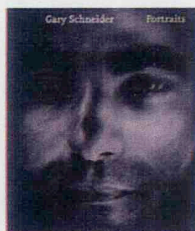


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## Finding Gary Schneider

At Harvard's recent symposium on photography, GARY SCHNEIDER and DENISE WOLFF discussed what it means to gaze intently.

"HOW WILL YOU KNOW WHO I AM?" Gary Schneider asked. "Not to worry," I replied, "I've seen your intestinal flora." And with nothing more specific asked or offered, Gary Schneider and I hung up having agreed to find each other at Harvard University's symposium, "Aspects of Contemporary Photography" where his photographs provide the centerpiece exhibition. I never gave another thought to how difficult it might really be to identify Schneider in the crowd. I had seen so much of him in his new book, *Portraits*—his hands, his chromosomes, his retinas, and various body imprints, along with his parents, his partner, and his friends. *Portraits* catalogues the Schneider retrospective mounted at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum until June 13th—from his early films and SX-70 Polaroids, through his hand and long exposure portraits, to his monumental "Genetic Self-Portrait." The exhibit is presented in conjunction with the symposium, which provided an interdisciplinary forum to discuss the themes raised by Schneider's work. I had traveled to Harvard to see the exhibit, to listen to the latest conversations in contemporary photography, and to situate Gary's work appropriately in the midst of them.

As I walked through Schneider's show for the first time, the long exposure portraits in both black-and-white and color absolutely astonished me. They ranged in scale from very human-sized contact prints of his parents to five-foot color portraits of people close to the artist. Using exposure times ranging from eight minutes to upwards of thirty minutes, Schneider moves a flashlight (his sole source of light) over the subject's face attentive to how they respond to the intimate portraiture process. Though Schneider wields the light at specific, individual moments, the film records the diverse responses as a totality on one frame. Thus, subtle shifts in movement, expression, and emotion, occurring throughout the exposure, are presented as one continuous face. The spectacular exhibition acted as an apt emblem for the symposium on contemporary photography.

The symposium included a series of engaging speakers and a lively, intelligent audience. Harvard's photography curator, Deborah Martin Kao, who organized the exhibition and symposium, identified several current "aspects" at play in contemporary photography: identity and privacy, performance and conceptual art, appropriation and the archive, and process as art. Though these are important in Schneider's work, the symposium addressed them in a much broader context and through the work of many artists—Thomas Ruff, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Catherine

Wagner, and Susan Derges to name a few. Most notable in the line-up of speakers, Richard Woodward spoke brilliantly about the photograph as both evidence and crime in today's society of surveillance and internet porn. The whole event held up, examined, and challenged ideas of art and the photographic medium in an intellectually athletic day.

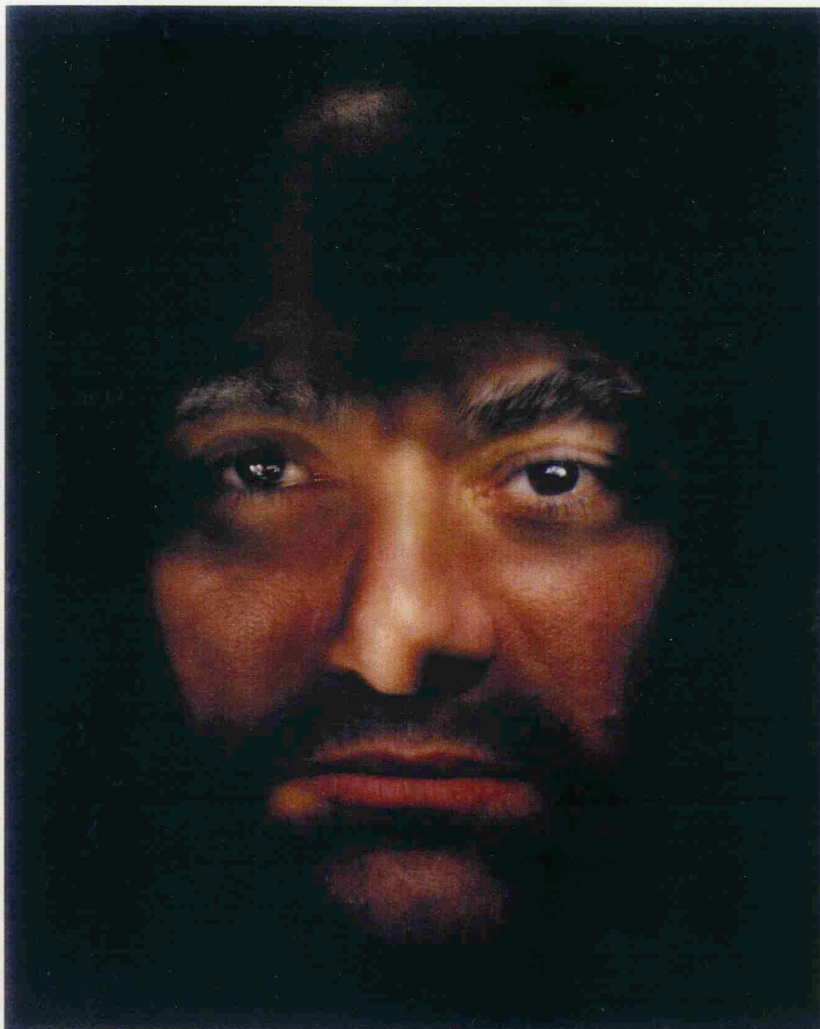
Yet, even as the day waned, Gary Schneider, the artist at the heart of the symposium, remained elusive. I'm not sure I can say exactly what features I looked for as I tried to find him based on his "Genetic Self-portrait," but I felt that anyone around me could potentially be Gary Schneider. Despite my earlier bravura, his basic cellular matter and even his face imprint left me without an effective way of recognizing him. I scanned the crowd and listened for his distinct South African

accent to no avail. My quest reminded me of Roland Barthes' famously absent Winter Garden photograph. Barthes teases the reader in *Camera Lucida* by describing the mysterious picture of his mother throughout the text without revealing it. He

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believed it would be meaningless to the reader, its only value coming from the ideas it generated in Barthes' complex discourse on representation.

