

**Michael Schreier. *Tears for an Empty Desert: The Interiors.*  
Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Ottawa, October 2 – 26, 2006**

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## Michael Schreier

*Tears for an Empty Desert: The Interiors*

Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Ottawa

October 2 – 26, 2006

A key image in Michael Schreier's recent photo exhibition shows tourists jostling for space in front of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. The famous sculpture is bathed in a golden light and clearly visible above the frantic crowd, which could not be more at odds with this emblem of private grief. Most faces are turned toward it, cameras glued to the eyes or swaying in upraised hands above the melee. One man and one woman have turned away; the man has a sullen expression, while the woman seems almost panic-stricken.

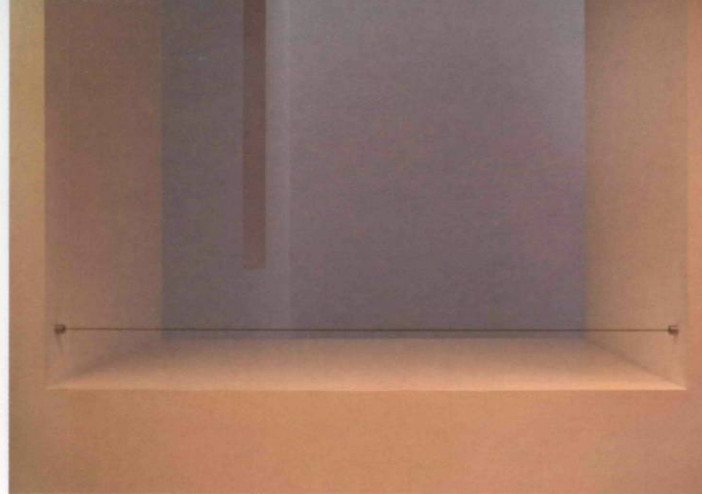
Schreier's *Pieta* was displayed in the back of the gallery, shielded somewhat from the front space, in which a series of empty interior spaces were shown. The wistful, quiet beauty of *Interiors* formed a sharp contrast with the consuming frenzy of the mob in the *Pieta* photograph. Windows and doors in the 11" x 15" inkjet prints make up the main lines of the compositions. In some photos, a passage to the outside is blocked by a bar or a banister, but even without these physical barriers the views provide no open vistas. Depth is minimized by the close proximity of buildings, trees, or bushes outside. The views are digitally manipulated to eradicate detail, and to conform in colour and tonality to the space inside. A subtle, mysterious light pervades both the inside and the outside, often without a clear indication of its source.

The uncluttered, almost minimalist images provoke a generic sense of loss. The windows seem institutional; few clues are given to the actual location or function of the buildings. In a talk, Schreier disclosed that most are interior spaces in museums and galleries. I then began to recognize sections of the new MOMA, as well as surveillance cameras and other museum apparatuses in some pictures.

The knowledge that these images are taken in gallery spaces charges the vague melancholy of this exhibition with a specific, historic complexity. The frames of the windows and doors parallel the architectural framing devices around the *Pieta*, but they remain empty of people and show only faint, ghostly reflections of artwork here and there. In one photo, the artwork is clear: a sculpture of two children huddled together. It is placed in a private apartment, near a wall below a line that recent floodwaters left behind. The greenish tint of this shadowy space suggests drowning; even this last bit of art seems in danger of disappearing.

What remains, in other pictures, are the ever-watching eyes of surveillance cameras; the apparatus is in control. I begin to see *Interiors* as a dystopian vision of the death of art, and the loss of our capacity to orient ourselves in this world that follows from this death.

Reading Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*<sup>1</sup> has set me thinking in such gloomy terms about Schreier's exhibition. Flusser argued that images helped people make sense of their environment, but since the invention of the camera and all the apparatuses that followed it, images have screened out the world rather than referencing it. He poses the question of how art, as a humanistic, intentional activity, can survive in the daily flood of images that influence and shape our thinking and behaviour.



20..09..04, 12..29..51, 76.2 x 101.6 cm  
20..10..05, 12..50..51, 29.2 x 38.1 cm  
07..01..06, 15..24..56, 29.2 x 38.1 cm

from the *Interiors* series, colour inkjet prints, 2006.  
courtesy Patrick Mikhail Gallery

With Flusser in mind, two pensive portraits, hung near the *Pieta*, one of a young woman, the other a double-take of a middle-aged man, take on a rather sinister meaning. Wide-open eyes gaze over rather than confront the viewer. The heads fill the picture surfaces; are these thinking individuals, opposing the pre-programmed tourists in Schreier's *Pieta*, or programmable head spaces?

Schreier has been a photo-based artist and taught photography at the University of Ottawa since the beginning of the 1970s, so to read this exhibition as an anti-photography statement may seem iniquitous. But Schreier's digital intensification of light and tweaking of colour and tone not only evoke a lament, but contain within this painterly technique a hope for a renewal of human agency in photography, and, by extension, in the larger culture. Flusser did not live long enough to get to know the ever-increasing possibilities of image software. Digital image making may never be as free from apparatuses as painting is, but Schreier pushes Flusser's dictum "Freedom is playing against the camera"<sup>2</sup> to great limits.

Petra Halkes

*The Interiors* forms part of a larger project, the limited-edition large-format book *Tears for an Empty Desert*, launched during this exhibition.

1. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

2. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, p. 80.

Petra Halkes is an artist and writer. Her book *Aspiring to the Landscape* was published by the University of Toronto Press in 2006.