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## GARY SCHNEIDER: AN INTERVIEW by Vincent Katz



Gary Schneider & detail of *Peyton*, toned gelatin silver (36x29 in.), 1994. Photo by Vivien Bittencourt.

There is something unfamiliar, nonphotographic, about Gary Schneider's work, in spite of the obvious reliance on photographic means. To describe his portraits, perhaps his most emblematic work, one must resort to insufficient metaphor. "Photographic painting" doesn't really get at it, because there is nothing painterly about Schneider's eerie and oddly moving depictions of these subjects, who are also his friends. Suffice it to say Schneider occupies that rapidly expanding realm of artists who use photographic equipment to create artworks that are beyond traditional conceptions of photography.

One aspect of this is size. Schneider works in several parallel, concurrent, series. As well as the ongoing *Portraits*, there are the *Botanicals*, the *Entomologicals*, a series of *Hands* (where the sweat of Schneider's hand makes an imprint in the emulsion on photographic paper), and *19th-Century Women*, printed from a found series of negatives. In this last series, size is of prime importance, because it is the factor distinguishing Schneider's versions of the women from vintage prints that would have been made.

Scale comes into play in all the series. In the *Portraits*, the faces are much larger than life-size, increasing their otherworldly, ghostlike air. The hands are all based on two negatives of Schneider's own hand, which he enlarges and prints differently each time, creating memorials to friends, both women and men. The *Entomological Specimens* have their origin in microscopic slides, from which Schneider prints directly, without the use of a negative. His *Entomologicals* come from negatives made by shooting through a microscope. In his use of found imagery, Schneider is interested in presenting something in a way it has not been seen before.

It is in his *Botanicals* and *Portraits*, however, that Schneider takes the same idea—exposing what has been heretofore unseen—into his own hands,

creating images of startling invention. In both these series, Schneider uses a large format, 8x10-in. studio camera, altering the subject during a prolonged exposure. He uses sheet film in a cartridge, called a "film holder," which he can take in and out of the camera at will; he can also store the negative indefinitely in the film holder, to add to at a later date. In this way he is able to work on several pieces simultaneously.

With the portraits, Schneider lights different parts of the face in sequence with a tiny spotlight, creating unusual effects as the shutter is left open. With the plants, Schneider exposes an image, closes the shutter, moves the plant, re-exposes it, and so on, thus creating a multiple portrait. However, he avoids the overlapping typical of "multiple exposure" photography. Rather, by his prolonged, involved process, he creates a complex, alluring space that gives the impression of being "nonphotographic" or "supraphotographic," as it is one that we do not have much experience seeing.

Of course, once the session is over, Schneider's work has just begun, as he takes a creative role in the printing process as well, burning and dodging to achieve his ultimate result. Schneider makes all his own prints, one at a time, in small editions, usually five or ten. Each print in an edition is unique, and they are significantly enlarged from the negative size. The portraits were originally all printed at 36x29 in.; lately, Schneider has experimented with printing other images slightly smaller, at 24x20.

Schneider, who grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, moved to New York in the 1970s, where he worked for Richard Foreman's Ontological Hysterical Theater, doing lighting and sound. He also studied at Pratt Institute, where he got his M.F.A. in 1979. In the late 70s and early 80s, Schneider had a successful experimental film career. This interview took place at the artist's

New York studio on November 13, 1995. As we talked, Schneider pinned up examples of his work, moving rapidly from subject to subject.

**Vincent Katz** Do you generally work in a large format?

**Gary Schneider** Well, they're various sizes, but this is the size I constantly am wrestling with. Or a variation of that size. This print was made from a direct enlargement from a microscope slide. So there's no negative involved. The hand prints were cameraless. They were made from an imprint of my hand onto a sheet of film that got processed and enlarged.

**VK** In your last show at P.P.O.W. you featured the faces and hands.

**GS** Yes. And the faces are made from large-format negatives. They are from 8x10 negatives, so they have a camera, obviously.

**VK** What goes into a shooting session?

**GS** Well, they're friends of mine; this shows Peyton Smith. What do you mean what goes into a shooting session?

**VK** Well, for example, when you start out, do you know how it's going to look and what format it will be in? What I find engaging is the relationship of the size of the face to the frame of the print and the size of the print. When you started this series of work was that something that you had in mind?

