

Gary Schneider at Howard Yezerski Gallery and Harvard University's Arthur M. Sackler Museum

South African-born artist Gary Schneider's provocative photographic portraits were recently the subject of a major retrospective at Harvard's Sackler Museum, spanning thirty years of the artist's career, and a complementary show at Howard Yezerski Gallery. This first career survey ranged from his early work in experimental silent film to his recent "genetic self-portrait." Also featured were reprinted nineteenth-century studio portraits, long-exposure "durational" portraits, and thermohydrogram handprints. The Yezerski Gallery show, called "Head to Head," included recent work: five monumental color portraits made between 1999 and 2001, as well as a silver gelatin version of the celebrated *John in Sixteen Parts*, 1996.

Schneider is well known for his "durational" portraits, first created in 1989. Inspired partly by the long exposure times of Julia Margaret Cameron's closely framed portraits, Schneider asks his subjects to lie down in pitch darkness, and suspends an 8-by-10-inch large-format view camera above them. The only light that is used comes from a flashlight that the artist moves over their faces for the duration of the exposure, generally between 8 and 30 minutes. The resulting portraits depict shadowy, often blurred, restive beings having the quality of charred apparitions. These ghostlike traces have the appearance of brushstrokes at times, as in the eyeglasses of *Shirley* (1991). In other portraits, there is often an eerie film covering the subjects' irises, somewhat like plastic wrap or some psychic ectoplasm. In *Yvonne* (2001), a portrait of the artist Yvonne Rainer, a reddened shadowy face, complete with heightened age spots and broken blood vessels, emerges from a completely black ground. Her penetrating and passionate dark brown eyes shine through the penumbra in this unglamorous but heartfelt image of one of the artist's beloved "specimens."

The monumental *John in Sixteen Parts* (1996), consisting of two rows of eight framed fragments of Schneider's partner

John Erdman, is a fine example of the intimacy between the artist and his models during the lengthy, often scripted portrait sessions. The work is a cubist puzzle of ears, mouth, chin, forehead, brows, and eyes shown frontally and in profile that come together in a variety of combinations, shades, scales, and degrees of clarity. At all times, Schneider's intention is to get extremely close-up—even beneath the skin—and these works, depicting variously lit and distorted beings, look remarkably like photographic portraits of the models' souls.

In Schneider's "genetic self-portrait," the precision and magnified scale of micro-

scopic images taken by medical scientists was impressive; however, the blown-up specimens of his retina, blood, sperm, and hair suffer from being too clinical and mannered, and they lack the humanness, vulnerability, physical identity, and narcissism that, together with the history and technical possibilities of photography, drive his best work, which for me are the meditative and richly expressionistic handprints and the numinous durational portraits.

—Francine Koslow Miller



Gary Schneider, *Meditations (panel 4)*, gelatin-silver print (35 1/2 x 28 1/2 in.), 1993. © Gary Schneider, courtesy Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge.