

COUNTING LIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY SCHNEIDER

Photographer Gary Schneider has long been recognized for his light-infused portraits, and for his use of scientific approaches to explore issues of identity. Here, writer Lynne Tillman discusses with Schneider his unusual working processes and the convergence of science with intuition, as well as the likelihood that human beings may be greater than the sum of their defining elements.

LYNNE TILLMAN: You've made images from nineteenth-century commercial portraits. You've worked in small and large scale. I'm curious about what activates your thinking, what the source is for those decisions.

GARY SCHNEIDER: The central issue for me in my work is to try and locate privacy in a very intimate way with my subject, then to frame it so that it can be exhibited or brought out of the studio. What happens in the studio is one event, and then how that gets interpreted is the next stage. But the central issue in all my work is privacy.

LT: How do you relate scale to privacy?

GS: When I'm looking at the surface of my subject, I'm interested in that information, and how that gets translated into a print; I would like that to continue to be readable, on some level—what occurred during the process of working or during the process of looking. Scale is a function of how that can occur once I'm making the print, bringing it into the world.

LT: You show viewers what you're interested in by revealing the process, too.

GS: Yes, by how I'm processing information.

LT: In "Genetic Self-Portrait," the scale of the image may be quite small, but it's of a detail of genetic information.

GS: That project evolved out of a kind of obsession with biology. How to draw from biology, how to use it as a way to learn language.

LT: The obsession showed itself first in the 1970s when you photographed body parts, close-up. Your photographic technique was very different.

GS: In that work, I used the camera in a different way. The focal distance was set so that the image had to be brought into focus. There

was a specific distance for my subject, which was either myself or another person. The size of the image was specific, and it was basically printed life-size. I still do the same thing. The new nudes, for example, were photographed in the same way, looking up close, except that the camera is static, and in a sense a passive observer, framing the whole body. I will print the nudes life-size. I'm coming back to life-size and in a way have completed a full circle from the 1975 work.

With most of my work, I see it in two different sizes. I'm looking at things very up close. In the "Heads" from 1989 through 2001, I've framed the head inside the 8-by-10 negative size, or transparency size, since that's the size of my camera. It's almost life-size; I print them life-size, or I blow them up, explode the information to the point at which it is still readable, with reading glasses. You should be able to come to the surface of all my work and be able to read the information and the surface, as if you were reading a map or landscape. With "Genetic Self-Portrait," I wanted everything to be very large and the viewer to feel inside this information. Some of these images are nine feet tall. But the sperm is eight inches high; I was limited by the technology available to me.

LT: Your 1970s work responded to questions around identity. As part of this investigation's evolution, you started to hold an exposure for a long time, to make something happen in front of the camera both for the subject and yourself. That's part of what you're interested in.

GS: That's all of it, actually.

LT: I wonder what the object means to you, because your relationship to portraiture is unusual.

GS: It never looks like the person.

LT: You never try for realism. I think you're trying to get at what really can't be photographed.

GS: Yes, exactly.

LT: To photograph your genetic code makes a portrait; it looks abstract but isn't. Seeing the "Genetic Self-Portrait" show at the ICP—beautiful, fascinating images—I thought: "But what does it mean?"

GS: It's all factual information. I wanted it to be very simple. You're looking at my retinas, you couldn't be looking at a more intimate

INTERVIEW BY LYNNE TILLMAN





PAGE 35, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Shirley*, 2001; *Dennis*, 2000; *George*, 2001; *Yvonne*, 2001.

ABOVE: *Mary*, 2002; *Shirley*, 2004; *Hope*, 2003; *Antony*, 2002.



image of a human being. You're looking inside somebody's eyes, actually. It looks like a Halloween photo. It looks like a pictorial rendering from maybe the turn of the century—a painterly rendering of a Halloween scene of a moon behind bare trees. In a way, that's the most simplified description of how I think my work has to function.

LT: The project also proposed that the sum of a human being is not just his or her parts: genes. Human beings exceed their defining elements.

GS: It could have been a portrait of anybody.

LT: Since the genetic makeup of humans is 99 percent the same.

GS: Though it's my portrait, in an excessively narcissistic way, it could stand for any of us, except there's sperm and a Y-chromosome, making it male. But apart from that, it's pretty much *anybody*, which was amazing for me.

LT: So what is identity?

GS: What you bring to it for yourself. In a funny way, I want all of my work to function as perfect metaphor. Whatever you're prepared to bring to it as a viewer, it will allow you to experience. I've already had my experience. I've had an intimate experience, in the case of that project, with various scientists. Also I've used my handprints in another series. But if you're a scientist or a medical doctor, you could look at "Genetic Self-Portrait" and tell exactly what it is. In fact, most doctors are quite bored with it. Scientists understand the poetry of its particular exposition, that it's very private, my most private parts. It's all about the forensic sciences; it's what we now consider factual. DNA evidence. The handprint, fingerprint, now the palmprint, identity bar codes. I chose hair, which contains all of our chemical information and history. Maybe it's a little paranoid, but I don't believe we have any privacy. There are cameras on the streets. Once you're inside the digital world, all of that information is accessible.

