

Arts

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THE SAN DIEGO
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ART REVIEW

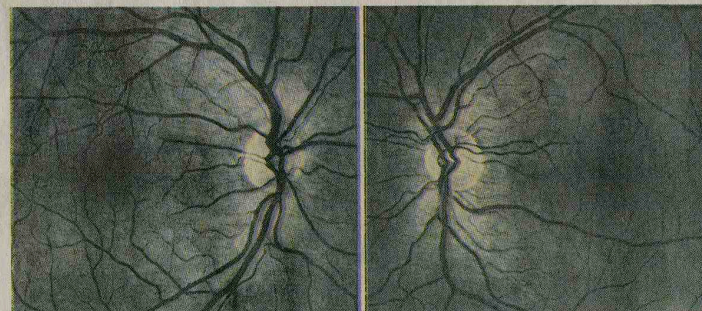
Schneider's photos add a dose of science

Portraits are the focus at MoPA

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

Photography, from the start, was part art and part science. For centuries, people had dreamed of pictures without using a pencil or a brush. But it wasn't until the 1820s and 1830s that the interaction between light, chemicals and picture surface was understood sufficiently to yield an image.

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, who created the first permanent photograph with a camera obscura in 1827, was an inventor, not an



Among the striking images in Gary Schneider's series "Genetic Self-Portrait" is this 1998 view of his retinas.

artist. He aided the now more famous Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre with the creation of the daguerreotype, which was unveiled in 1839. William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of negative/

positive photography back in the 1830s, was a leading authority on optics and theoretical mathematics.

The relationship between art and science in photography has

DETAILS

"Flesh: Portraits by Gary Schneider"

When: Through Sept. 14

Where: Museum of Photographic Arts, Balboa Park

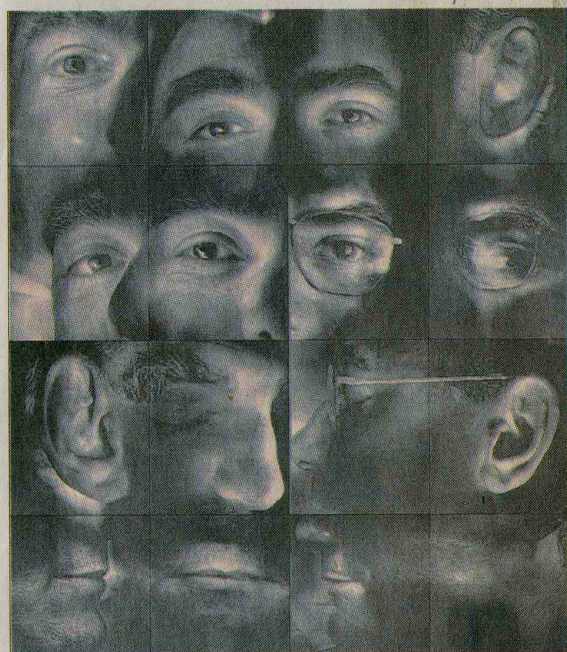
Tickets: \$6, adults; \$4, students seniors and military

Phone: (619) 238-7559

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endured. Take Harold Edgerton, who always insisted his now famous high-speed pictures were not art. But people decide for themselves and some of his images, like "Milkdrop Coronet" (1957), are collected and shown simply for their beauty, not for the

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"John in Sixteen Parts" (1996) is emblematic of Gary Schneider's desire to create unconventional portraits.

► **'FLESH'**

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MoPA exhibit is artist's first solo West Coast show

advances they made in making new things visible to the eye.

Conversely, there are artists who venture into the realm of the scientific to see what its imagery can yield in the way of art. Gary Schneider is clearly one of them.

His exhibition at the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park, "Flesh: Portraits by Gary Schneider," follows the museum's recognition of him with its Lou Stoumen Prize in 2006 — an award endowed by the late photographer and filmmaker to recognize mid-career photographers "whose work relates in spirit and sympathy to Stoumen's own humanistic style of photography." Schneider was the fourth recipient and joins an accomplished roster: Debbie Fleming Caffery (1996), Kenro Izu (1999) and James Nachtwey (2002).

Schneider, who was educated both in his native South Africa and in the United States, has for many years worked in New York and exhibited frequently in galleries and museums in the Midwest, on the East Coast and in Europe, steadily gaining a larger profile. But this is his first solo exhibition on the West Coast, in a gallery or museum.