**GS** Yes, absolutely. *Peyton* is quite late. *Peyton* is from 94, as is *Anya*, and I started making these portraits in 89. I make one, and I've played with it for awhile; in other words, made the negative, processed it, printed it, played with it in the darkroom—done different versions of it. It educates me so I'm ready to do another. All my series are ongoing. I have very few that are actually closed. The series of 19th-century portraits that were made from found negatives is the most conceptual of my works. They're a classic New York portrait or American portrait from the 1870s, 1880s. I wanted to explore them in this kind of life-size scale, and I went out and looked for them and found them and knew exactly how I wanted to print them.

**VK** Were those daguerreotypes or photographs?

**GS** They were negatives. If I change scale with them, it's a very dramatic shift in meaning. Actually, these *19th-Century Women* I've never printed in any other size. The botanical series, which is also made from my negatives, works very differently in a different scale, and I'm interested in that. With the microscope slides, they're in one format, because it's about the explosion of information, bringing it up to you in a cinematic way, so that you're inside the information. All my work deals with the same kinds of issues—looking at something under a microscope, looking at the information very close up. When I'm photographing things, like when I'm photographing the botanicals or photographing these faces, I frame them, I leave the camera open, and then I light them, light half of the face. So they're not setups. The



(Left) Gary Schneider, *Anemone*, toned gelatin silver (36x29 in.), 1990. (Right) Gary Schneider, *Poppy*, toned gelatin silver (36x29 in.), 1991.

tographers who are specifically making images. I think there's becoming a very clear distinction between those two things.

**VK** In what way? It seems what you're saying is where there isn't a need for beauty or for physicality of an object, there's a way to avoid that.

**GS** In the end, I think I would like to lose the darkroom. I don't mind losing the darkroom eventually, but the way in which you can experiment in photography, the way in which you can play in this medium, it's very much a drawing medium, rather than a conceptual one. I'm making and exploring, rather than preconceiving, and I think the digital technologies require a certain preconception.

**VK** You have a physical interaction with the object.

**GS** What was interesting to me was not particularly film production, but the editing process. It's a very intuitive process, literally working through the material like collected information. For me, what happens in the darkroom is this sifting through what I have on the negative and making it have meaning out there.

**VK** How does that process differ from one series to another? For example, the work you've done from microscope slides—would that require as much work by you in the printing process as the faces, as many different variations?

**GS** Oh, definitely.

**VK** How do you turn a slide into a print?

**GS** I put it in the enlarger and make a print directly from the slide itself; there's no negative. I was also very interested in surface and how one thing builds on the other and informs the other. I was interested in surface and how that in itself can talk about space, and that's how *Peyton* happened. She's at the end of that exploration. It's so bizarre where her surface becomes—I don't know if it's a metaphor, but actually it becomes a way to explore other space. The microscope slides were matter; they're material. The *Hands* come directly out of the microscope slides. A hand print is the sweat of my hand embedded into a film emulsion with a flashed shadow to enclose it. It's information. It's the sweat making information in the emulsion!

**VK** What I see a lot in your work is the issue of mortality—an unnatural or unpredictable darkness of the flesh and a kind of deterioration of the surface, a disintegration.

**GS** Obviously, I'm interested in issues of mortality. They obsess me, and they have for too long now, so that obsession is obviously invested in the work. I don't go out to make a statement about mortality, except that the hand prints started out as autobiography. There are only two negatives that I play with. I realized that I could manipulate them so excessively that I could start to make a tonal story, literally. I could choose tones that were descriptive of other things. I started to compose them like tonal portraits of people I could no longer photograph,



so they become memorials for me for friends who are dead, or who no longer can be photographed, even though it's my hand. It's a process that I don't want to subject certain people to. So death—or mortality, the nature of mortality—is something that I'm fascinated by, and I find a kind of peace in. I'm interested in taking myself and also the viewer into a world that is a little unsettling but not frightening. I suppose the darkness of it, or the way in which, as you described, the flesh seems to be disintegrating or coming apart is a very unsettling thing to notice.

**VK** At first glance, something seems unnatural. There seems to be a dark aura over the subject, a kind of darkness encroaching, but as you look at it, maybe your eyes become accustomed to it, and even the issue of mortality hanging over it—you realize that's a natural eventuality. So I see a distinction between what seems unnatural and what is natural.

**GS** But what is natural actually in a portrait?

**VK** Your work provokes one to question conceptions of normality. I think we have a received view of what things look like, and they may not always look like that.

**GS** In the end, I am choosing to enlarge insects and botanical specimens that have been dead for at least a century. Those 19th-century women are definitely gone, a century ago, and I'm interested in that.

**VK** What attracted you about the particular women you chose as images for that series?

**GS** I didn't have that much choice, actually. They were a set of portraits that I found, and they had already been somewhat edited, even though they come out of the studio.

