



## Bits and Pieces of a Lavish Palace

By **WILLIAM MEYERS** | May 8, 2008

The Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of Imagination recently hosted a roundtable discussion on "The Psycho-Neurology of the Photographic Arts" in its space at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute on East 82nd Street. An Ivy League professor of Modern art who was smarter than necessary began the discussion by averring that there were no intrinsic characteristics of a photograph, that photography is an entirely cultural construct. Robert Polidori, the token photographer among the savants, insisted that photography was set by physics.



*Edwyn Houk Gallery*

Robert Polidori, 'Versailles, Salles D' Afrique, Painting of Louis XVI, by Callet' (2007).

"Vision is natural," Mr. Polidori went on to say, and the crowd laughed nervously. "Codes of perception are biological," he insisted. The professor asked why, if that was so, had the Chinese not invented photography. "I don't know," Mr. Polidori answered. He pointed out it was a trick question that really had nothing to do with the issue at hand. Much else of what was said in the next hour convinced me that the academy is where art goes to die, that the college department of art is essentially a hospice. If you want to learn about "The Psycho-Neurology of the Photographic Arts" and actually see some of the real stuff, Mr. Polidori's "Versailles: États Transitoires" is currently on exhibition at the Edwynn Houk Gallery.

Versailles is the spectacularly lavish palace outside of Paris that was the home of the kings of France until the French Revolution, and is now one of that country's most popular tourist attractions. The transitory state Mr. Polidori set out to photograph is the gradual decomposition of this magnificent heap into something other, a sort of slow-motion Ozymandias. He brought both artistic and technical talents to this project. On first entering the Houk Gallery one notices, even across the room, the richness of the colors of these large-format prints, as saturated and delicate as dye transfer prints, a complex technology that is rarely used today. They are Fujicolor Crystal Archive prints, made by a process Fuji developed in collaboration with Mr. Polidori, and whose magnificent properties he puts to appropriate use.

"Versailles, Salle du XVIIIème, Detail of Portrait of Louis XIV at Ten Years Old, by Henri Testelin" (2007) gives us only the lower-left corner of a painting of the boy who was to become Louis le Grand, the Sun King around whom all of France would revolve. In fact, all we see of him is his right leg encased in white hose, his foot shod in a delicate black slipper whose strap is adorned with an ornate piece of jewelry. The painter skillfully rendered his flowing deep blue velvet robe decorated with gold fleurs-de-lis and trimmed with ermine, as well as the lighter blue rug on the stairs leading to his throne. A small palette, the artist's calling card, is painted in the corner. Besides that, Mr. Polidori's photograph includes the painting's gilt frame and the frame's shadow on the red-flocked wall-covering, a bit of the elaborate red-and-white molding beneath that, and at the bottom a small sample of the faux marble wall.

Mr. Polidori justifies the use of his large format by filling his pictures with detail. From a distance we admire the formal artistry of his composition, but up close we see what this photograph is really about: the gilt flaking off the frame. The regal gold is cracking and flaking and falling off in small bits, no more immune to time than the boy whose flesh-and-blood leg once inhabited the elegant hose in the painting. Mr. Polidori's technical skill in handling his 8-by-10-inch view camera, in processing the negative in Photoshop, and in collaborating with Fuji and master printer Philippe Laumont in his atelier, produced a glorious image of transience.

In "Versailles, Salle des Bains of Marie-Antoinette" (2005) the receding black-and-white floor tiles give an illusion of depth, and the light coming in from the window on the left gives the room a feeling of airiness. The modulation of the pale blue color across the wood paneling testifies to the Fujicolor's marvelous sensitivity, but it is the sheet of plastic that covers the white and gold brocade spread on the bed against the far wall that is the geographical and aesthetic center of the image. It is the plastic sheet, meant to be invisible but marked by Mr. Polidori's eye, which signifies the passage of this chamber from its royal past to a state co-equal with that of any bourgeois rentier.

In the other 12 pictures, the glory of 18th-century Versailles is summoned up and then serially deconstructed.

At the Philoctetes Center Mr. Polidori, who was born in Montreal in 1951, spoke about the impact Frances Yates's "The Art of Memory" had on him when he read it at 20. The book tells how ancient people achieved great feats of memory by associating what they wanted to remember with a succession of loci, places they had already familiarized themselves with. Mr. Polidori turned to photography as "an allegiance to meaning," and because he "wanted icons to serve memory." He has made a specialty of photographing rooms — Versailles, but also schoolrooms in Ukraine deserted by the disaster at Chernobyl, middle-class living rooms in New Orleans rearranged by the receding waters of Hurricane Katrina, decaying mansions in Havana wasted by half a century of Fidel Castro — because "rooms are metaphors and catalysts of meaning." He makes stunning images because it is "hardest to remember the banal." Thus concludes the lesson in psycho-neurology.

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