

WHAT A (SELF) PORTRAIT CAN DO

Picturing South Africa in New York

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**GARY SCHNEIDER: *HANDPRINT PORTRAITS*,
JOHANNESBURG DAVID KRUT PROJECTS | SEPTEMBER 8
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At first glance, Gary Schneider's ink prints on canvas look like satellite images—mottled with whorls of light and fields of charcoal black, they recall photographs of our planet at night, or Hubble snapshots of distant nebulae. But no, they are contact prints of the hands of South African artists, enlarged to a monumental scale. Looking over these handprints on an October afternoon, Schneider remarks that their milky surfaces have been compared to Victorian ectoplasmic photographs, but he doesn't press the idea that there is anything mystical at work here. In his assessment, these images hold power because they are unique signatures, unaltered impressions left by remarkable people.

Schneider's HandPrint series grew from the South African-born photographer's recent visit to Johannesburg. While mounting an exhibition there in 2011, he began a freewheeling portrait of the local arts community by collecting handprints from the painters, photographers, craftspeople, and activists he encountered. He often took impressions from artists he had never met before, getting to know them only through the intimate darkroom process involved in his photogram technique. The project built such momentum that, upon returning to New York (his home since 1977), Schneider immediately made plans to return to South Africa for more samples—and so the Krut show feels like a work-in-progress that will soon

appear in a much grander form. But while the principal aim of the handprint project is to craft a portrait of Jo'burg's artists, whom Schneider found uniquely industrious and solitary, the series also creates a portrait of the artist himself. The complex textures of Schneider's prints speak to his obsession with minute detail, the delicate touch with which he digitally picks out every ridge of skin. Palmistry comes to mind—it is as if he is searching each wrinkle for clues about his subjects, for evidence of a connection between their work and their bodies. The prints also illustrate the artist's drive to record his encounters—this recent series represents only a small fraction of the similar handprints he has collected since 1996, charting years of experience, commemorating family, friends, and colleagues. They do not simply record individuals, they chart vast human networks connected by commonalities known only to the artist. To examine Schneider's handprints is to catch a glimpse of the way he processes the world around him. There is something mesmerizing about these prints. At first, they look nearly identical to one another, and it is tempting to breeze past them all once you have examined the first. But then nuances begin to emerge—here a set of fingertips blazes white, as if smashed into the paper; here fog covers a palm's center, indicating its heat—the individuality of each impression, and the artist behind it, slowly becomes clear. Standing in front of “Senzeni Marasela” (2011), an unexpectedly delicate handprint made by a notoriously uncompromising woman artist, Schneider expresses hope that his prints will inspire New Yorkers to look carefully, and use his images as a small window onto a community parallel to our own.