LT: You're invested in the history of photography. Going back to photography's beginning, there was "spirit photography." That influence is in your work.

GS: No question. My fantasy about spirit photography is that it occurred because of accident. Accident means that the author couldn't understand the illusion, so it must've been something else. What fascinates me is that you work inside a medium, your work is produced inside that medium. We are not describing reality. We are working inside a medium, the medium of photography is light. It is the guiding force of how my work is in the world, how it occurs, how it is on the wall. You read it as if it appears to be illuminated from within. I try hard to make that occur.

LT: You want a viewer to be aware of the light, illumination. A spirit or something intangible is what light is or could be.

GS: Something alchemical. Definitely.

LT: When you made the "Hands" series, how did you make it seem as if light was emitted from them?

GS: In 1992, I found some microscope slides, and thought: What is a negative? A negative is areas that are congested with silver, they hold back light when you print them, and the areas that have less silver congestion let light through. The areas that have less information print as dark. When I made microscope-slide prints, they were slides of actual pieces of biology, either an insect or a botanical. I created them to have an illusion; they are like enlarged photograms. The "Hands" are like enlarged photograms, coming directly from my work with microscope slides. If you touch the emulsion of a negative, you make a fingerprint. Anybody who handles photographic material knows never to touch the emulsion, because it can leave an indelible mark. What the handprints are—or what I term "sweat images"—are imprints of sweat into the film emulsion, in an extreme way. I've basically damaged the film by wetting it with sweat. Humidity formed by the body also debases the emulsion. When the hand presses down, all of that becomes deposits of information holding back light. When you see those handprints, what you see as light is actually sweat.

LT: When I posed for my portrait, or "Head," in 1990, I lay down, while you painted my face with an intense flashlight. The exposure was very long. The finished portrait has a moody, Julia Margaret Cameron effect.

GS: My work has nothing to do with painting, even though it looks painterly. I'm very influenced by Cameron, an incredible early portrait photographer, and even though all of the photographers around her embraced the technology, she was much more interested in exploiting the technology. Her portraits are very expressive. What excites me about her portraits is that they feel very unveiled. I thought it was because they took so long to expose. She took about eight minutes to expose her heads. They're very large negatives, the size of the prints, which was the nature of that work. She poured the emulsion on the glass, made her own negatives, then she exposed them. She often photographed children; you feel those children responding to sitting still so long. But I make my subjects as comfortable as possible, I have to keep them awake, often.

The act of lighting, for me, is sort of a counting, I do that out loud, so it becomes a meditation, and my light, or life, is flaring all over the place. Making the "Nudes," I felt that most if not all of my subjects' experience was relaxed and somewhat sexual. It's so intimate. The subject is lying down, made to feel as warm as possible, you're in the dark. You're basically in bed.

LT: Being looked at.

GS: I tell people: "You're so inside of yourself that shyness becomes irrelevant." What can be read as awkwardness or distortion or angularity, which looks like discomfort, is perspective: where my camera is in relation to the body, and because the body is supine.

LT: Unlike others of your images, with the "Nudes," you image the entire body. That's another scale shift.

GS: It was difficult to conceive of, actually.

LT: How did it come about?

GS: I'd become adept at using the small flashlight, looking at different bits and pieces of information, accumulating that information to make up an image on one sheet of paper. Color, unlike black-and-white, needs to be technically proficient. In other words, if I'm working in transparency, which is a direct positive, I'm working inside a very narrow range of error. The transparency has to look good enough to print. For the color "Heads," I reduced the process. I photographed each head in the same way. The sequence was basically the same for each; by the end of the "Heads," I'd become very good at counting light, counting quantities of light over a certain geographic area. How white is it? How dark?

LT: I love that idea, "counting light."

GS: Literally, quantities of light. When I was finished with the "Heads," I'd become really proficient at it.

LT: You say you don't print the "Nudes" straight. How do you mean?

GS: I don't want the manipulation to be so excessive. I mean, I don't create the image in the process of manipulating with Photoshop, which is very easy to do. I use Photoshop for all color. I think it's the only way to print color.

LT: Why do you think it's the only way to print color now?

GS: Because color is so limited as a technology. In order to maximize it, you don't have the same kind of control in the darkroom as you have in black-and-white. I don't like the medium to foreground the process. I want the process of how it was made to be foregrounded. The medium is there to give you the platform, the way *into* the process of how the image is made.

LT: What do you mean by "the medium?"

GS: How it's printed.

LT: So you don't want the viewer to be aware of the printing technique.

GS: No, although I get asked about it all the time, because they look so eccentric.

LT: There's something frightening about the "Nudes."

