

# Art in America

February 2005

# Gary Schneider: Facing Time



*Gary Schneider: Ellen, 2004, pigmented ink print,  
80 by 40 inches.*



*Terrell, 2004, pigmented ink print,  
80 by 40 inches.*



Using a lengthy exposure and a handheld flashlight to illuminate his subjects, photographer Gary Schneider creates large-format portraits—holistic body vistas, each of which is also the record of a performance.

## BY TREVOR FAIRBROTHER

**G**ary Schneider, who was born in South Africa in 1954, is best known today for *Genetic Self-Portrait*. This expansive and dramatically heterogeneous work depicts the exterior and interior of the artist's body. The core group of 14 photographs dates from 1997-98, and there have been a few subsequent additions. Schneider generated some of the images simply by pressing himself against the emulsion of a sheet of film. Most of the negatives, however, stem from collaborations with medical researchers in New York; they range from X-rays to shots of chromosomes tagged with fluorescent markers. *Genetic Self-Portrait* had a special appeal during the turn of the millennium, for it evoked a frontier where portraiture might take cues from new scientific endeavors, including the Human Genome Project.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, *Genetic Self-Portrait* is one of the highlights of curator Deborah Martin Kao's recent exhibition titled "Gary Schneider: Portraits."<sup>2</sup> Most welcome, however, is Kao's thorough examination of the artist's work since 1975, for she maps the unusual trajectory that Schneider's career has taken. As an art student in Cape Town, he loved to paint, but soon followed the latest trends he read about in magazines from overseas. Thus Vito Acconci's synthesis of performance, photography and conceptual art became the template for Schneider's ambition. By 1979 he had settled in New York, where he worked as a light and sound technician in Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater and started to exhibit his photographs, present solo performance pieces and make experimental films. When lack of funds stifled his work in film, Schneider made his living as a master printer for a variety of successful photographers, starting with Lisette Model. He did not exhibit his own work in New York between 1982 and 1991.

Schneider's current project is a series of full-length nude portraits of friends and acquaintances that he began after Kao put together her exhibition. In marked contrast to the microscopic analysis that prevails in *Genetic Self-Portrait*, these nudes are holistic vistas of the body as physical and emotional actuality. The intensity of the exchange between the artist and his nude subjects is as evident in *Erick* (2002), an early example, as it is in such recent works as *Ellen*, *Terrell* and *Jeanne* (all 2004). But it is pointless to impose any narrow definition on the series, given the striking differences among these four portraits. Each subject combines awkward, grand, graceful and miraculous qualities in a personal way, and all are shrouded in thoughts that we may sense but never know. The nude portraits are as compassionate as they are intimate, but there is also a palpable feeling that the sitters are working in some way to endure the event. The scrutinizing artist and his exposed sitters are all committed to the inert artifact that will outlive them: a photograph. It is perhaps also useful to know that Schneider took a legal risk by not hiding his homosexuality when he was a student in South Africa. The elements of danger and bravery in his new nude photographs recall a self-portrait made when he was 22: a grid of 10 double-exposed Polaroid prints in which the artist's staring face is veiled with spectral images of male genitals and buttocks.<sup>3</sup>

To produce his nudes Schneider uses a large-format camera and practices a flashlight technique he developed in the late 1980s. The subject lies on a black cloth spread on the floor, while the armature of a big camera stand holds the lens over the middle of the body. Once the shutter has been opened, the small flashlight becomes the only source of illumination in the pitch-dark room. Treating one small bodily area at a time, Schneider moves the flashlight in rapid swirls that recall a pencil making scribbles or a brush working up a covering of paint. His route around the body is always the same, with each stop devoted to a specific zone, such as the forehead or hand. Each time he turns on the flashlight, he counts out loud to time the exposure. Schneider's noises, movements, and his sporadic coaching give the sitting a ritual aspect not immediately evident in the resulting



Jeanne, 2004, pigmented ink print, 80 by 40 inches.



**Schneider's portrait of an anemone in full bloom is weirdly nocturnal; his moody lighting encourages the association of flowers and mourning.**



*Anemone*, 1990, gelatin silver print, 36 by 29 inches.

photograph, though his subjects have commented on it. Both parties improvise and contribute to a performance.

