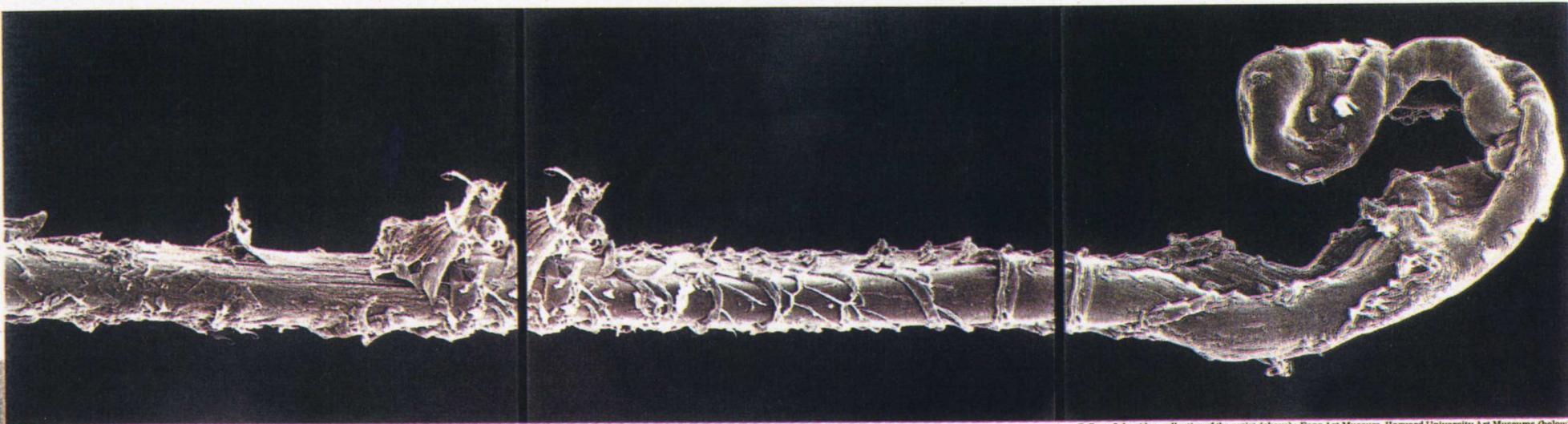


## ART



© Gary Schneider, collection of the artist (above); Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums (below)

# When the Artist Is the Curiosity Cabinet

Gary Schneider, Former Victorian Portraitist, Now Inventories His Own Insides

By SARAH BOXER

CAMBRIDGE, Mass

**G**ARY SCHNEIDER makes portraits. But he has a slippery idea of what a portrait is and what it means to make one.

During the 1980's, he printed photographs for Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz, Bruce Davidson, Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Richard Avedon. (He took particular note of the way Mr. Avedon waits for his subjects to lose their composure before snapping the shutter.)

Then, in 1987, Mr. Schneider started working with dead photographers, printing pictures of insects from old glass negatives. "The author wasn't present, and I could explore myself; I could adjoin myself with the author," he said, speaking at Harvard University's Arthur M. Sackler Museum here, where an exhibition of his work, "Gary Schneider: Portraits," organized by Deborah Martin Kao, is now hanging.

In 1990, Mr. Schneider, 49, who was born in South Africa, found some anonymous late-Victorian portrait negatives at a flea market. He printed them large and named a set of them "Carte de Visite." Does he really consider them his own? "It was me acting as myself in the darkroom," he said. "I was working with work that might otherwise disappear." The pictures are, he added, "responses to the appropriations of Sherrie Levine, who

takes the works of male photographers and makes them her own." That is a yes. They are his.

What he likes about the late-Victorian portraits is that the subjects have no "camera face." First, these people had no experience with photography. And second, the exposure time was too long. Consider the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, the photographer with whom Mr. Schneider admits an obsession. She needed eight minutes to expose the wet glass plate for a single portrait. No subject can hold a camera face that long, even with clamps to steady the head.

Inspired by Cameron, Mr. Schneider began making "durational portraits" of his friends and relatives. He had them lie supine in the dark. For up to 30 minutes, he explored their faces part by part, with a flashlight, while the camera shutter was open. With such a long exposure, you can't control what comes out, he said. In 1996, using this technique, he made one of his best-known works, a facial portrait, shot in bits and pieces, of his companion, John Erdman, "John in 16 Parts."

Eventually, Mr. Schneider limited himself to Cameron's eight-minute exposure and switched to color-transparency film. One of the resulting large portraits, "Helen," has eyes that don't go together. What happened? "She coughed," he explained. A lot is left to chance, but Mr. Schneider still prides himself on being a puppet master. "I can make the subject blink by lighting the eye with a flashlight. I'm asking the subject to blink."

In time, the idea that a botanical specimen could serve as a portrait crept into his work. In 1992, Mr. Schneider began making botanical pictures from 19th-century microscope slides. A year later he began producing photoerams by placing his own hand down on



negative film, waiting for the emulsion to absorb the sweat from his palm.

"It wasn't a photo but a piece of my hand, a specimen," he said. From one negative he made a set of memorial pictures, manipulating the prints while medi-

*A microscopic image of a hair from Gary Schneider's "Genetic Self-Portrait" series, above, and his "John in 16 Parts."*

tating on the dead: the photographer Peter Hujar, the performer Ethyl Eichelberger and Mr. Schneider's mother, Mirriam. The hand pictures, he said, "became very private memorials." In a more traditional vein, if you can call it that, he had each of his family members put their own hands on the emulsion. "It is more private than a portrait of a face," he said. More like a handshake.

Mr. Schneider turned further inward in 1996. With the help of various scientists, he harvested his own microscopic biological images: pictures of his retinas, his hair, his sperm, his chromosomes. It is what "being inside of me" looks like, he said. The resulting work, "Genetic Self-Portrait," seems to bring everything Schneiderian into play: it is metaphorical yet factual, old-fashioned yet contemporary, generic yet deeply personal. And it raises that slippery idea of authorship. He knows that a scientist took the picture and he does feel a twinge of co-authorship. But, he says, "it's my work."

The latest of these kinds of works began with a crude proposal. In 1999, Mr. Schneider asked a scientist: "Do you mind looking at my stool in a nondiagnostic way?" When the scientist agreed, Mr. Schneider proceeded to eat all kinds of bad stuff — chocolate, blue cheese — "to get things stirred up." With the resulting photograph, a triptych of his intestinal flora, he returned to his botanical roots, but without leaving himself behind. □

## 'Gary Schneider: Portraits'

Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.  
Through June 13.