

The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, APRIL 4, 2003

Gary Schneider

*Julie Saul Gallery
535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through April 19*

Gary Schneider knows that there is more than one way to take, or make, a photograph. But his latest works — big color portraits — are especially strange in appearance and, it turns out, technique.

They evince an unusual combination of waxy pall, burnished color and shadow. The faces glimmer out of the dark shadows that play across their skin like soot. They could be coalminers getting off work, or lost souls brought back from the dead and freshly made up. Or perhaps they have floated to the surface of some dark liquid that has left a filmy residue on their skin.

In fact, these portraits were taken as their subjects lay motionless on a table beneath a suspended camera pointing straight down. Using long exposures, Mr. Schneider spends up to 30 minutes on a ladder, moving a tiny pen-light back and forth over the faces in an otherwise dark studio. The first clues to this process, which resembles drawing, are the peculiar squiggling lines of light on the lenses of the glasses worn by a woman named Shirley.

The results are about as far from snapshots as you can get. Mr. Schneider has extended the basic photographic instant of light hitting an object in time as well as space, specifying each instant of light — and its intensity — point by point. But he has also extended the emotional exposure that most people feel in front of the camera, while disrupting the usual formalities of posing, both conscious and not, with the relaxing pull of horizontality. His subjects are in a sense playing dead with their eyes open, which may be the ultimate source of the work's eeriness.

ROBERTA SMITH