The use of a flashlight for finessing tones is a technique familiar to photographers who specialize in still life. Schneider learned of it from New York photographer Peter Hujar, who was both a friend and a client of his printing business. Flowers were among the first subjects Schneider tackled when he began to experiment with a flashlight. He connects his choice to the fact that biology "was the only class in school in which I was really happy," and fondly recalls the pleasure of making botanical diagrams and watching time-lapse films of plants growing.<sup>4</sup> *Anemone* (1990) typifies the combination of lyrical and quasi-scientific impulses he was pursuing. Schneider exposed the plate four times, carefully moving the flower to different places on the background. By diligently limiting the flashlight's movements during the exposures he gave the anemone a luminous vitality and kept the enveloping space murky. While the exquisite sharpness of the image recalls the scientific fidelity of classic botanical illustrations, the chiaroscuro and greatly enlarged scale wed facts with supernatural effects. Schneider's portrait of an anemone in full bloom is weirdly nocturnal, and his moody lighting encourages the association of flowers and mourning.

Early in 1991 the photographer Nan Goldin invited Schneider to participate in a group show at St. Lawrence University in upstate New York. The exhibition, titled "From Desire: A Queer Diary," marked his reemergence as an exhibiting artist. The two works he submitted were *Anemone* and a flashlight image of a

man's hand, neck and chest (*Hand*, 1989). "From Desire" was part of a festival devoted to work by lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. The project urged solidarity and empowerment at a time when AIDS was taking an appalling toll on the arts community and stigmatization ran rampant across the country. Goldin wrote in the accompanying brochure: "The community after ten long years of the AIDS crisis is not just surviving but flourishing, and art has been a binding force, a format of unification, an outcry and an arsenal."<sup>5</sup> While Schneider's *Anemone* is not an activist statement, its inspiration and qualities cannot be separated from the early years of the AIDS epidemic. When he exhibited nine of his still lifes in New York in 1992, the critic Elizabeth Hess wrote: "Stripped of their natural colors and turned innumerable shades of gray, the flowers become morose. All together [the photographs] form a funereal bouquet, offering their dark beauty as a remembrance. . . . 'Botanicals,' Schneider's title for the works, suggests a scientific investigation of the material, but what we see is more enigmatic than fact or reason."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to making his own negatives, Schneider took an interest in using historic, timeworn negatives as the starting point for his artistic statements in the late 1980s. He first exhibited this kind of photograph in 1991. "Carte de Visite," a suite of nine large prints, was shown in Manhattan in the same month that Goldin's "From Desire" project was on view upstate. Schneider had recently salvaged a group of Victorian glass negatives—all half-length shots of middle-class women posed against a plain dark background—and he set out to give new life to these petty scraps of history. Knowing that 100 years earlier they would have been printed in postcard size, he was eager to reinterpret them through enlargement. He wanted to "unveil a previously undetectable exposure of the subject" and to capture each woman as "a transported soul."<sup>7</sup> In the printing process he "exaggerated the lighting on the eyes . . . to have the eyes really make contact with you."<sup>8</sup> Schneider also used his skills as a printer to derive esthetic interest from the damage that time had wrought on the negatives. Rather than minimize any signs of distress, he allowed its traces to be as sharp as the lines of jewelry and lace. The "Carte de Visite" pictures slowly foster unease by gently

*Carte de Visite* (no. 1), 1990, gelatin silver print, 37 by 28 inches.





summoning an awareness of the fragility of human flesh, the irrelevance of personal possessions and the marks of time's progress.

The groundwork for Schneider's nudes lies primarily in his two series of portrait heads. He began a series of black-and-white heads in 1989, and a color group in 1999. Pictures in the first group are 3 feet high, the others 5 feet. He presents them in simple frames with no mat. The sittings take place in the dark using the flashlight technique. The subject is lying down, and the artist photographs the parts of the face in a specific order: forehead, hair, right eye, right side of nose, right cheek, lips, chin, left cheek, left side of nose, left eye and then a slight outlining of the whole form. The black-and-white portraits had an exposure time that ranged from 20 minutes to an hour, whereas the color works take about eight minutes. The most curious visual effects of these long-exposure portraits reflect the fact that the sitter inevitably moves: a nose may seem to divide or turn a corner, and eyes may drift out of alignment and convey different expressions. When compared to a conventional fast exposure, one of Schneider's negatives may be said to have a greater accumulation of glimpses of the living subject, even though it may produce an image that seems imprecise or unstable.

