

EZ6 Focus is put on self-discovery

In search of identity, Gary Schneider has traveled from South Africa to New York, from the 21st century to the 19th, and from the surface of his sweaty palms to deep into the structure of his own chromosomes. It has been three decades since he first set out with a camera to make sense of the self. He has reinterpreted studio nega-

Visual Arts

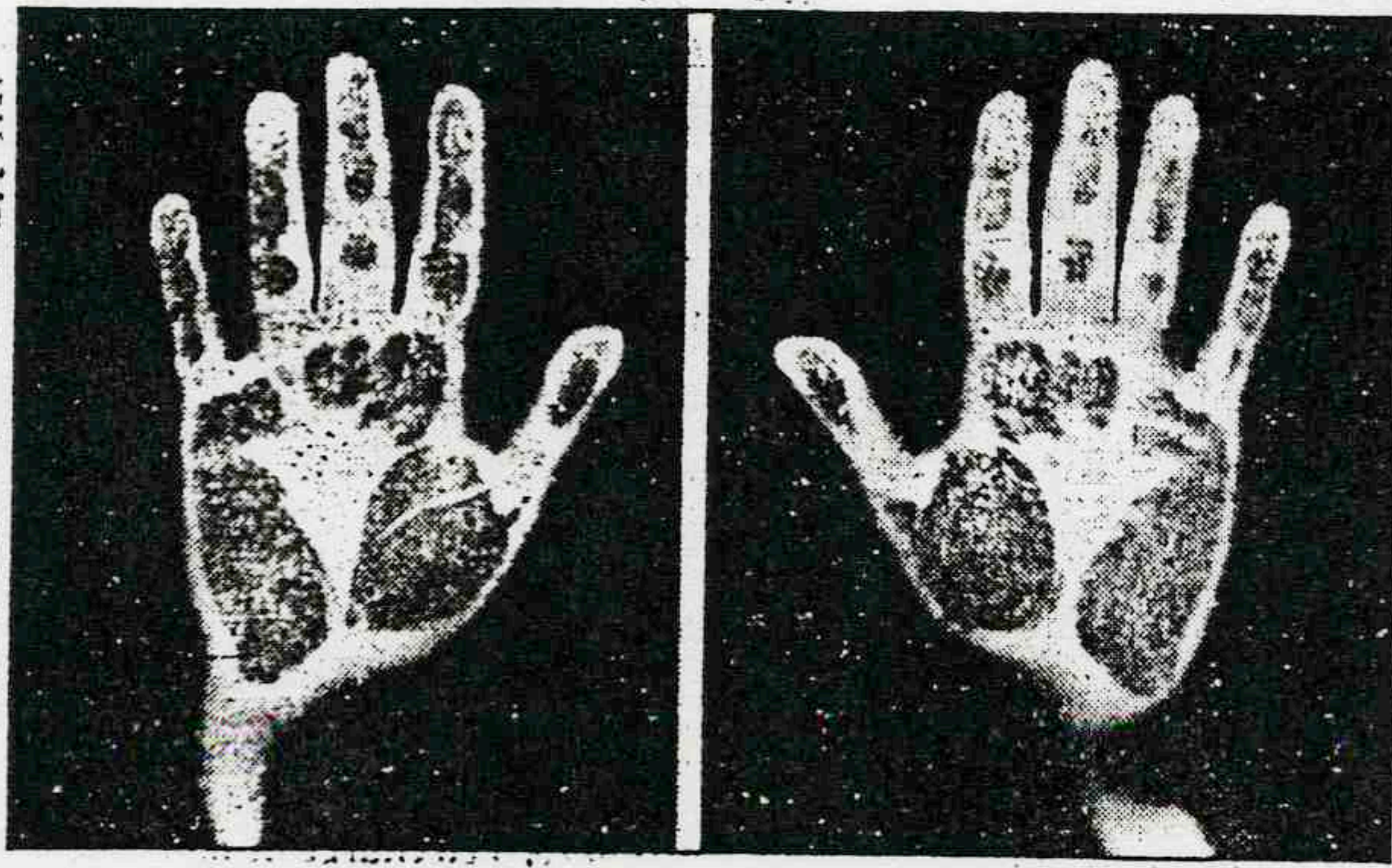
JOANNE SILVER

tives of seated women, made in the 1800s, and pictures of his own DNA, recorded with the very latest medical imaging techniques. No matter what his apparent subject, however, the artist has concluded, "All my portraits are self-portraits."

At Harvard University's Arthur M. Sackler Museum through June 13, "Gary Schneider: Portraits" pre-

sents an extraordinary 30-year retrospective of the photographer's visual investigation of being. The pieces range from an early 16-part "Portrait of Ralph" — with its close-up views of toes, lips, nipples and skin — to the monumental "Genetic Self-Portrait" he made in response to the Human Genome Project. People emerge in the faces Schneider surveys, in handprints and in cubist grids of body parts. Character unfolds within the distorted images harnessed by the photographer over lengthy exposures in near-darkness. Emotions rise up out of ghostly imprints of human hands. At every juncture, the artist thwarts expectations to reveal something startlingly true and personal.

"I've inherited, in being South African, the obsession with looking at things up close," Schneider once told an interviewer. "This is what all my work is — looking at



things really up close." Biology class was the highlight of school for the artist as a young man, who would later experiment with making large-scale photographs of the

slivered information on microscope slides. Additional forces motivated the shy and dyslexic teenager to find a refuge in art. He said, "Growing up in South Africa and



PERSONAL STUDY: Gary Schneider's prints 'Vince,' above, and 'Hands' are part of the retrospective 'Gary Schneider: Portraits' at Harvard University.

being gay, I became interested in constructing my identity and the authenticity of my environment."

At first glance, Schneider's photographs here would seem to have much to do with identity, but little to do with environments. Eyes, lips, glasses, curves of flesh and tufts of hair constitute neither landscape nor architecture. Schneider is masterful, however, at using scale and sequence and timing to produce a sense of place in his images of people.

Individuals such as the artist himself, his partner John, or his friend Ralph — transcribed as fragments in a grid — invite viewers to spend time in their midst, assembling the bits into a coherent whole. Once no larger than postcards, the 19th century pictures in the installation "Carte de Visite" have assumed life size in Schneider's hands. With their newfound stature, these women lose their anonymity and beckon onlookers to pause and imagine their stories.

In a medium that hinges on what Henri Cartier-Bresson called "the decisive moment," Schneider pursues quite a different goal. His portraits illustrate not a split-second fact, but a reality shifting over time. His enormous studies of the faces of friends and relatives register odd incongruities as a result of the long exposures, during which the photographer illuminates the features with only a small flashlight.

If the prolonged sessions recall methods from more than a century ago, Schneider's products also reflect an uncertainty that registers as quite contemporary. Similarly, the "Carte de Visite" portraits poignantly straddle two eras. Schneider's heat- and sweat-sensitive handprints, sometimes created in memory of a loved one who has died, fuse multiple time frames in a single shot: the instant when the photographer placed his palm on negative film, and the lifetime being saluted by that gesture.

Perhaps it is only fitting that the most detailed existence Schneider has documented ends up being the most elusive, unfixed in time and space. "Genetic Self-Portrait," developed in collaboration with a group of scientists at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, charts chromosomes, a monstrously enlarged strand of hair, retinas, irises, mucous, intestinal flora and various other aspects of Schneider's physical being. What remains elusive in these poetically rendered images is the person who carries these attributes. That identity lingers as a horizon does in a landscape, ever-present but ultimately unattainable.

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