

Portrait of the Artist as a Left Hand

By Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

Soon after it was invented in the nineteenth century, photography was pressed into service as an aid to policing and to forensic investigation of various kinds. It was used to record the faces of criminals, the criminally insane and the just plainly insane. This variety of visual documentation extended the field of the pseudo-science of phrenology, which involved 'reading' the shape of a person's head to determine their character. The theory was that you could spot a criminal or a lunatic by studying the particular formation – the bulges or indentations – of the skull. You could even determine, by looking at a photograph of a face, the potential of the subject to become a criminal, or lose their minds. Photography presented the phrenologist with a new machine for 'seeing', what the artist Alan Sekula called a 'truth apparatus', that confirmed what science already purported to know about human nature. In addition to the professional and scientific exploitation of the photographic image was the fact that the lay person, viewing photographs of prisoners or similarly 'undesirable' members of human society, could predict, retroactively of course, their criminal bent, could claim to 'see' what they would become. The viewer could say, simply by looking, 'Well yes, you can see, of course, that this is a dodgy character.' It was a very short step from here to a racist eugenics, for which photography also became a useful tool.

We have learned, since then, a great deal about the profoundly problematic truth-value of photographs. Nonetheless, we still give in to the temptation to read our knowledge of something

or someone back into the photographic image, searching intently for latent clues, the bits of visual evidence that will confirm what we think we know about the world and human beings. As though this will bring us some comfort, will serve as a small defence against the unpredictability of violence, misfortune and other real or imagined threats to our sense of belonging in the world.

A second use to which photography was put early on was the *carte de visite*, that elegant, though more erotically charged, ancestor of the now ubiquitous business card, left in silver platters or carried into salons on velvet cushions to announce one's credentials or leave a trace of one's having been there. Through the mechanism of the camera, then, the alleged scum and the supposed cream of society could, at least in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, potentially be subjected to the same 'forensic' assessment made possible by the extraordinary technology that seemed able to commit to paper the truth about who you really were. Incidentally, the word 'forensic' goes back to ancient Roman times when, in order to determine the truth in a criminal matter, evidence was presented 'before the forum'. Given the relative lack then of what we have now come to know as 'forensic science', your guilt or innocence was more likely to be decided on the strength of the argument presented in your favour than through any actual evidence linking you to a crime. (This, one might argue, is no different in contemporary legal practice – witness any high-profile trial of the last several decades – but forensic science now offers an additional layer to the legal case, one linked to *physical* evidence gleaned from crime scene investigations and DNA evidence removed from the bodies of victims and suspects alike.)

Both of these moments in the nearly two-hundred-year history of photography are present in Gary Schneider's work of the last four decades. Not satisfied to record simply the face or body language his subjects present to the lens, Schneider has, using a variety of photographic techniques, endeavoured to look a little deeper in order to interrogate our assumptions not only about the relationship between what we look like and who we are, but also about the perceived ability of the photograph to present us with 'evidence' of this relationship. In his *Genetic Self-Portrait*, for example, he worked with scientists to produce extraordinary images of his own body, seen up very, very close. In his nude, full-length portraits, he used light not to flatter his (brave) subjects but to get as close to the bone and skin as he could in order to prompt us to look at bodies – our own and those of others – and to examine the inevitable vanity of self-representation.

In the hand portraits, however, Schneider tries to see something, some clue about human subjects, not through a lens, but through the very contact of skin with film. But this contact – an encounter with the old truth-telling apparatus – is replete with paradox and irony. It hides and reveals, tells us everything and nothing – about photography, about looking, about subjectivity and identity, and, especially in the South African context, about the *politics of looking*.

Schneider has been making handprints for several years now, but in this iteration of the project he travelled from Johannesburg to Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown and Durban, setting up a small studio in each place and meeting resident artists. In the digital age, darkrooms have become quaint remnants of analogue photography: dusty spaces, smelling of chemicals and

sweat, in the basements or back ends of art schools. Schneider sometimes has to dust off old enlargers and clear out some art-school junk to prepare for his work. He mixes his chemicals and tests the equipment, and then, as he settles in to meet and photograph his subjects, a subtle transmogrification takes place (the first of several): the darkroom becomes a kind of confessional booth – an enclosed, private space in which, in the minutes before the portrait is made, something might be admitted to, some small sin or vice revealed through a comment or a quick joke. Privacy and intimacy enter the photographic contract: the 'sitter' might draw her privacy more tightly around her in such close proximity to another person, or, in a moment, disclose a long-held secret.