**VK** But you could have gone on in your search.

**GS** No, these were good enough, and what I liked about them is that they were totally plain. They were consistent. The studio had a system. They had a skylight, and they had a specific distance from the camera, and they had a plain background, and all you have really is a somewhat adorned face, right? You look very carefully at the clothing, and the clothing is Sun-

day best. So you have fashion, but it's consistent through all nine of them. What you have is the difference between the faces. They're totally unveiled; they are presenting themselves. They would never have seen a portrait this enlarged. They probably would have seen it on a contact sheet, which would have been about 2-1/4x3-1/4 in. So in a way they're unembellished prints. I've enlarged them to describe them as clearly as I could and make them as present as I could. I exaggerated the lighting on the eyes in the process to have the eyes really make contact with you.

**VK** Your botanical studies remind me of Blossfeldt. Is your process with them similar to the portraits? Is it a long exposure time?

**GS** Yes. Some of the images are built over a very long period of time—months—and it's all sitting on one sheet of film. I will montage inside the camera. You can close up the negative, take it out, reframe. It's like an evolving drawing as I'm doing it. In fact, this *Anemone* is the same blossom, the same flower, described four times. It's like those botanical studies in etchings from the 17th and 18th century. There's one I did much later, a vegetable, which actually led me back to biology class, where you do drawings of a bean sprouting. That one took three or four months to do.

**VK** When you engage in that process, as in *Anemone*, photographing at least four different times, can you see the previous image as you're doing the next one?

**GS** I've made a drawing.

**VK** So you know where the image is, and you reposition it.

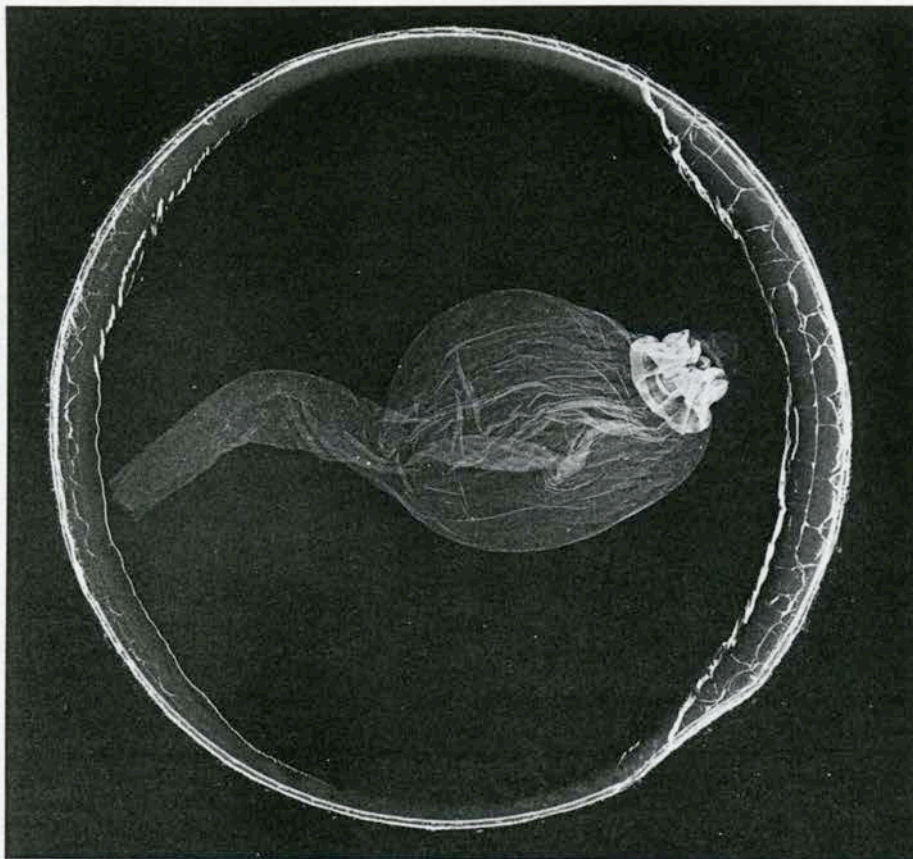
**GS** I know exactly where it is, and actually I've done a portrait that way, too, where each part of the face was a different exposure. The face was recomposed for each stage. It was the same day, but each was a different framing.

**VK** Which plant is this?

**GS** Exactly, it's a rose! Making something so personally described that it becomes something else. What it is is a rose being pulled apart.

