



Entrance Vestibule, Avaras House, Goa, India, 2002

# Leaving THE ROOM

*Award-winning photographer Robert Polidori recently showed his powerful images of the interiors of rooms as altered by the passages of time in Hong Kong for the first time. Kee sat down with two-time winner of the prestigious Alfred Eisenstaedt Award and World Press Award winner to find out more about his career as a “conceptual documentarian” and his intriguing images.*

{ *Words:* RACHEL DUFFELL *Images:* ROBERT POLIDORI COURTESY OF SUNDARAM TAGORE }



Bedroom, Ciudadela, formerly the house of Countess O'Reilly, the Condesa de Buenavista, 6 #320, Miramar, Havana, Cuba, 2001

*From* the inside of the Palace of Versailles in France during its comprehensive restoration, to the interiors of the homes of those who fled after the devastation of Chernobyl or in the wake of New Orleans' Hurricane Katrina, photographer Robert Polidori has been where few other photographers have gone before. His images, for the most part, are artistic documentations of rooms, through which he hopes to show the passage of time as well as reveal something about those who may once have resided there.

In the early 1980s, Polidori managed to gain access to the Palace of Versailles which at the time was undergoing an extensive and costly refurbishment programme in an attempt to restore it to its former glory. It was here that he initially began to focus on shooting interiors, which he went on to do for the next 30 years, though it was something that had been in his sphere of thought for several years by this point.

"I read a book in 1971 called 'The Art of Memory' by Frances Yates and it had a profound impact on me," states Polidori, referring to the pneumatic systems through the ages from BC times to the Renaissance that cultures have incorporated into their societies. "What thrilled me was that students of the art of memory would have to memorise empty rooms. Then there was a second part involving the ancient image which you place in there. It was ultimately a study of the inherent values of icons."

Polidori goes on to talk about how his interests lie in human psychology and how rooms can serve as a doorway into the human mind. "I started to do more modern studies on what rooms meant. Writer Gaston Bachelard goes into the sociological and psychological aspects of rooms and how they affect the human subconscious in 'The Poetics of Space'. Carl Jung refers to the concept of the 'super-ego' and the way that a person puts things on the walls or on their bodies reflects the way they want to be perceived, because that's the way that they think they are. It's self-projection outwards. In other words, I could take a picture of your face and you get a feeling, an idea from that, but if I take a picture of where you live, I know way more about your personal values. So I got into taking pictures of rooms with no people in them. I take psychological portraits, devoid of people," states Polidori, going on to explain his own theory on his subject. "Rooms are both metaphors and catalysts for states of being, and in a way they are a window to the soul. I think that human beings make rooms as an unconscious desire to go and relive the pre-natal life, life in the womb, and the reason we do this is basically because we are afraid, because of a basic human condition question that is not answered. Why are we born, where do we come from, why do we die and where do we go?"

From apartments in New York, vacated only following the deaths of their tenants, and urban dwellings in China to Dubai, to the architectural interiors and the decaying mansions of Cuba, once so splendidly vibrant pre-Castro, and the colonial vestiges of Goa, Polidori has addressed his thoughts and captured a broad cross-section of residences caught in perfect moments of light, masterfully framed with his large format camera using long exposures. Beautifully composed, they are deeply aesthetic, as well as being a chronicle of the times and of those who lived in them. It is these aspects of his work that have led to his label as a "conceptual documentarian" as he blends art with photojournalism. "Strict photo documentarians are less concerned with rules of pictorial grammar," clarifies Polidori. "I find them quite loose and even not professional. I find their imagery psychologically shallow and their observation temporal plane too short to be called deep or highly revelatory. I find them amateurish in the greater scheme of things. They don't ask the question as succinctly, therefore the answer is



Salle de Crimée Sud, (99) ANR.02.036, Salles de l'Afrique, Aile du Nord – 1er étage, Château de Versailles, France, 1985



Cabinet intérieur de Madame Adélaïde, (56 C) CCE.01.058, Corps Central – R.d.C., Château de Versailles, France, 1986

not so great and (their images) become so fragmentary as to be devoid of meaning, or worse, misdirect your knowledge. I try to find spatial and temporal contexts that have historical resonances because I am fascinated by history and memory, and for me it's richer to have an image whose context brings with it more baggage, so it's pre-loaded with more stuff, and offers a richer experience."

Images by Polidori can be read by their viewers on a number of levels. "I look at photography as an oracular process, so where I point the camera is more or less a question that I pose, and the image that I get is more or less the oracle's answer. Like all of these oracular processes, there is a certain kind of interpretation or deciphering that goes on," states Polidori. "At whatever level of enquiry the viewer is capable, I try to frame it in a way that is accessible to them, but with references and clues to things that lie outside the picture frame, or further investigations within the photographic frame that lead them to further enquiries, so that depending on their knowledge base, or their thirst for questions and answering and knowledge, they can go as far as they can, or want to. I try to make my work multi-leveled so that different kinds of people can be engaged."

As well as his more comfortable interior shots, Polidori has also shot some very emotional, albeit static, scenes, including Beirut's courtyards, where traces of war can not only be felt, but seen, Chernobyl's homes following the radioactive disaster that occurred in 1986, and the remains of New Orleans' inhabitants' abodes following the havoc wreaked by Hurricane Katrina. So how did he feel shooting people's intimate quarters following such devastation? "Actually, when I shoot, I don't feel anything. I concentrate on the task at hand. Let me put it this way, if you are going through heart surgery, do you want your heart surgeon to be going through emotional epiphanies about your state of vulnerability and that he has the power of life and death over you? You don't want that," implores Polidori. "But also, since I use film that is expensive, and I pay everybody off (to get into certain places), I want to come out more or less successfully. So when I'm framing, I'm so taken by the spectacle before me that I don't feel that much fear. But as soon as I put the camera down and look away, I'm frightened. It's the weirdest thing. My desire to get the image is greater than my fear and actually makes me forget."

Consistently Polidori gets the job done. His New Orleans series of work showed in 2006 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and was the museum's most popular photography show in its 141-year history. However, the artist and photographer feels like he has almost reached the culmination of his love affair with rooms. "I have spent 30 years indoors and now I want to be outside. I'm looking at cities like nesting phenomena, photographing the accelerating rate of urban development, but that's one of the last things I want to do in photography. I want to get back to films now," states Polidori who originally started his professional life working in cinema. "I never really wanted to be a photographer. I thought photographers were stupid compared to filmmakers," he states with a laugh. "But I'm evolving now and I want to move onto new stuff. I could just continue the rooms thing, but other people are doing it now, and it's ok," he accepts. "It's time."



Foreground: Salle les campagnes militaires et le décor des résidences royales, (93) ANR.02.011, Background: Escalier Questel, ANR.02.012, Salles du XVII, Aile du Nord - 1er étage, Château de Versailles, France, 1985