Schneider exercises control when using his flashlight to expose the negative, but equally important to him is the solitary process during which he decides on the look of any given print. He is particularly interested in the visual editing he performs in the darkroom or, in the case of the color work, on a computer. Schneider thinks of his negative as "information" that he has collected; he describes print production as an intuitive process of "sifting through" the contents of the negative in search of an image that will speak to the present.<sup>9</sup> *Badomi* (1999), a fine example of these tender yet complicated pictures, confirms that the artist's preferred realm is one where questions and uncertainties are welcome. His work in printing *Badomi* involved the basic options any artist weighs when deciding on the look of a portrait. In real life the woman is a performance artist distinguished by her striking pallor, but in this portrait she exists as a shadowy and mysterious character. By allowing the unlit areas of the face to be uneven Schneider seems to suggest both injury and sturdy resilience. His esthetic sensibility leans easily toward the handcrafted, and *Badomi* might usefully be compared to a drawing: van Gogh's *Peasant of the Camargue*, made in Arles at harvest time in 1888. The Dutchman produced this ink sketch to send in the mail to Theo van Gogh, so that his brother might have a sense of his recent oil portrait of the same peasant. The astonishing array of brown ink marks made with a reed pen embody van Gogh's intuitive efforts to translate to ink and paper the vibrant colors, ruffled textures and turbulent brushstrokes of the painted portrait. Schneider shares with van Gogh a creaturely interest in reaching out to a kindred soul, and this impulse powerfully informs Schneider's portrait heads and nudes. As for van Gogh, when he sent the drawing to Theo he included this comment: "I wanted to paint a poor old peasant, whose features bear a very strong resemblance to Father, only he is coarser, bordering on caricature. Nevertheless, I should have been very keen to do him exactly like the poor peasant that he is."<sup>10</sup>

There is certainly a painterly aspect to Schneider's work, but the history of photography, rather than painting and drawing, exerts the most direct influence on his practice. He regularly acknowledges the primary importance of that great Victorian original Julia Margaret Cameron. Disdaining the exactitude and immediacy that soon made photography endlessly appealing to commercial exponents of the medium, Cameron chose to make lyrical and ennobling explorations of



*Badomi*, 1999, chromogenic print, 60 by 48 inches.

light, shadow, form and texture. Schneider has observed that Cameron's photographs gave him the urge to make portraits that feel "very present." He argues that Cameron's subjects were innocent in a way that we can never know, for their childhood years had not taught them how to project a "camera face." He also thinks that Cameron's eight-minute exposures softened up the defensive social reserve of the sitter. According to Schneider, she reveals whatever is going on "inside that mask."<sup>11</sup>

There are also instructive parallels between Schneider's work and two photographers who explored painterly and imaginative renderings of the body. Man Ray's use of the darkroom technique called solarization was a facet of his devotion to Surrealism in the 1920s. By making a quick flash of light when developing a print he was able to introduce—without really controlling—peculiar accidents of tone that defamiliarize the image. Schneider does not use this process, but he is obviously committed to experimentation with light and to prints in which tones and shading veer away from objective reality. Lucas Samaras was similarly inventive with his "Photo-Transformation" series of 1973 [see *AiA*, Feb. '97 and Sept. '04]. Working with Polaroid's new SX-70 instant film, he found countless obsessive ways to modify the 3-inch-square pictures while they were

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# Schneider

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developing before him. There are affinities—both procedural and psychological—between Samaras's scratching and rubbing and Schneider's exploring and probing via flashlight and printer. Both artists improvise as they entice the mundane visible world toward the uncanny.

There are many historical works of art that address the body's fateful relation to time in ways that bring Schneider's new nude portraits to mind. Two such objects in particular seem worth mentioning, though I do not mean to imply that Schneider was influenced by either of them. My goal is merely to show instances of what I take to be a similar visual and intellectual engagement with the theme of transience.

