

ARTINFO

Robert Polidori

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Published: September 23, 2006

To commemorate the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, ARTINFO has brought back our AI Interview with photographer Robert Polidori, first published in Sept. 2006, on the eve of the opening of his exhibition "New Orleans after the Flood" at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.



PARIS—Robert Polidori is among the most respected of contemporary photographers. His photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide, and his books Havana (2001) and Zones of Exclusion: Pripyat and Chernobyl (2003) have cemented his reputation as a leading artist of human tragedy and pathos. His work has appeared in Vanity Fair, Fortune and The New Yorker magazine, where he is a staff photographer.

In September, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is presenting "New Orleans after the Flood," an exhibition of Polidori's photographs taken immediately after Katrina tore through the city. And another show from the same body of work opens at Flowers Gallery in London later in October.

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Robert Polidori, "5000 Cartier Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 2005"

As it turns out, Polidori is as eloquent in conversation as he is in his photographs. Our conversation, which began simply as a discussion about this latest project, led into deeper revelations about the strangeness of reality vs. fiction, and about what drives him to photograph.

Robert, I'm looking forward to seeing your work on the walls of the Metropolitan Museum. Tell me, as you see it, what is the difference between seeing your work in the New Yorker or in the pages of one of your books and seeing it on a gallery or museum wall?

I won't comment on the sociological differences because those are obvious. But physically, the prints at the Met are bigger and better. It's not the case that bigger is always better, but in this case, they are. I shoot almost exclusively in large format. All of the images in the show were shot as 5-by-7-inch sheet film originals, which is an anachronism, because nobody shoots in 5-by-7 inch any more. I buy the film from Kodak specially cut for me. I like high resolution and a lot of detail. You see a lot more in the [Met] prints than you do on the little printed page of a magazine, so that's one difference. Also, prints from the red-green-blue color world are richer than what you get from the cyan-magenta-yellow-black separations of the lithographically printed page.



Robert Polidori, "2732 Orleans Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana, September 2005"

Something that has always struck me about the high level of detail that you're talking about in your work is that it allows you to make your pictures more telling in psychological terms.

Yes, I think so. When images are soft, they just remain evocative, or in your imagination. You get a mood, and it remains on the emotional level. The viewer has to put more of him or herself into it. When there is more detail, it's like that old expression: There's no fiction stranger than reality. Reality will compose the most extreme paradoxes and contradictions and adjacencies, which can't be understood.

So detail gives you more mental work to do. There are more things to look at, which suggest more and more questions. All that mood is still there anyway, so it's like the double-punch effect. It's a question of keeping the mind occupied while the emotions are being silently manipulated on the back burner. I just think it makes for a richer experience. And it has the added value of being a more accurate historical record. So you have something for everybody.

And how does that relate to the pictorial sophistication of your images?

I'm not one of these artists who's making art about the processes or the rules of art-making. I'm not interested in that. I think that that's been gone through, and I think that it's one dimensional. It's not about art-making. However, there are aesthetic principals there, pictorially speaking. The grammar of my pictorialism comes from pre-Renaissance and Renaissance perspective, because all of that stuff is built into modern lenses. So that is assumed in the technology that I use.

What would you say was your basic reason for taking photographs?

I don't take photographs because I love doing it (though I don't hate it). Some photographers are in love with the process of taking a picture. Psychologically, I'm more interested in the situations that taking the picture puts me through, and what it forces me to witness. I really do it because I want that picture. It's like I'm collecting evidence, like a detective looking to solve a case. I don't mean that literally, but I use it as a simile. It's a thing about phenomena and asking questions. And answering some, but not answering all of them.

Yes, I see that. It's like you were saying earlier about reality's paradoxes. It seems to me that this is what makes these New Orleans pictures so poignant. Each image presents the evidence of someone's neat and ordered life that's just been turned upside down.

Yes, it's imploded. I'm interested in interiors, and I have been for a long time, simply because they're indices of individuals' personal values. They tell you a lot about the individual. Like I've said before, to me interiors are both metaphors and catalysts for states of being. You can take a portrait of somebody, and you might have a feeling looking at their face, but you know less things about them by looking at their face than you do when you look at the way that they compose their own interior space. What interests me are their values.

Even in portraiture I don't like the snapshot. I like the formal portrait because I like it when the subject chooses his or her own pose. I'm not interested as much in what I feel about the subject as I am interested in what the subject feels about themselves. In psychological terms, we're talking about the super-ego, and that's what interests me. And I photograph almost everything in the world except myself. I guess I'm outward-looking.

The other difference between the snapshot and the formal portrait is the length of the exposure. That's important to you, isn't it?

I'll paraphrase Dieter Appelt, a German artist, who said "the snapshot is of a moment that will never occur again, and the long exposure is of a moment that never occurred to begin with." All the things I do are long exposures. When I was a teenager and in my early 20s, I was interested in so-called "spirit photography." Even though I know it's all fake I like it anyway, because I like what it tries to do, which is to reveal an inner truth. So I use long exposures because of that, but also because I photograph in such dark places and usually I don't use artificial lighting. I like natural light. I like the certain look that it gives.

Apparently you didn't have any choice when you were in New Orleans.

No. There was no electricity. It was very dark inside those houses (and it was stinky too). We're talking 400- or 500- or 600-second exposures.

And yet they're so incredibly sharp.

This sounds very simple, but I think that photographs should be taken of still things; cinematography must be taken of moving things. It's hard to say it's an absolute truth, it's a relative truth. There are exceptions.