

Robert Polidori

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‘Present/Past: The Robert Polidori Photographic Archive’ Review: Inside Pictures’ Outsize Impact

An exhibition helps dissect the photographer’s portraits of interiors and reveal his creative process

WILLAM MEYERS
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Installation view of ‘Present/Past: The Robert Polidori Photographic Archive’ Photo by Patrick Y. Wong.

We read rooms the way we read faces; “Present/Past: The Robert Polidori Photographic Archive” at the Briscoe Center for American History has examples of the photographer’s portraits of interiors and helps us understand how he goes about shooting them. Mr. Polidori (born in Montreal in 1951) gave up on a stalled career as an avant-garde filmmaker after he read Frances Yates’s “The Art of Memory,” which explains how certain ancients, e.g., Pythagoras, memorized data by envisioning it as items in a room. Through a friend involved with New York real estate, he had access to apartments whose occupants had recently died and he began photographing the uninhabited rooms; people’s stuff, what they left behind and how they left it, told him who they were.

Sarah Sonner, the Briscoe Center’s associate director for curation, and Jill Morena, registrar for exhibits and material culture, selected 12 large-format color prints of the sort Mr. Polidori is famous for to be displayed in “Present/Past,” but before you enter the gallery where they are hung you pass through a room with six vitrines, each of which has two panels of smaller prefatory photos. Because the Briscoe is devoted to history, it is interested in how particular

photographs came about, and these small prints show the artist's process as he worked toward his ultimate exposures. The archive was donated to the Briscoe recently by an anonymous Chicago family; Ms. Sonner had to pick what to show from its 20,000 Polaroid prints, 53,000 contact prints, 11,000 proof prints, and over 700 large-format prints. Although many museums hold the archives of distinguished art photographers, the Briscoe is unique in preserving the work of photojournalists and documentarians; Mr. Polidori's projects qualify him as both an art photographer and a documentarian, but he wanted his archive to be in Austin, where the contents would be understood as historical artifacts.

A vitrine panel devoted to interiors includes the early "Living room, 642 East 14th Street, New York, NY" (1985); among its oddments are two television sets, one on top of the other. Mr. Polidori later said of this work, "I perceived the rooms and their objects as a sort of psychological Rorschach test." Another panel includes "Test print for Versailles Enfilade, ca. 2005," a horizontal section of a picture printed to be sure the colors are right. Because of Mr. Polidori's technical competence, Fuji enrolled him to help with the development of the Fujicolor Crystal Archive process he uses for his large-format prints.



Robert Polidori's '6328 North Miro Street, New Orleans, Louisiana' (2005) PHOTO: ROBERT POLIDORI/BRISCOE CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN.

"Bon de deplacement, Salle de la France et l'Europe, (87) ANR.02.005, Salles du XVII, Aile du Nord - 1er etage, Chateau de Versailles, Versailles, France" (2007) is one of three exhibition pictures from Versailles, where Mr. Polidori has been photographing for over 30 years. At 60 by 72 inches it is the largest print on display; it shows an empty gilded picture frame. The wall covering behind the frame is pale green with an ornate floral design, and the print picks up the subtle play of light it reflects. To the right of the empty frame is a sliver of a frame containing a period painting, but what seems to have caught the photographer's eye most is a small custodial note at the bottom of the image announcing the removal of the frame's painting. Mr. Polidori is interested in the effects of time on habitations, how their functions and meanings change, and the efforts made to accommodate them to current purposes. Restoring a painting is one such effort.

One vitrine has 39 pictures, mostly black-and-white Polaroids, of the damage hurricane Katrina caused in New Orleans. Mr. Polidori calls them “sketches” and they are not especially interesting, at least not until you see them translated into the four large-format prints they prefigure. In “View from St. Claude Avenue Bridge, New Orleans, LA” (2005), 50 by 66 inches, the cyclone fences are totally ineffectual at keeping the flood water from the houses, including the one with three pretentious columns.