GS: One review of the color "Heads" described them in the most morbid terms. I appreciate that.

LT: The "Nudes" look stiff, or rigid.

GS: I did a lot of Alexander Technique. In a way, how the hands are posed comes from that technique. The distortion that resulted in the "Nudes" is similar to early Christian sculpture of the twelfth century.

LT: The lines are very angular.

GS: Very distorted, elongated, sometimes enlarged, in weird perspectives. In a funny way, like El Greco. I'm very taken with El Greco. With the "Nudes," I grew close to the shadings that occurred. What you're looking at that seems to be dirt or even decomposing flesh is literally the lack of light focus. In other words, less light on those areas makes shadow.

LT: With a body lying down, it defies gravity.

GS: Or it's releasing itself to gravity.

LT: It's not being pulled down in a vertical.

GS: It's being pulled away.

LT: Or pulled away horizontally. That creates the distortion, doesn't it?

GS: Yes. A lot of the distortion. It's funny, but I don't intend them to be meditations on mortality.

LT: Yet they are.

GS: My work always has been, since I was twenty. It must come from an obsession that has been with me always.

LT: Photography is perfect, then; it always includes death and memory.

GS: It has to, because once you photograph it, it's gone. So it begins that way. I'm often asked: If you came out of painting and performance and film and installation, how did you end up just making photography? I come out of Vito Acconci, for example. All of his actions, like swinging the camera and releasing the shutter, influenced my own process, which is inside the very act of making. I don't think any viewer can look at my camera images and be able to uncover the process of making, because all of the moments are fused. So I've never become bored with the broadest aspects of what the photographic medium can really mean. Even now that I'm actually moving very fast into digital reproduction.

LT: Did you have any feelings about changing your process, moving into digital?

GS: No, because Photoshop is based on darkroom manipulations—and more a black-and-white darkroom than a color darkroom, so it seemed very natural to me.

LT: We talked about spirit photography. It reminds me: I met a magician recently who said everything he does is an illusion. You push illusion. You've said that between accident and illusion is where you reside.

GS: That's where I need to reside. I perform, and then there is an image. The image is totally

(continued on page 79)



ABOVE: *Vincent*, 2002; *Steven*, 2003; *Laura*, 2003; *Tom*, 2002.
Photographs courtesy / © Gary Schneider



Schneider (continued from page 39)

uncontrolled. I do push illusion. That's the painterly part of me. With all art but photography, you begin by presupposing fiction. You begin with illusion, you begin with nothing, and then you make. But with photography, you presuppose fact. It's built into it. In a way, in my work, accident and illusion have been an evolution. I know I've finished with a particular investigation—like the "Heads," or the color "Heads," or now the "Nudes"—when I can completely control how the things are made. Once I've learned what I'm doing, it's over. It no longer holds the kind of possibility of the journey.

LT: On the other hand, death isn't an illusion. Photographing bodies as closely as you do leads to the conclusion that you're dealing with mortality. People must respond that way often.

GS: I'm proud that, in a sense, I'm given to and have been given that subject. It's immense. Religious, for one thing, though I don't mean them to be. I've been looking at bodies for thirty years now.

LT: Your work seems to ask: What is this body that we're in?

GS: But in the way I focus on it, I've rendered the body kind of redundant. Isn't it?

LT: Yes, and that's intriguing. What does that mean?

GS: I've no idea what that means exactly.

LT: Could you be photo-

graphing anything else with this process? What about a cat?

GS: They wouldn't keep still.

LT: You'd have to drug them.

GS: I've thought of that. There's a history of portraits after death. It reminds me: I was there when my mother died. As she died, she took that last breath, and she was gone. *She* was gone. All that was left was the body. I had absolutely no feeling about it. It was just a body to me. It's irrelevant to me, the body.

LT: You've explained your point. You've shown where it comes from, where the idea of redundancy comes from. The person doesn't reside in the body. Your mother took her last breath, she was gone. Her body was there; it was redundant.

GS: Yes, it was nothing. It was weird. My father became very attentive, and I wanted to help him, so I helped him lay her out. What was amazing to me was the last remnant of wet-ness behind her head. Here was this last bit of her activity, or life, just before she disappeared.

LT: Your photography points to what can't be known, captured, even if we're looking at a body.

GS: It begs interpretation from the viewer. So I embrace all interpretation. ●

"Gary Schneider: Portraits" was presented at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum earlier this year, and is now on view at the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, August 13–October 10, 2004.

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GARY SCHNEIDER's 1997 installation *Genetic Self-Portrait* was presented at New York's International Center of Photography and Mass MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. "Gary Schneider: Portraits" opened at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is currently on tour.

The accompanying catalog was published by Yale University Press/ Harvard University Art Museums.

LYNNE TILLMAN's last novel, *No Lease on Life* (Harvest, 1999), was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her most recent book, *This Is Not It* (DAP, 2002), is a collection of stories responding to contemporary artwork.

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