Once the lights are turned out, however, the old and beautiful alchemy of black-and-white photographic printing is played out in a ten-minute session in the thick darkness. The sitter begins by washing all trace of lotions and oils off the hand. She enters the room and, guided by the photographer, places her left hand on a rectangle of unexposed photographic film for two minutes. The heat and moisture in the hand leave behind an 'image'. After this, the film is exposed briefly to light from an enlarger. The photographer then dips the film into developer until the ghostly image emerges. This is a tense moment, since the sitter, peering over the photographer's shoulder, is not sure what, precisely, the enlarger and film have exposed, what the pressure and heat of the hand have given away, what secrets and lies the developing fluid might coax to the surface. Perhaps this is what it feels like to have one's palm read: despite a determined skepticism, one half believes – hopes, perhaps – that all will be revealed.

What emerges from the process, however, is not a picture of a hand as we know it, clothed in skin. At the moment of exposure, we see everything and nothing. The subject is neither male nor female, young nor old, black nor white, large nor small. Try as we might, these are qualities of the subject that we are unable to detect. What we see is the unmistakable outline of a human hand, hence a 'portrait' of someone that is as unique as a fingerprint. But also, we see a photographic – in the scientific sense of the word – representation of heat: the reaction of a bodily fluid to photographic paper, the warm extremities of the fingers. 'Skin' in fact retreats from the image and is seen only as a ghostly shadow lying at the edges of shimmering points of heat and light. Its absence is remarked upon. We cannot tell its texture or its hue. Except that there is a surprising presence of colour in the images: from somewhere in the centre of the hand a light emanates. In some portraits it seems almost to pulsate, so bright is it. In others it is a soft, deep glow. And in each, the pads of the palm and fingers glitter, as though the hand has been dipped in gold leaf. In these surprisingly intimate pictures, these beautifully sensual photographic encounters, skin is not the object of scrutiny, and yet within it – underneath it, extending out of it – resides the moment of encounter.

In the short durée of the portrait session, photographer and subject share a secret, spoken or intimated, and then the pleasurable tension of watching an image appear on a sheet of film being agitated in a tray of liquid chemistry. Whether or not the hand portraits can be said to reveal anything, certainly they offer a compelling and gorgeous temptation to assign meaning. The process itself, the miniature drama

it contains, reminds one of the history of photography and especially a technique of making images that has been made almost obsolete by new and 'better' technology. And though we long ago let photography off the truth-telling hook, we cannot quite shake our belief in its ability to tell us, mysteriously, something true about ourselves.

Beyond these scintillating visual and experiential elements of the hand portraits, however, is a larger narrative in which Schneider participates, the complexity of which became clearer to him the longer he worked on the portraits. The narrative – the fractured story of who and what we are in South Africa – is partly Schneider's own (he was born in East London and left for New York in the seventies for a variety of personal and political reasons). But it is also not his own, though his status as an insider/outsider gives him a particular insight into how it unfolds. It is imbued with the peculiar politics of race and inclusion/exclusion that have shaped us, and that the artists whose portraits are included here have all explored in different ways. On the one hand – no pun intended – this book presents us with a *list*, which is an always treacherous thing because it is, by its very function, an exclusionary device. On the other hand, the portraits might tempt us to settle into a comforting humanist vision of shared experience.

These responses are both true (though not straightforward). But the hand portraits seem also to propose a slightly different map of our human experience, shared and not shared. The hand with its array of fingerprints is the unquestionable exemplar of uniqueness, the indisputable proof of our singularity (as forensic science, ironically, has taught us). But the images of hands here, like the whorls of the human fingerprint, tell us at once everything and nothing of the people to whom they

belong. The fingerprint – and by extension the hand portrait – is unlike the inscrutable image of the human face. It is forensic, it gives us clues. But clues to what? To acts we have committed? To the surfaces of things we have touched? Schneider's compulsion to repetition (which he shares with every single one of his subjects here) is partly aesthetic and partly political (in the broadest sense). He repeats the hand portrait, trying it out again and again as though he really is looking for something, some collective clue, or some beautiful pattern. He repeats the portrait of the *artist's hand* as though the clue he is searching for might be revealed to be an aesthetic key to human experience, something that only the making of and looking at art can reveal. But what he elicits from these left hands, though they themselves make objects and images that hope to speak to and of their makers' experiences of the world, is a luminous beauty that has nothing to do with being an artist, something to do with being human, and everything to do with being warmly alive in the brief moments of pressure and exposure – in which skin is pressed to paper and light is introduced.