There are two pictures in “Past/Present” whose import has been radically enhanced since the exhibition was conceived, “Control Room, Reactor 4, Chernobyl” (2001) and “Waiting room in Hospital #126, Pripyat” (2001). The former is a monument to shoddy Soviet construction, the comic ineptitude of perestroika, and nuclear disaster; the empty monitors and control panels might be a set for a dystopian science-fiction movie. Pripyat was a town built to house the workers at the Chernobyl nuclear plant; the frayed chairs and dead plants wait quietly for patients.



Robert Polidori’s ‘Control Room, Reactor 4, Chernobyl’ (2001) PHOTO: ROBERT POLIDORI/BRISCOE CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN.

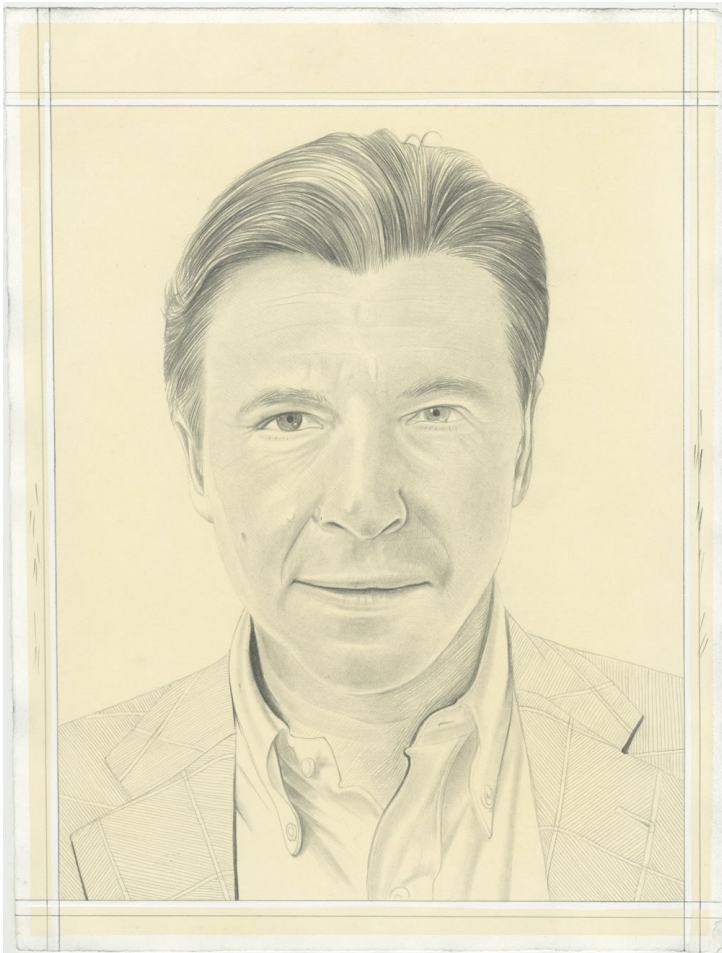
A wall text quotes Mr. Polidori saying, “Fate has it that I became obsessed with rooms as metaphors and catalysts of states of being.” With the Russians again in Ukraine and Chernobyl so recently a war zone, the empty control room and decaying hospital may not be relics of the past, but portents of the future.

Robert Polidori with Jean Dykstra

“I consider myself an iconographer, and iconography can have a psychological undercurrent, a deeper undercurrent.”

JEAN DYKSTRA

APRIL 6, 2021



Robert Polidori. Pencil on Paper by Phong H. Bui.

Robert Polidori is a photographer of human habitats, from the sprawling, “auto-constructed” cities of Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai to interiors in places like Versailles (which he’s photographed over 30 years), Havana, post-Katrina New Orleans, Naples, and Pompeii. A staff photographer for *The New Yorker* from 1998 to 2006, he has published 15 books with Steidl, and he received a Guggenheim Fellowship for photography in 2020. In March, a trove of contact sheets and Polaroids from Polidori’s archive went on loan to the Briscoe Center for American History in Austin, Texas. In April, his photographs of Pompeii and Oplontis, including frescoes in various stages of restoration, will be on view at the Kasmin Gallery in New York. His large-scale color photographs, taken with a view camera that produces highly detailed images, bear witness to the passage of time and comprise a kind of social portraiture. Polidori spoke to me from his home in Ojai, California.