William Blake's study for the illustration *The Soul hovering over the Body, reluctantly parting with Life* (published in 1808) is one of several drawings made in response to Robert Blair's popular poem "The Grave" (first published in 1743). It shows the soul of a young woman who has been summoned by Death as she gazes on the strapping body of a sleeping man. The caption for the illustration quotes from Blair's poem: "How wishfully she looks on all she's leaving, now no longer hers!" Blake had visions of spirits who exist beyond the realm of normal sensory perception, and his art often sought to show a relationship between inner spirituality and its manifestations in the natural realm. In this drawing the artist imaginatively juxtaposes a flowing weightless spirit and a static monumental body, and it can be argued that Schneider's nudes seek to touch both these realms at the same time. *Jeanne* and *Terrell* (both 2004) revel in physicality, and yet, in the subtle happenstances of shadow, gesture and glance they seem to hint at higher consciousness. Both works evoke lightness and release, particularly in the ways in which the woman's body seems to float and the man's torso to arch—effects seemingly intrinsic to their respective physiques as positioned. It is not farfetched to suggest a connection between the underlying strangeness of Schneider's nudes and the romance of spirit worlds. In 1991 he acquired a collection of Victorian spirit photographs and attempted to make his own translations of some of the negatives in the manner of his recent "Carte de Visite" series. But Schneider quickly abandoned the spirit project, and his reasons for doing so say much about his disciplined esthetic: "No matter what I did they still looked too fake to me. They just belong so thoroughly to that particular time that they don't translate into a contemporary context at all."<sup>12</sup>

Hyman Bloom painted *Female Corpse, Front View* in 1945. It is one of several full-size paintings of cadavers inspired by a visit to the morgue of Boston's Kenmore Hospital. As Holland Cotter has observed: "Despite the fact that these paintings are surely a response to the Second World War, when hell on earth reigned at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Bloom refuses to reduce his subjects to emblems of irony or pity or anger. . . . He offers death and beauty as morally neutral and inextricably linked."<sup>13</sup> Thus Bloom's florid expressionist rendering of rotting flesh in *Female Corpse* addresses metamorphosis, the ongoing transformation of life forms and the transcendence of one individual. The crusty surfaces and Gothic jolt of Bloom's corpse paintings are a far cry from Schneider's nudes, but both artists share an interest in the passage of life. If death is clamorous in Bloom's *Corpse*, it is a quiet drone in Schneider's nudes, from the enveloping black setting to the sense that a life has been briefly arrested for the sake of the portrayal. In a recent interview Schneider states that he does not intend his nudes to be "meditations on mortality," and yet he also notes that the odd shading of the bodies "seems to be dirt or even decomposing flesh."<sup>14</sup> His nudes surely begin as an expression of reverence for life; they trace moments when the sitter can do little but lie still during the admiring study undertaken by the artist. His portrait of a pregnant woman (*Ellen*, 2004) deepens this association by showing one being who is waiting to bring forth another. Despite the joyful overtones of maternity, this photograph has an unsettling edge. The force of gravity on the recumbent figure adds to the distortion of an already swollen body, and the subject's slightly anxious demeanor complicates her robust and bountiful condition.

When I met Schneider for the first time about a year ago he volunteered that the nudes seem to reflect changes he has felt in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York in September 2001. That he lives close to the site of that

devastation might parallel in some respects his life as a gay man at the onset of the AIDS crisis, the period when he began his ambiguous still-life compositions and his portrait heads. While the recent nudes will prompt countless personal readings, they share a sense of being aware of time, and perhaps of experiencing it in a heightened way. John Erdman, an actor and performance artist who is also Schneider's domestic partner, has enriched the artist's sensibility, particularly through his knowledge of powerful moments in performance when time seems to stand still. Both men participated in Robert Wilson's *Edison* in New York in 1978 (Erdman performing on stage as Thomas Alva Edison, and Schneider working as a lighting technician). Three years earlier, in an essay aptly titled "Time To Think," Calvin Tomkins listed the most challenging innovations put forth by Wilson and his performers: "The apparent absence of narrative, the repetitiousness, and the slow movement, and, perhaps, the [invitation] to fall into a trancelike state of mind in which the imagination could run free."<sup>15</sup> Since the late 1970s, Erdman has been the subject of many of Schneider's photographs and has inspired the artist to find ways to make photographs that are pockets of time spent in intimate observation. A portrait by Schneider is a record of a performance, and the nudes make us especially aware of the episodes that make a life and the corporeal fragments that collectively house individuality. □

