

# Art in America

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Robert Polidori: Temple of David, Beirut, 1996, Fuji color crystal A print, 32 by 40 inches; at Pace/MacGill.



## Robert Polidori at Pace/MacGill

Scrawled on a red chalkboard in an ordinary schoolroom are white Cyrillic letters that translate: "There's no return. Farewell. Pripjat, 28 April 1986." This note found above broken desks is an incidental relic of a town in a restricted area known as an exclusion zone that radiates outward from the silenced nuclear reactor that made Chernobyl famous. The room seems trashed beyond repair, while light spills through the casement windows beyond which green things are growing. This image is among the large-format chromogenic prints mounted on Plexiglas that were part of Robert Polidori's recent exhibition, and among the many published in a new volume, *Zones of Exclusion, Pripjat and Chernobyl* (Gottingen, Germany, Steidl, 2003). Taken together, they add to his ongoing project: the interpretation of the interrupted urban landscape. Known for his photographs of the baroque decay of modern Havana, Polidori, staff photographer for the *New Yorker*, focuses his view camera on cycles of construction, stasis and decay. In *Michigan Avenue, Chicago* (1999), he looks across a vast, muddy excavation for the city's Millennium Park to the Italianate office buildings and high-rises beyond. His point of view reduces a yellow boom truck and crane to the relative significance of a Tonka toy. *Interrupted Highway, Gabarri, Alexandria, Egypt* (1999) tracks an unused highway cutting through a cityscape that abruptly terminates in an excavation of the old city, where the layers of an archeological dig are framed by more recent residential

buildings. There are brightly painted shutters and a jerry-built shelter for the dig, laundry on a line and, diminutive in the foreground, a child in red among a flock of chickens. Descriptive and objective, the image encompasses the inhabitants of a site and their abandoned homes and artifacts, as well as the workers whose labor has helped create a city of the dispossessed.

Polidori's palette is restrained. Light tents down through the rafters to the walls and tire-strewn floor of the Temple of David, Beirut (1996), its pale blue walls the color of the sky. In this ruined structure that may have been a mosque, a surrounding aisle is defined by pillars supporting Moorish arches ornamented with David's star. The rich, red seats of the Sala Alejo Carpentier, Gran Teatro de la Habana, Habana Vieja (2000), still in use, seem at stylistic odds with the Baroque decorative program of the quietly decaying theater. Most of the frescoes on the ceiling are gone, but there are ornate chandeliers, and putti attend the plaster reliefs above. Polidori lovingly recalls such fittings among the stock of the skylit Atelier Feau, Paris XVII (1998), whose inventory includes numbered stacks of garlanded surrounds and a painted boiserie portraying the muses of poetry and music. He records and names these places as though entrusted with an essential job.

-by Edward Leffingwell