

Friday

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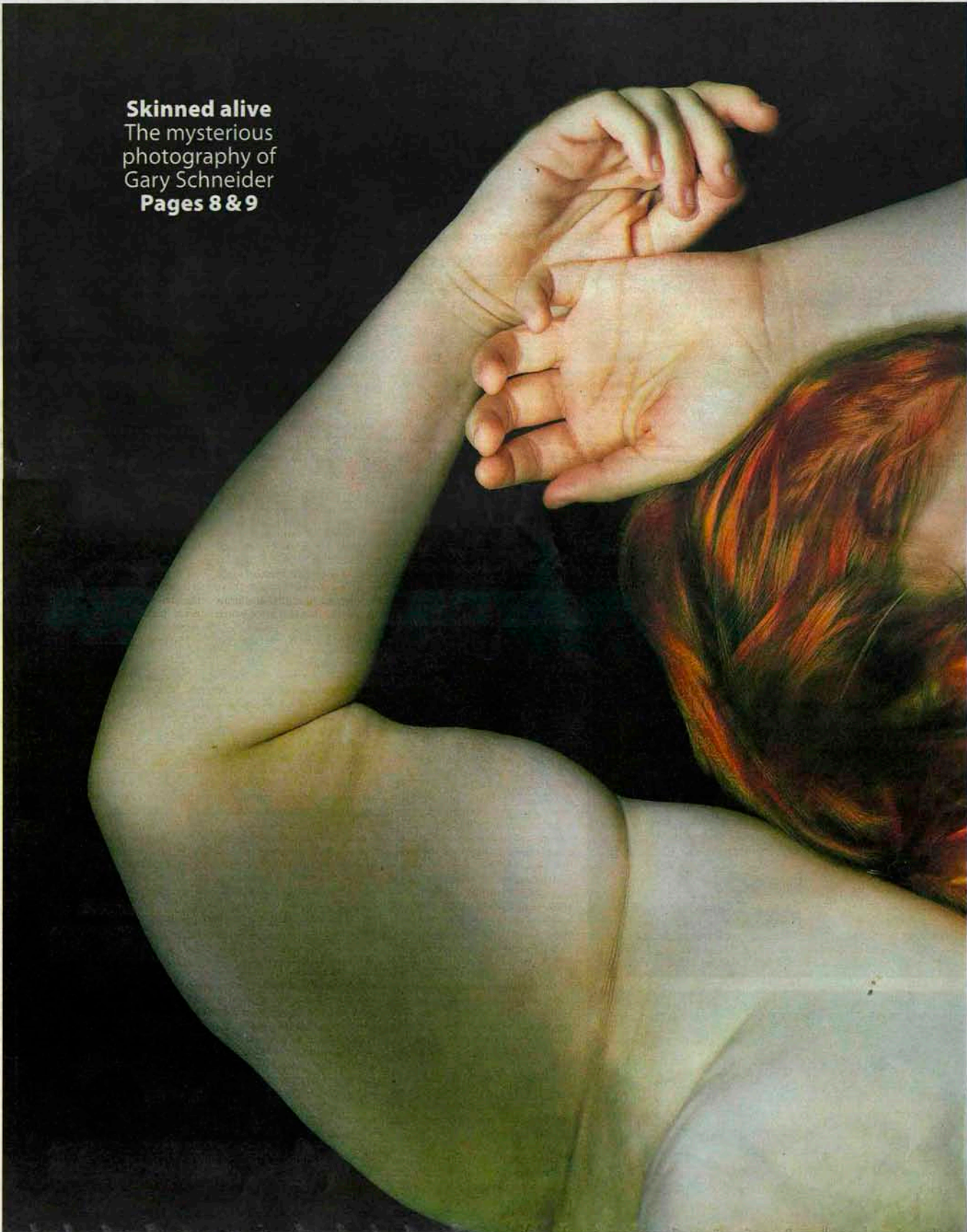
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Photography



Carly's legs, 2006

Talk to the hand

Whether it is the face, body or just the hand Gary Schneider uses photographic techniques to search below the surface of his subjects

Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

Soon after photography was invented in the 19th century it was pressed into service to aid policing and was used to record the faces of criminals and the criminally insane. This kind of visual documentation extended the field of the pseudo-science of phrenology, which involved "reading" the shape of a person's head to determine his or her character.