*This essay is drawn from my lecture of the same name delivered at the symposium "Aspects of Contemporary Photography," Harvard University Art Museums, Mar. 13, 2004. For their help with this project I am most grateful to Michael Dumas, Alexis Dunfee, John Erdman, Deborah Martin Kao, John T. Kirk, Gary Schneider, Catherine Tedford and Howard Yezerski.*

1. See Anne Thomas, "The Portrait in the Age of Genetic Mapping," in Gary Schneider, *Genetic Self-Portrait*, Syracuse, N.Y., Light Work, 1999. The first publications to feature this work included the *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 17, 1999 (an issue titled "The Millennium," with a text on Schneider by John Noble Wilford), and William A. Ewing, *The Century of the Body: 100 Photoworks*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2000.
2. Deborah Martin Kao, *Gary Schneider: Portraits*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Art Museums, 2004.
3. For an illustration see Kao, pl. 4.
4. Quoted in Kao, p. 105.
5. "From Desire" featured a broad range of art by 39 artists, including Nayland Blake, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Peter Hujar, Deborah Kass, Greer Lankton, Zoe Leonard, Siobhan Liddell, Jack Pierson and David Wojnarowicz.
6. Elizabeth Hess, "Gary Schneider," *The Village Voice*, June 16, 1992, p. 91.
7. Gary Schneider, "Statement on Carte de Visite," P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, April 1991.
8. Quoted in Vincent Katz, "Gary Schneider: An Interview," *Print Collector's Newsletter*, March-April, 1996, p. 13. When Schneider exhibited "Carte de Visite" at P.P.O.W. Gallery in 1991, Vince Aletti drew a connection with the neo-expressionist photographs of Mike and Doug Starr before stressing the singular power of Schneider's psychological questing: "Though the flawed surfaces suggest a Starnesque attack on the conventional image, the subjects—their yearning, wariness, contempt, or confusion preserved a century later—gaze out at us with a complicated humanity that's both eloquent and seductive." See the *Village Voice*, Apr. 16, 1991, p. 113.
9. Quoted in Katz, p. 13.
10. See catalogue entry by Harry Cooper in Stephan Wolohojian, ed., *A Private Passion: 19th-Century Paintings and Drawings from the Grenville L. Winthrop Collection*, Harvard University, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003, pp. 145-46.
11. See Schneider's comments on Julia Margaret Cameron in Katz, p. 12.
12. Comments made in 2002, quoted in Kao, p. 110; this catalogue (pp. 14, 108) illustrates two spirit photographs in Schneider's collection.
13. Holland Cotter, "Introduction," in Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *Hyman Bloom*, New York, Chameleon Books, 1996, p. 9.
14. Quoted in Lynne Tillman, "Counting Time: Photographs by Gary Schneider," *Aperture*, no. 176, 2004, p. 39.
15. Calvin Tomkins, "Time to Think," in *Robert Wilson: The Theater of Images*, Cincinnati, Contemporary Arts Center, and New York, Harper & Row, 1984, p. 55. (This essay first appeared in the *New Yorker*, Jan. 13, 1975.) Note also that Erdman collaborated with Peter Campus on a film installation titled *Head of a Man with Death on His Mind* (1978, Whitney Museum of American Art). The only shot is a close-up of Erdman's heavily shadowed face; the uncut footage shows him maintaining an eerie stillness for 12 minutes, until he can no longer hold his pose.

"Gary Schneider: Portraits" appeared at the Harvard University Sackler Museum [Feb. 28-June 13, 2004] and traveled to the Contemporary Art Museum, Honolulu [Aug. 13-Oct. 10, 2004].

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