

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2000

The New York Times

Beauty in the Eye (and the Fingertip)

By MARGARETT LOKE

Gary Schneider's photographic exploration of the universe that is the human body holds the kind of magic and wonder found in pictures of distant stars, nebulae and galaxies.

One of his images, measuring an imposing 108 by 87 inches and made up of nine panels, resembles a black-and-white NASA composite of a bleak, cratered moonscape. This Schneider image included in "Gary Schneider: Genetic Self-Portrait" at the International Center of Photography uptown, is actually his dark-room rendering of a much-magnified specimen: a cell scraped from the inside of his cheek.

Despite its title, "Genetic Self-Portrait" is extravagantly unclinical. By dispensing with the often easy appeal of color and sticking to the subtle tonal range of black-and-white photography, Mr. Schneider zeroes in on the essence of his subject: the mirac-

ulous, elusive, fragile, mysterious thing we call life. This is not an original theme; but filtered through his eyes the familiar is startlingly, powerfully unfamiliar.

The tips of his fingers and the palm of his hand become a very heaven of glowing lines and glittering stars. His trises are hypnotically alien, giving the viewer the sensation of falling into a strange black hole with alluring moons and stars at its center.

Mr. Schneider's retinas are more earthbound. In a diprych of the inside of his eyes, the macula and optic nerves surrounded by blood vessels are transformed into romantic Photo-Sessionist-like dual images of a moon obscured by bare tree limbs.

The mitochondrial DNA sequence from a hair follicle looks uncannily like tall, tidy stacks of gambling chips. And the head of his sperm could have been an oddly slimy tulip and stem.

Most mesmerizing is a 20-by-72-inch triptych of a hair follicle. Velvety, encrusted with cobwebby patterns and amazingly tactile, the follicle, curling up at one end like a whimsical extraterrestrial being, both attracts and repels.

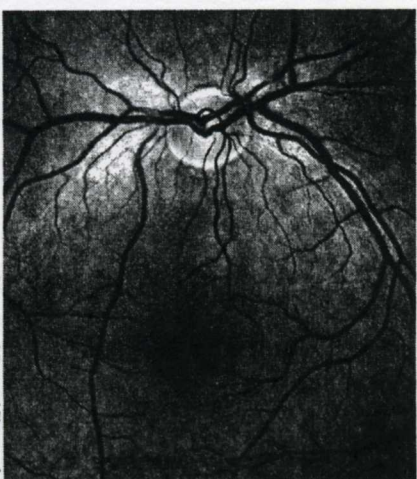
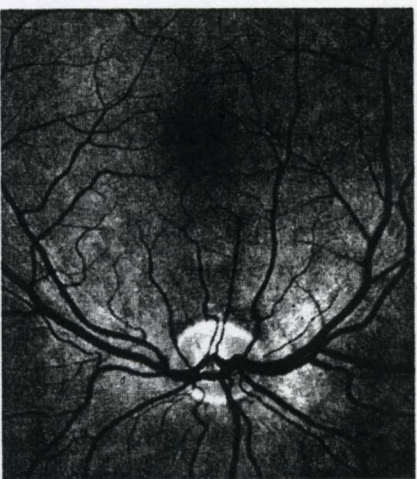
In the accompanying catalog, published by Light Work, Mr. Schneider gives a detailed explanation of how this image was created. It involves a scientist giving the follicle a plat-

num coating, which "conducts the electron beam when the specimen is scanned" by an appropriate microscope. Mr. Schneider made a 4-by-5-inch negative "off what appeared to be a television screen." Then, he adds, he enlarged "these negatives beyond what is normal for scientific illustration."

A few of the images here, like the one of the palm, involve nothing more complicated than the photographer's putting his sweaty hands on the emission side of a film plate. But many of the pictures resulted from his collaborating with specialists using a variety of imaging equipment, from a Nanoscope atomic force microscope and an X-ray machine to a transmission electron microscope and a camera made to photograph the retinas.

Long interested in unorthodox portraiture, Mr. Schneider, who focused on filmmaking in the 1970's and early 80's, began creating images on an elemental biological level after he tried in 1987 to save a handful of 19th-century glass-plate negatives that he had found in the Caribbean. The negatives were the work of an anonymous amateur trying to photograph insect specimens through a microscope.

But once they were brought to Manhattan, where Mr. Schneider lives, the negatives began to suffer from a mold buildup. Mr. Schneider,



Gary Schneider's diprych "Genetic Self-Portrait: Retinas" (1998), at the International Center of Photography.

a master printer who had a photo lab in the 1980's, decided to conserve the negatives by printing them. In the darkroom he learned a language from the negatives, he has said, even as he superimposed his own interpretation on them. The images on the glass negatives have disappeared, surviving only in Mr. Schneider's prints.

One of those prints is in "Gary Schneider: Specimen Drawings, Photographs 1987-1999" at the Eleanor Barfoot gallery in SoHo. Titled "Entomological No. 3" (1987), the print is a delicate abstraction of seemingly gauzy strips of ribbons radiating from a knotted center.

In a similar postmodernist vein Mr. Schneider made photographic enlargements of microscope slides of

a group of biological specimens in 1992 and 1993.

Three of these large prints (29 by 31 inches) at the gallery display the specimens in all their mystifying, understated beauty. "Biological Specimen No. 1" in particular has within a fuzzily outlined circle a blob of something that looks as if it had just burst into life.

Side by side at the gallery are two images that are almost opposites in complexity and feeling. One is "Datura" (1996), an exquisitely elegant, Irving Penn-style picture in delicate tones of grays and whites of a flower in various stages of development. This image was printed from a large-format negative that had been in a cartridge, or film holder, that could be taken in and out of the

camera so the film could be exposed again and again over the course of a few weeks.

The other image is "Mask" (1999). As he did with his palm photographs, Mr. Schneider created "Mask" by pressing his sweating face on film emission, creating a fearsome self-portrait. Like a brutally burned face, it is pitiless. And its hard, glinting eye gives no quarter. But looking as if were reflecting a light source, the glint is actually the tear in the artist's eye.

The heavenly body and its extraordinary microcosmos are no more immune to life's ravages than the images on the glass negatives that Mr. Schneider found in the Caribbean.

"Gary Schneider: Genetic Self-Portrait" is at the International Center of Photography, 1120 Fifth Avenue, at 94th Street, (212) 860-1777, through April 9. "Gary Schneider: Specimen Drawings, Photographs 1987-1999" is at the Eleanor Barfoot gallery, 580 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo, (212) 625-8899, through April 22.