**VK** It almost looks more like flesh than a rose.





Gary Schneider, *Entomological Specimen #8* (28-3/4x30-3/4 in.), 1992.

that I'm showing you, maybe a little earlier, and they were made by putting a camera up to the lens of a microscope and making a negative. So there was always this fascination of saved information, fixed in the emulsion.

**VK** What do you call this series?

**GS** These are the *Entomologicals*. They're insects or parts of insects. I found these negatives in the Caribbean, and I loved them as objects and as negatives. I bought them as themselves and then brought them back here. They were already disintegrating; they'd been attacked by microorganisms and so on. Immediately I brought them here, they dried out. They started to flake, they started to become powder, so I called every conservator I could get hold of, and the only thing they told me to do was to make a negative from the negative. In other words, to make an interneg, make a copy negative, and I realized I wasn't interested in them as images. I was really much more interested in them as objects, as negatives. So I didn't do that. I thought, "Why bother? I should just dump them." And in the meantime I could play with them in the darkroom and see what they could give me and conserve them that way.

**VK** These are very different from the *Entomological Specimens* you showed me before.

**GS** Yes, exactly, because these are by an amateur scientist, sitting with a microscope. These aren't on commercial film. That's why they disintegrated. These are on a gelatin emulsion. By putting his camera up to this microscope and having the light behind the thing, he was able to create this negative. So all the elements are in place for me, and it gave me all the information I needed to play with the space.

**VK** These originals are from the 1870s?

**GS** 1870s, 1880s. I don't know the exact date, it's impossible to really know, but that's when those emulsions existed. I realized that since this person no longer existed there was no problem of shifting authorship. I could just assume them totally and play with them absolutely and make them into the kinds of explorations that I needed them to be. I didn't quite realize I was doing that, but I was trying to conserve them. I was trying to conserve them and trying *not* to make them look old particularly.

**VK** So you don't have any information about them? You don't know if they were made in the Caribbean? They could have been made somewhere else.

**GS** I just assumed that they were made in the same place. I think being a colonial was like being inside of a microscope. I've inherited, in being South African, this obsession with looking at things up close. This is what all my work is—looking at things really up close. I want the person who made these slides to have been a colonial, stuck there without anything to do but to live inside of his microscope! That's my fantasy about this author.

**Vincent Katz** is a poet and musician living in New York.

**GS** But don't they all look like flesh? I think Blossfeldt achieves that, where all of a sudden the surface takes on other meaning.

**VK** And also he finds imagery in the surfaces of the plants.

**GS** Yes. At a certain point, I went for meaning that was already built in. There's a mythology about the poppy, for example. When you have "poppy" in your head, you have a sense of a certain quality, the essential quality. I went out to find that quality, take it, and develop it till it becomes mine.

**VK** This seems somewhat different from how you proceeded in the *Portraits*.

**GS** Well, no, it's not. It's actually exactly how I proceeded in the *Portraits*. Because I know those people so well, I already knew what they could give me. It was almost a built-in meaning.

**VK** You did set out to achieve a certain result?

**GS** I think I actually always do, in a way. But then what happens is that, once the person comes into the studio, something else occurs, this other intention, because of what they bring in that day. What happens afterwards is more fascinating, because my relationship with that person is irrevocably changed. It's a very intimate process; there's a kind of sharing; and there's definitely a trust, both ways, actually. It's very important for me that the subject see the portrait before it gets put out into the world. I believe that portraits are a very powerful form, but they're also a kind of theft, always.

**VK** Or a gift?

**GS** Well, I'd like to think of them as a gift, but definitely at the same time—yeah, it's a gift to the subject, I hope it's a gift to the subject—but I want the subject to make the decision that this is OK. To be in the world. And it's often a process where they will see their portrait, and then it's like, "I don't want to see this part of myself. This is not what I'd like to show."

**VK** Have you had someone say, "I really don't want you to show that"?

**GS** So far not. I've had someone say, "I really don't want you to show that" and then reconsidered. That's happened several times, and I've gone back and gotten feedback from the subject, too, which helps me to find another kind of core. It's not only light and surface and work. There really is an exploration of subject. In fact, with these *Entomological Specimens* it becomes clearly defined.

**VK** With prints made from slides, do you tend to remember what the subject is?

**GS** I try to forget what it is, actually. Sometimes it's not so easy to forget, but I want to have transformed it into my biology. People always ask what they are. I have to go back and look at the slide, and sometimes it's not described there.

**VK** It doesn't really matter, in terms of the image.

**GS** Well, doesn't it? I mean, in a way there's a voice here. There's a history of microphotography. In fact, the first things that I worked from were made from negatives I found about the same time as these *Entomological Specimens*