

Timeout

Hong Kong

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* Interview Robert Polidori

Internationally renowned for his large-scale photography of ruins and deserted spaces, Robert Polidori likes to recall his defining influence: Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory*, which he came across in 1971. The book's descriptions of ancient memory systems (consisting of the memorisation of empty rooms), along with other psychological implications of interiors (most notably the Jungian concept of *superego*), provide a fascinating philosophical backdrop for the 60-year-old photographer's architectural photography series, which have taken him to places ranging from the Palace de Versailles under restoration to the crumbling mansions in Havana, Cuba and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina – the last project of which culminated into a controversial yet hugely popular exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2006.

The Montréal-born, New York-based artist worked as a staff photographer at *The New Yorker* for 12 years, before recently turning his attention to *Vanity Fair*. During his prolific career, he has published 11 photography books, including *Havana* (2001), *Zones of Exclusion: Pripyat and Chernobyl* (2003) and *After the Flood* (2006). As we meet up at his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, Polidori, who once worked for iconic avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas at the Anthology Film Archives in the 1970s, is also planning to get back to his roots in filmmaking.

In your work, you're often capturing places in different degrees of decay. Would you say you're a nostalgic person?

Yes and no. Unlike many Aquarian [people], who are irrepressibly sentimental – for example, I'd say I like to go to Brazil because in their culture, they have no hang-up about being sentimental – I'm very taken by history. And the thing I like about rooms that decay is that several layers of time are visible. It's not so much that I love decay as much as being able to see many levels of time simultaneously. I would say photography is a more zen-like medium than the movies.

In terms of your creative process, do you think your work captures the social climates of the times, or is it more a record of one particular moment in one particular space? Both. But... you mentioned creation. I don't create. I like to



Lightkeeper Robert Polidori is a chronicler of human spaces that are now devoid of people

ART

think of myself more as a medium. For example, many people think in the photos: 'Ah, you must have moved this and brought this!' But you know, hey, I don't go around with a big truck full of props and then place them in a space. I don't really invent or create. I go and try

to find places that are inherently evocative, that are already rich. I find that reality is more imaginative than anything I could dream up. I'm basically a phenomenologist, okay? I try to just get the best that I can.

Is that why you mostly shoot with natural lighting?

Oh yes. It started out at the beginning because I was poor. Lighting takes a long time to do properly, and also lighting changes [from places to places]. I would say 99 percent of every photo I've taken is [shot] with available light – though there are some exceptions. Philosophically, I don't like lighting so much, because I think that I'm changing [the scene] already. Practically I never did it, because [in] a lot of

places that I had to shoot, I could have gotten done maybe one-tenth or one-twentieth of the amount of pictures that I [can otherwise do], and I would have needed a much larger crew and they simply would not have given me authorisation to be there. But ultimately, I don't do it because it doesn't look as good.

For the works at this exhibition, were they mostly done by just you and your camera?

I'd say for most of them, yes. And maybe [for] some of the later ones, it was me, one assistant and one scanner and Photoshop person. But I like to have small crews, because the larger the crew, the more it changes the psychological ambience. I like to try to absorb the subject, and if there're too many other people in the room, I'll also absorb them – and they're not part of it, unless I want them to be.

You seem to be more interested in the interior spaces than the people who occupy them.

Yes, because I think that rooms are metaphors and catalysts for psychological states of being. They are mirrors to the soul. I could take a portrait of you now, and I [could] take a picture of where you

live – I would know more about your personal values by the picture of where you live than your face. And that, I would say, is almost a universal truth.

With the images that you took inside museum spaces, what do you think about their relationship with the museum or gallery spaces that they're eventually exhibited in?

Well, it's like the room within a room within a room... [Nowadays,] a lot of contemporary art in the North American or Western European context is this kind of art that's just about the material, and I never thought this was so interesting or so fantastic. Being a contemporary artist, I wanted to refer to deeper cultural, historical or psychological things. I like understanding how things were at one time. I like iconic art. To me, the so-called abstract painting, I don't care [for] so much. To me, it's decorative; I mean, it's alright, but it doesn't excite me. I like good iconographers.

Interview: Edmund Lee

Robert Polidori's exhibition, *Ars Memorativa*, is at Sundaram Tagore Gallery until Oct 16.