Luckily, in the end, finding Gary Schneider never became that postmodern. When I finally discovered him at the end of the day, he was every bit what one would hope an artist inspiring the themes of the symposium would be: handsome, clever, and effortlessly hip; he appeared, much like his photographs,



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as if he were lit from within. We had an engaging conversation about the symposium, his process, and his various bodies of work.

**DW** After undertaking the "Genetic Self-Portrait" with the help of doctors and scientists do you believe that your body's internal processes have some bearing on your identity or personality?

**GS** I'm using the scientific model of identification and also my body as a means to express ideas. But, if you're not a scientist, these specimens could be anyone; they could be you. They identify, but they're an impossible form of identification without the face. At the same time, they could be used for scientific illustration though I've also translated them as art objects. I've printed them large to explore them like a landscape and manipulated them extremely in the darkroom. I treat the samples as if they were an appropriated image, where the specimen is raw material for interpretation. I'm not interested in finding resolution or exact identi-



fiction, but in the process of art making. The scientist searches for answers and certainty, but my role as an artist is to open questions and interpretations.

DW I'm fascinated with the intense gaze of the durational portraits. I know you direct the subject to "locate" the lens during the session, even though the room is dark. Yet, this is strange since you are not behind the camera. I imagine I would feel compelled to look at you as you moved around me. What does it mean that their gaze is directed to the camera/viewer?

GS I want them to be aware of me, but to focus on their own experience. I use the lens as a distraction from my activity and have to remind them of the lens so that they'll concentrate. The subject is very self-conscious in the beginning because of the unfamiliar situation. During the exposure, I converse with them more than I direct. I'm aware of how the subject is responding and pick appropriate times to act with the light. Over the exposure time, they become more meditative and introspective, turning inward. So, I try to leave as much time as possible between the first eye, close to the beginning of the exposure, and the second, which is at the end of the exposure, so I can record this shift beyond the self-conscious,



beyond the camera face into meditative space. During the exposure, the subject blinks and sometimes I remind them to blink, but the camera records the eyes as open. So you see the gaze as open, which is an aggregate of the physical act of being open. So I'm searching for the sublime both for myself in the process and for the viewer who the subject essentially "locates" in the lens.

DW What do you think of your work in book form? Are you happy with *Portraits*?

GS I'm very pleased with *Portraits* and the exquisite reproductions...and the affordable price. The photo book is unique in a way. In an art book of sculpture or painting, the true work is always somewhere else outside of the book. It cannot be seriously represented in book form. Photography books are wonderful because they present a valid version of the work. And this is very gratifying.

DW Not long after I got the book, I placed my hand over the photograph of your hand, physically touching it. I know I would not touch the surface of an expensive print or do this in a museum.

GS Yes, yes. Certainly you could not do this with the more precious object or in the public space of the gallery. Since my images are very, very private, the book provides a space for more intimate viewing and interaction.

DW During the symposium, ICP's Brian Wallis talked about the difficulties of creating portraits in a postmodern culture that critiques the very idea of a unified identity. I think his reading resonated with the artists he examined, like Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. But he did not address your images. Is there a way in which your work resists this kind of interpretation? And in what ways are you in dialogue with the postmodern?

GS It was fascinating to listen to him and hear his own desire, what motivates him as a critic. But my work is simply not motivated by critique. I'm using performance in my process though I'm not influenced by Cindy Sherman. And I've been fascinated by the idea of the found object since 1987. I treat the specimens in my "Genetic Self-Portrait" as appropriated objects. So, I'm reacting to Sherrie Levine's appropriated images but also very influenced by Marcel Duchamp's found objects. I'm working

with some of the same ideas as the postmodern artists, but employing them to a different end, one based in the personal rather than the critical. So, I often do not fit neatly into a postmodern reading at all.

DW Perhaps it's radical to be producing work without an implicit critique.

GS Yes. What you're seeing in my photo-



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graphs is me working through the process of art making. It's completely dark in my studio when I make a portrait and also in the darkroom, so in a way, I'm always feeling my way through the dark. And the work just comes together there, all of a sudden.

Nietzsche claims that the truest seeker seeks not truth in the labyrinth, but his own Ariadne. In this, I am reminded of Gary Schneider seeking not truth or monsters but the threads of the other, of the self, and of Ariadne, the very symbol of art making. And where Roland Barthes never revealed his Winter Garden photograph because of its deeply personal meaning—"It exists only for me. For you it would be nothing but an indifferent picture...in it, for you, no wound"—Gary Schneider journeys beyond this conceit. He produces exactly what Barthes restricts in his postmodern exploration of photography. He reveals what is deeply private, what has the utmost personal meaning to him—and it does wound.

*Gary Schneider: Portraits*, published by Yale University Press. New Haven. 126 pages, 3 gatefolds, 30 halftones and 100 color illustrations. Cat# YU059S \$24.95

Denise Wolff is a photographer and writer in Washington, DC.