

GARY Schneider's mode of photography is highly unconventional. His subjects lie in the dark for hours while he traces their bodies with a pencil torch, illuminating their flesh in front of a camera lens positioned above them.

One would expect the result to be a disjointed, if not incomplete, long-exposure photograph in which areas of the body might be left concealed by the dark.

Nevertheless, these studies – such as long-winded and obsessive process could only be deemed a study – appear fairly conventional – aside from the dark patches that fall strategically on parts of their bodies. These shaded areas aren't accidental; they are all calculated to create depth and visual interest. The interplay between dark and light is particular to photography, but this curious type of photographic approach evokes not only a painterly quality but a painterly mode, which is also rooted in negotiating the balance between darkness and lightness.

In effect, Schneider paints with light; his strokes, if you will, are visible on the naked flesh of his subjects. In this way his invisible gaze leaves a trace. Like a painter he conjures his subjects from the darkness or nothingness – although, obviously in this context they are fully formed before he encounters them. Nevertheless, painters are also bound to their models and their idiosyncratic features that must be rendered authentically in order for their act of mimesis to be convincing. Schneider might be restricted to his subjects, but he has freedom to decide what parts of their bodies to enhance through his choice of what to illuminate and what to leave cloaked in darkness. Consequently, he gives life to subjects in a manner that defies traditional notions of photography.

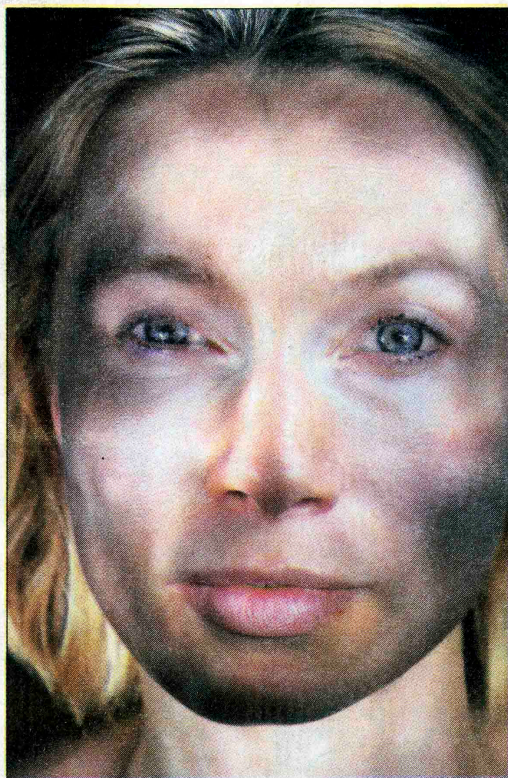
Photographers are generally slaves to reality, but Schneider subverts this law by choosing what will be seen and how to treat it. It's quite a radical departure, though obviously this actuality underpins all photography to a certain extent, though in a much more subtle manner. Schneider simply sets up a context in which he can manipulate this condition in quite an extreme way, though the results may obscure this radical subversion.

He is said to have borrowed this approach from a Victorian photographer called Julia Margaret Cameron, who also forced her sitters to pose for hours while she took long-exposure photographs. Like Cameron's portraits, Schneider's also bear subtle traces of the longevity of the process, such as blurred areas on the body where the sitter has twitched or moved. This brings to mind Francis Bacon's portraits, where certain features of his sitters are blurred, or slightly distorted, or even Cubist portraiture which aspired to capture a multitude of perspectives of a sitter within a single painting.

His mode of portraiture and the long period he spends with his subjects are a tacit acknowledgement that a subject cannot be captured in a split-second, as is the case, or presumption, with a conventional photograph. Certainly, Schneider's process engenders a level of intimacy with his subjects that is unprecedented in photography – or for that matter in painting. This intense scrutiny borders on violation, it is suggested in the catalogue. Certainly, he is forced to consume and map every area of their naked bodies in order to complete their portrait.

Vincent (2002) and *Jeanne* (2004), the two naked portraits on display at this exhibition, *Skin*, might not be fully aware of the "violence", as they lie inert in the dark. The consumption of their naked frames by the eye of the viewer isn't obviously realised. Nevertheless their awkward and stiff postures suggest they are not at ease, but locked into an emotionally and physically loaded exchange with Schneider.

From this point of view, the artwork is not simply the photograph which Schneider presents, but plays out in a performance that occurs between him and his subjects in the process of producing the image. It is a performance in which the boundaries and the relationship between



Kate McCrickard, 2009



Carly's legs, 2006.

Painting with light

Gary Schneider's unconventional photographic portraits have a painterly sensibility, writes Mary Corrigan



John's Lips, 1999

the photographer and his subject are enhanced and tested to the extreme. It is for this reason that his subjects are unclothed and positioned in a decontextualised space – the black background. He does not want to disrupt the ambivalent relational dynamic with a discourse on their individual identity.

In other words, these portraits aren't about the sitters per se, but the protracted encounter with Schneider and his probing ray of light. So while his process suggests an almost pathological hunger to know their bodies, it is similarly marked by a

procedure to unknow them, to completely disentangle them from any cultural or identity links. Schneider's brand of portraiture is defined by a process of pushing them into a realm of unrecognition. The interplay between light and darkness, illumination and concealment, which visually underpins this project, also functions on a metaphorical level, explaining the subtle dynamic between sitter and viewer, which is predicated on a kind of cat-and-mouse game where the viewer attempts to retrieve information about the sitter, which he or she wishes to conceal.

By ridding his images of the signs which would help us identify his subjects, he indirectly hints at the idea that their identity resides within, beneath their skin. His probing light is presumably meant to illuminate the information concealed beneath this fragile but also impenetrable layer. It is such an interesting subversion not only of photographic practice but the act of portraiture.

● *Skin* is showing at the David Krut Gallery in Parkview, Joburg, until September 10.