The theory was that you could spot a criminal or a lunatic by studying the particular formation — the bulges or indentations — of the skull. Photography presented the phrenologist with a new machine for "seeing" (what the artist Alan Sekula called a "truth apparatus"), which could confirm what science already purported to know about human nature.

A second use to which photography was put early on was the *carte de visite*, an elegant ancestor of the now ubiquitous business card, left on silver platters or carried into salons on velvet cushions to announce your

credentials or leave a trace of your having been there.

With the camera, then, the alleged scum and the supposed cream of society could be subjected to the same "forensic" assessment made possible by the extraordinary new technology that seemed able to commit to paper the truth about who you really were.

The word "forensic" goes back to ancient Roman times when, to determine the truth in a criminal matter, evidence was presented "before the forum". Given the relative lack then of what we have now come to know as "forensic science", your guilt or innocence was more likely to be decided on the strength of the argument presented in your favour than on any

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actual evidence linking you to a crime.

These moments in the nearly 200-year history of photography have long fascinated Gary Schneider, who was born in East London but is now a naturalised American. He is in Johannesburg for an exhibition at David Krut Projects and to make what he calls "hand portraits", a project he has been engaged in for almost 20 years and part of which was published in 2010 by Aperture as *HandBook*.

Two of these portraits are included in the exhibition, which gives a taste of the trajectory of Schneider's work since the Seventies when he left South Africa to live in New York. He has long sought, photographically, to get under the skin of the people who have (bravely, sometimes) posed for him. Not satisfied simply to record the face or body language his subjects present to the lens, Schneider has used several photographic techniques to look much deeper.

In his *Genetic Self-Portrait* he worked with scientists to produce extraordinary images of his own body, seen up very, very close.

But in the hand portraits he traces images made by the contact of skin on film. He has set up his "studio" in the closet of a darkroom at Wits University — a kind of confessional booth, he says — and in the darkness of that

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how and tell: Gary Schneider's photographs of the hands of Willem Boshoff, Jo Ractliffe and Ali Hlongwane

pace the old and beautiful alchemy of printing is played out in a 10-minute portrait session. The "sitters" wash all traces of lotions and oils off their hands, enter the booth and, guided by the photographer, place their left hand on a rectangle of unexposed photographic film for two minutes.

The heat and moisture from their hands leave an "image". The film is exposed briefly to light from an enlarger. Schneider then dips the film

into developer until the ghostly image emerges.

This is a tense moment, because the sitters, peering over the photographer's shoulder, are not sure what the enlarger and film have exposed, what the pressure and heat of the hand have given away, what secrets and lies the developing fluid might coax to the surface.

Perhaps this is what it feels like to have your palm read — despite a

determined scepticism, one half of you believes (hopes, perhaps) that all will be revealed.

Photographer and subject share not only an act of voyeurism, in which the latter is a willing participant, but also a strange and brief intimacy set in motion by darkness, a close space and a sheet of photographic film, and the delight of watching an image appear on the film being agitated in a tray of liquid.

Whether or not one is convinced that Schneider's hand portraits do "speak" of something (*HandBook*, in which each silvery image is paired with some small biographical textual detail, certainly offers a compelling and gorgeous argument), the process itself, the minute drama it contains, reminds one of the history of photography and especially of a technique of making images that has been made almost obsolete by new

and "better" technology. Though we long ago let photography off the truth-telling hook, we cannot quite shake our belief in its ability to tell us, mysteriously, something true about ourselves.

Gary Schneider: *Skin* is on at David Krut Projects until September 10

To see the slideshow go to mg.co.za/schneider