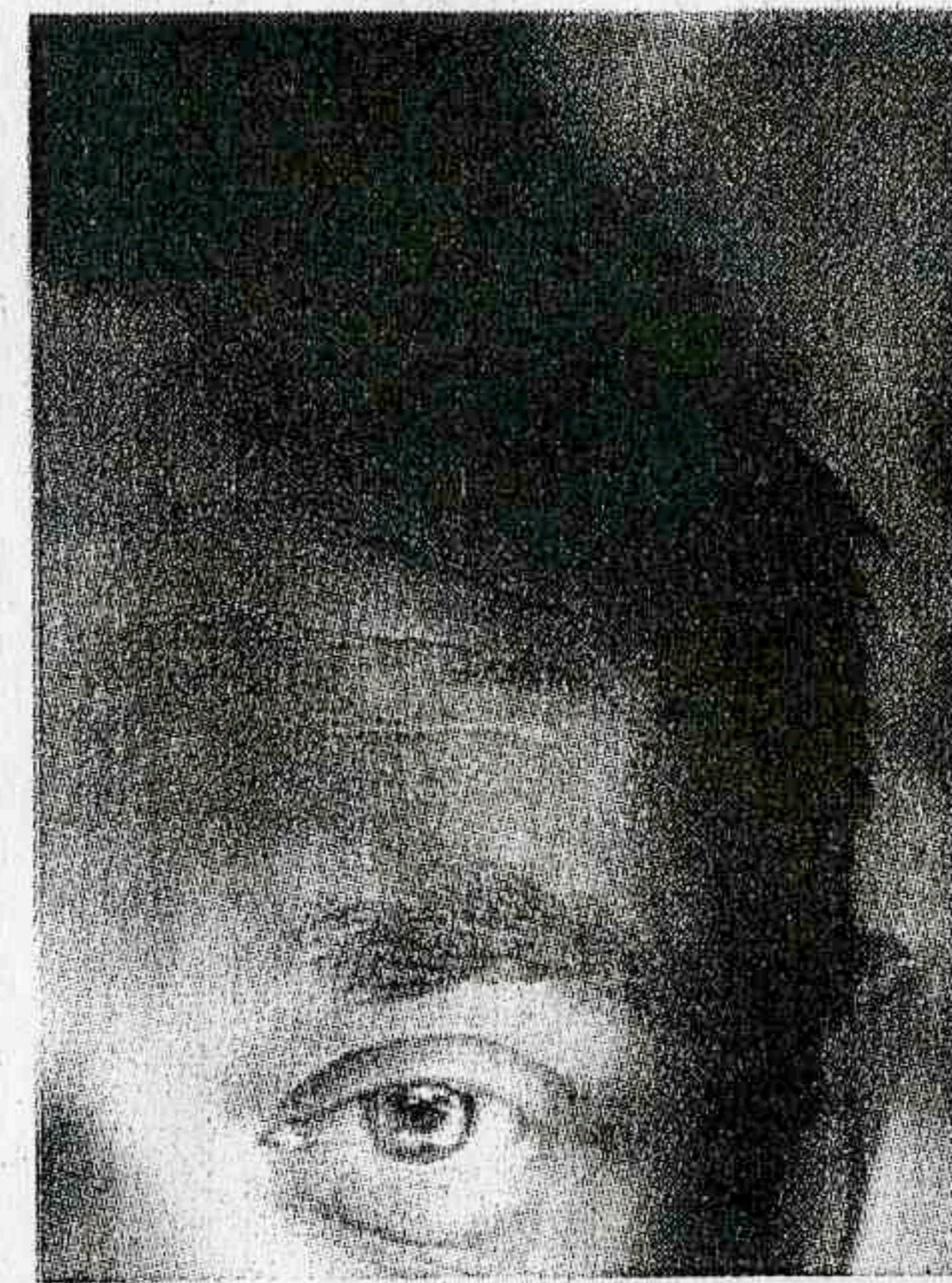
ing inside of themselves trying to keep still. I printed them life-size and exaggerated the eyes in Photoshop."

These historical prints become conceptual when you are one-on-one with them. It's as though you are having a conversation that erases distance and time.

