

Art in America

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Gary Schneider: *Telma*, 1990, toned gelatin silver print, 36 by 29 inches; at P.P.O.W.

Gary Schneider at P.P.O.W.

Photography's *bête noire* has always been its inability to get beneath the surface that, as a technical art form, it records so adeptly. The photographer's struggle, therefore, has been to put a metaphorical handprint on every image he makes. Consequently the handprint itself has become a clichéd signature piece for serious photographers: witness the solarized picture of his own palm that Robert Frank used on the cover of *The Lines of My Hand* and Man Ray's handprint on the cover of his *Autobiography*.

Gary Schneider, a South African transplant, has taken this self-conscious "manual" meta-genre almost into the realm of parapsychology, with a series of large-scale rayogram prints of his own hands that he calls "portraits" of friends deceased or for some reason unavailable for more conventional portraits. In each of these dark, brooding impressions, the artist's own sweat, oozing through his pores, has interacted with the chemicals of the negative to provide a glittering fingerprint pattern on black that is like a Kirlian spiritual aura. In the process of producing these images Schneider manipulates the printing process, leaving himself psychologically open (he claims) for memories of the subject person to leave their mark on the final image.

Through these handprints, which resemble giant X rays, one gets an eerie sense of apparitions evoked, as in a turn-of-the-century seance. One may be skeptical, however, as to whether Schneider has actually captured anything of the individual subjects in this literal laying on of hands.

For a second photographic series of head portraits, Schneider ran a tiny light source over the faces of his subjects during long sessions in total darkness. The resulting images appear to have drawn from each sitter a glowering spirit double who displays more fear, angst, suspicion or knowing introversion than could be revealed in a "straight" photograph. Some of

these self-conscious portrayals resemble Bill Brandt's portraits of soot-blackened coal miners in the 1920s, while others have the kind of under-the-chin lighting reserved for publicity shots of hypnotists and mind-readers. Whether or not they meaningfully represent specific people, Schneider's hands and faces summon up a heightened reality that is likely to remain in the consciousness of the viewer for days after exposure to them.

—Peter von Ziegesar