He is a intriguingly contra-

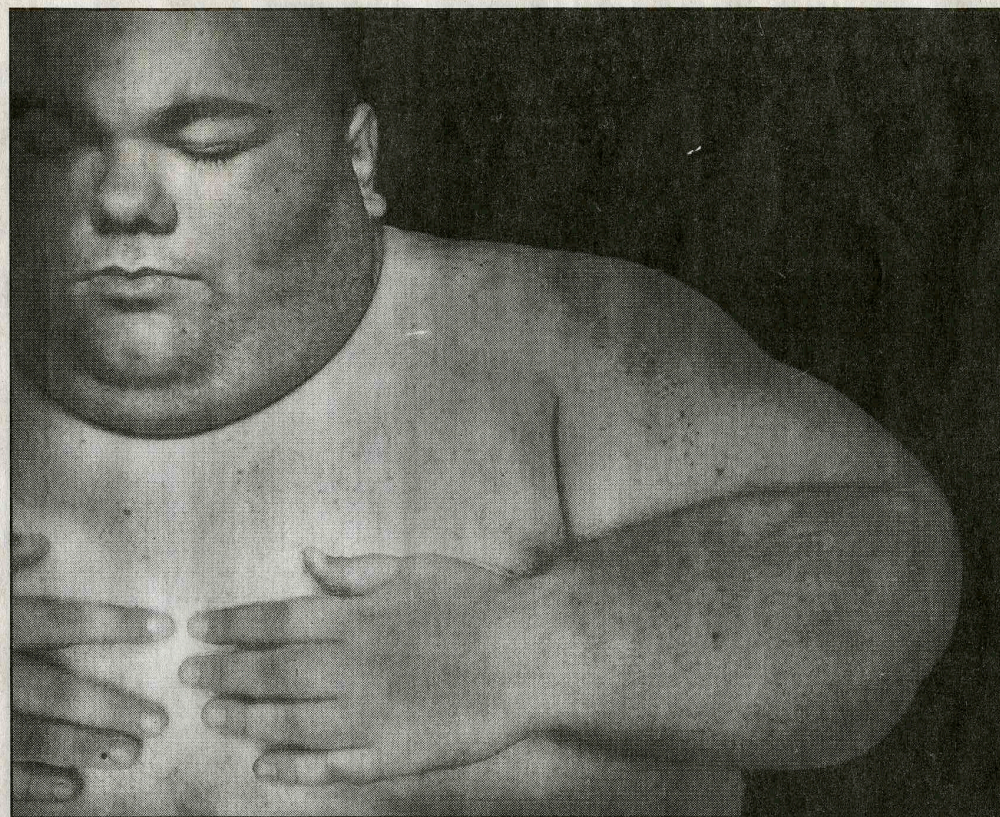
dictory artist, cool and analytical in some of his work, and leaning toward the grotesque in other pictures. In one interview, he mentions that biology was a favorite subject in high school. Looking at his series, "Genetic Self-Portrait," you believe him.

This "portrait" takes up a good portion of the show and it is a body of work that has attracted a good deal of attention since it was completed in 1999. The story behind it seems vital to a viewing of it.

In 1996, he was invited to make photographs that would, in some fashion, take advantage of the visual discoveries being made on the Human Genome Project. He decided to use himself as subject, which was in line with his strong interest in portraiture and self-portraiture.

The results are only intermittently compelling. His DNA sequence is just that: a set of spindly looking shapes, no matter how handsomely it's done in platinum (Schneider is an expert printer). It is rather remarkable to think that his "Genetic Self-Portrait: Chromosomes" (1997) contains defining markers of his identity, printed as 19 images. But in purely visual terms, a marker is a marker.

His self-portrait is at its best when the imagery of the body connects in some way with imagery in nature and the cosmos, as we know it. In "Genetic Self-Portrait: Retinas" (1998), the imagery doesn't evoke the eye so much as a kind of moonlit sky, with twisting vines of



"Omar" (2006), part of a recent series by Gary Schneider that concentrates on obese subjects, is in his exhibition "Flesh" at the Museum of Photographic Arts. Gary Schneider

branches silhouetted against the sky. "Genetic Self-Portrait: Ears" (1997) has a similarly compelling effect. You can make out their shapes, but this might just as well be some sort of view of outer space, focusing on curiously shaped galaxies.

The poetic truth of these pictures is that all of nature is something of a hall of mirrors, in which shapes within the

body echo those throughout the physical universe.

For Schneider, "Genetic Self-Portrait" connects with his larger, long-standing ambition to create new sorts of portraits. As far back as 1975, during his high school years in Cape Town, he was taking an unconventional approach to portraiture, photographing friends in fragments and having a friend

take the same approach to him as a subject. He would arrange the pictures in a grid, partially inspired by his passion for the sort of conceptual photography he was reading about in *Artforum* and other art magazines, by Vito Acconci and others.

These early portraits are not part of the show, but years later you can find their echoes in his large-scale portrait of his long-

time partner, "John in Sixteen Parts" (1996). Some of its eerie power derives from the way his eyes and lips appear and reappear in separate prints, all of them arranged neatly in rows. But some of it emanates from the stark contrasts in light and shadow throughout.

The rest of the work in this exhibition represents the two dominant strains in his work: portraits of people and an abiding interest in natural forms, particularly botanical ones.

He comments on the intimacy of making portraits, which is no doubt true. His "Full-Bodied Nudes," in particular, involve a long process between photographer and the subject.

These nudes are removed rather than erotic, as if they exist in a realm that is wholly contained within the picture itself. Some of that tone surely derives from his method of making them: He uses only a penlight and long exposure time. There is a strong cinematic quality to them — Schneider is also a filmmaker — in which movement is often visible in the picture.

The style is stark, sometimes grotesque. He has spoken of trying to get beyond the mask, a kind of posed face, that people offer to the camera. That he does. But these pictures still end up seeming more intriguing for their concept than as individual photographs, much like his "Genetic Self-Portrait."

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