"They are unveiled, and I think it is because they weren't aware of what we are aware of now," he says. The mask of a "camera face" exists even in pictures of very young children. It is a conditioned response to having your picture taken — a contrived pose. The photographer selects the moment to capture what he or she sees as authentic. Somewhere in that contract, if the photographer is lucky, the mask fades and the soul emerges.

"There is this weird contract about what a portrait really is," says Schneider. "Privacy is a big thing for me. 'George' remains totally exposed but totally private."

As a way of breaking through the camera face, Schneider made a series of long-exposure, large-format head shots. "George" (2001), a 60-by-48-inch chromogenic print, was made by multiple exposures on the same photograph. Each portrait takes over an hour to photograph. The sitter is positioned on the floor with the camera suspended above. In a blackened studio, Schneider asks the sitter to engage the camera lens, opens the aperture and proceeds to navigate the subject's face, feature by feature, illuminating each section with a light



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TOP: "Hands," 1997, from Gary Schneider's collection "Genetic Self Portrait" is part of an exploration of what makes up the self. **BELOW:** "Heinz" is part of Schneider's investigations of the human face.

pen. It's a continuous process, broken up into sections.

"I want all my work to be able to function with your reading glasses on, literally reading the surface," he says. The larger-than-life size of "George" trans-

forms the face into a human landscape, glorious lip mountains and valleys with lakes of welled-up tears.

We can't help but wonder why he's teary. However, our emotional responses belie the truth.

"The tears weren't an emotional response," says Schneider, "he was tired and his eyes were watering as a response to the light. There is a schism between what actually occurred and your experience of looking at the photograph."

Because no one can sit perfectly still for an hour, the larger portraits have distortion built in to the fragmented photographic process. For Schneider, it becomes the result of a trace of a performance, an intensely personal interaction and the byproduct of his investigation. The first eye on the right side of the portraits is focusing on Schneider's lens. By the time he gets around to the left eye, the subject is looking in. This result is a separation; we register each eye individually.

In "Shirley" (2000), the wispy, cloud-like light trails in her eyeglasses contrast with the exaggerated reds and green in her cheeks, lips and eyes. Schneider uses Photoshop for his color photographs as he uses the darkroom for black-and-white work.

While distortion is the byproduct of the larger portraits, damaged emulsion is the byproduct of the hand-print series.

"I took the problem of fingerprints damaging a negative and exaggerated it to the extreme," he says. "I put so much sweat into the emulsion that I can actually print that damage. The more sweat there is, the darker and denser the damage in the emulsion, the more light will be held back. Then, I enclosed all that in-

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formation in an outline of my hand photographed with a flash. It became a lightgram or a thermohydrogram. It's only the outline of my hand that was made of light; the rest of it was damaged print."

The first series of "damaged prints" are tender "tone poems" — Schneider's eulogies to lost loved ones. "After Mirriam" (1994), a unique silver-gelatin print in four parts, is dedicated to the memory of his mother who died of cancer in 1994. The haloed fingers appear as though they are the source of light.

Lovely silvery fingerprint patterns and shapes expose family traits, in the handprint family portrait series, taking us ever deeper into what connects us biologically and emotionally.

Schneider's evolution as subject, scientist and artist is evident in his "Genetic Self Portrait" (1997-1998) installation. Here he is totally exposed, right down to his DNA.

Invited to participate in the Human Genome Project, he collaborated with scientists at the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York to create images of his genes and chromosomes. He provided samples of his blood, hair, mucus, stool and sperm that were enlarged using photo microscopy.

Schneider manipulated the images in the darkroom, enlarging sections of some of the "self-portrait" to mural size. The results are dazzling and frightening. This is an inner landscape, reminiscent of stones, sticks, rivers, flowing water and flora.

"Each one of these is evidence that could be used against me on some level," he says. "It was a giving up of my privacy."

We witness, in this retrospective, the relentless inquiry of an artist — the process by which he examines himself and his subjects and the courage it takes to expose that to the public. This isn't a flash of exhibitionism, it's an uncovering of the images that connect our outer and inner worlds. Here, the repetition of shapes and forms distorted and distinct from multiple dimensions melt into infinity.

"Each time I make another body of work the solutions are all different," Schneider says. "I don't have one way of getting there."