

Home > Hong Kong > Play

Robert Polidori photographs Hong Kong's 'rational planning'

Controversial post-Hurricane Katrina photographer comes to Hong Kong to exhibit his best and produce new work

By Payal Uttam 12 September, 2011



Robert Polidori in India -- you know what they say about men and the size of their cameras.

Canadian-born photographer Robert Polidori hasn't taken a vacation in 25 years. He's been too busy carting his large-format camera around the world to document the aftermath of events like the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Hurricane Katrina and the Lebanese Civil War.

For decades, the 60-year-old artist has been obsessed with human habitats violated by time and circumstance. For Polidori, interior spaces can reveal the collective soul of a society. He describes vacant rooms as exoskeletons of peoples' internal lives.

His most controversial series of photographs captured the destroyed homes in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Although many decried his work as capitalizing on the disaster, Polidori's 2006 exhibition "New Orleans after the Flood" was one of the most popular photography shows in the history of the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Among his rich body of work, Polidori has also captured the crumbling decadence of mansions in Havana, the restoration of the Palace de Versailles as well as colonial architecture in Goa. Selections from each series will be on display in Hong Kong at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery from September 15 to October 16.

Polidori, who began his career as an avant-garde filmmaker, crossed over to stills in the 1980s. While exhibiting internationally, he has maintained his position as staff photographer for "The New Yorker" since 1998.

We spoke with the cult photographer ahead of his solo exhibition in Hong Kong titled "Ars Memorativa."



Salle de Crimée Sud at the Palace de Versailles.

CNNGo: *You started your career working with Jonas Mekas and making avant-garde films, how did you decide to become a photographer?*

Robert Polidori: In 1971 I read a book called "The Art of Memory" by Frances Yates, which dealt with ancient memory systems. What all these systems had in common was that practitioners would memorize empty rooms.

Also, it seemed to me that the portrayal of rooms looked better in photography than in cinema. When there is a chain of motion, rooms seem to vibrate a little and they don't look as timeless or as eternal as they do in still photographs. I think it's better to photograph what doesn't move than make movies of what does move.

CNNGo: *From all the rooms you've shot, where did you feel most comfortable?*

Polidori: Let me answer it to you this way -- there are many artists who do work that is like themselves, but I'm attracted to things that are most unlike me.

Astrologically, I am an Aquarius. Aquarian people develop their identity by taking things out of the world and putting them into themselves. You embrace things and ingest them and they become part of you.

So the question you ask is totally foreign to my personality. When I'm happy I'm a little sad, when I'm comfortable I must be a little uncomfortable.

CNNGo: *OK, where have you been most uncomfortable or scared?*

Polidori: In New Orleans. The working conditions were very difficult. The actual stench and the involuntary vomiting gets tiring after 12 hours a day. Everything stinks of decomposing organic matter.

Every house had a refrigerator in a closed environment. We're talking about contained, decomposing rot that was pretty intense. That was scary. There was mold everywhere and I had bad asthma.

But psychologically, I felt privileged.

CNNGo: *Why did you pick Hurricane Katrina over other disasters?*

Polidori: I don't know if people would agree that Hurricane Katrina was a historical occurrence when the majority of Americans realized that global warming was probably real and that perhaps it could affect their lives.

Around the world more of these events will bring global warming into the consciousness of people simply because it will become a reality.

“
***Chaos is interesting.
That's where the world
comes from.***

— Robert Polidori on being called a "connoisseur of chaos"

I try to anesthetize upon historic events. I think of the Katrina incident as the historical backdrop where I illustrate myriad different examples of what exoskeleton violation looks like. Each portrait is like an exploded cadaver diagram. It's what is left of somebody's nest.

One thing that I found surprising was that the poorest parts of town were somehow more individualized than the bourgeois areas where I guess those people buy all their furniture from the same stores. In the poor parts of town, for example, there was more color used.

I always thought one of the powers of wealth was the power to individualize oneself but this was not true as far as interiors in New Orleans.

CNNGo: *You say that homes are exoskeletons of people's internal lives. What's your house like?*

Polidori: Most of the time I live in hotel rooms but they don't reflect my personality. People would say, to really know me they would look at my desk.

In the last few years that has changed. I actually built a kind of a studio in New York City from scratch with an architect. I'm about to sell that and maybe build a home but I only got involved in that process when I was 57 years old.

Most of my life I developed a kind of active homeless attitude. I don't necessarily recommend that but I found that to be an important process for me to go through. The only interior home life that I ever really developed was my psychological inside.

There is an expression in French: "Les cordonniers sont toujours les plus mal chaussés." In other words, the shoemaker who makes everyone great shoes wears crappy shoes.

I live in contradiction to what I photograph. At first it was unconsciously, then it was consciously. Sometimes to have a particular skill you have to not allow yourself the luxury.

CNNGo: *How does it feel to be described as a "connoisseur of chaos"?*

Polidori: It doesn't bother me at all. Order comes out of chaos. People who like lower level order, I don't find them so intelligent or so courageous, but that's OK.

I've been called a lot of things, I don't think that one's particularly insulting. Actually I take that as a compliment. To me, chaos is interesting. That's where the world comes from.

CNNGo: *What else have you been called?*

Polidori: I forget the exact the exact phrase but I've been called basically an immoral opportunist in the work that I did post-Katrina in New Orleans. I think that was probably the main one that was actually meant as a critique or insult.

But I didn't produce that storm. It wasn't my doing. I rather that there be a record of it than no record.

CNNGo: *Hong Kong is pretty catastrophe-free but you'll be shooting here this month. What attracted you to the city?*

Polidori: In the last five years I've been working on this notion of cities as a subconscious nesting need. So I've been shooting cities that grow up with absolutely no plan like the large favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the slums of Dharavi in Mumbai, the Kibera slum in Nairobi as opposed to planned cities. They have in common a kind of density.

Hong Kong to me is one of the examples of say a more rational planning. It's the hardest place to impose a grid system because of the inclines but Hong Kong attempts that, so it's an interesting case study.

CNNGo: *You recently photographed Bottega Veneta's Fall-Winter campaign. How do you switch gears from such intense subjects to doing a fashion shoot?*

Polidori: It's like this. Sometimes you make love songs, sometimes you make dirges and sometimes ballads. I just take it as a challenge.

When I do things for myself, like most of my books or project, I set out with my own self-imposed questions and limits and when I'm commissioned by someone or an organization to do some images there are also some limitations imposed.

Often I find when I am commissioned to do things, it's not anything that I would spend my own funds to produce but I always learn something from it or notice something that I reintegrate into my work.



Bedroom in Havana at the former home of the Countess O'Reilly, the Condesa de Buenavista.



Entrance Vestibule at the Alvares House in Goa, India.



Salle les Campagnes Militaires et le Décor des Résidences Royales with the Questel staircase in the background at the Palace de Versailles.



Cabinet Intérieur de Madame Adélaïde at the Palace de Versailles.

Ars Memorativa

Photographs by Robert Polidori,
September 15 – October 16, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road, Central,
www.sundaramtagore.com