Robert Polidori: Hello.

Jean Dykstra (Rail): Hi, Robert.

Polidori: Hi, Jean. How are you doing today? I got my first COVID-19 vaccine some days ago; actually on my 70th birthday.

Rail: Hey, congratulations. That's fantastic.

Polidori: Yes.

Rail: Do you have the second one scheduled already?

Polidori: Yes. In a month. It's so chaotic. The whole rollout ...

Rail: Yeah it's been terrible. So Robert, can you tell me a little bit about your upcoming show at Kasmin Gallery?

Polidori: It opens April 22. It's images of sites in Pompeii and Oplontis near Naples, in Italy—in other words, late Roman frescoes and habitats. The first time I ever saw them was, I think, in 2009 or '10. I've seen them in books before, of course, and I did some photography at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, but none of those images are in this exhibition. So, anyway, in 2017 and '18, I spent a lot of time—over two summers—in Naples shooting abandoned churches, of which there are many. But I wanted to get back to Pompeii, so I spent maybe two days, twice, there. And I took some pictures of the frescoes, *in situ*, meaning how they look inside of the habitat where they were. They were partially restored, and I should explain what I mean by “partially,” which gets to the problem of making prints of these images. I didn't really think about this when I was taking the pictures, but making “nice” prints from them is way more problematic than I ever imagined, for the following reasons: One is that, for some reason, the photographic process seems way more natural when photographing a virtual subject rather than a subject which is painted art or sculptural art already—

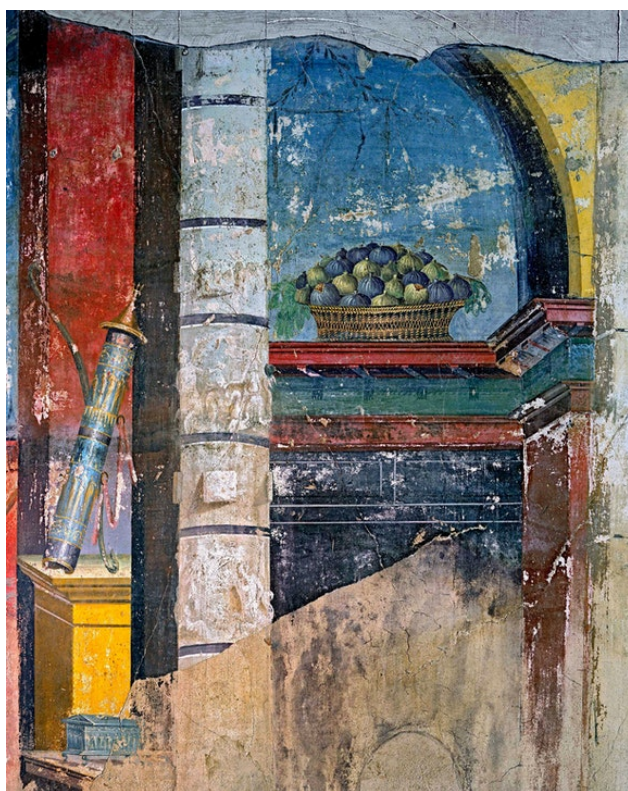


Robert Polidori, *Villa dei Misteri #1, Pompeii, Italia*, 2017. Archival pigment print mounted to dibond, 54 x 44 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Rail: You mean photographing a work of art, like photographing a painting, is more difficult than photographing a room or an interior. Is that what you're saying?

Polidori: Yes, yes. For the following reasons. One is that one is pigment chemical based, it's like the colors that are reflected back from a painting. It's already a modulated light. See, there's something that's already sort of ersatz about it. And another part of it is perceptual. When we look at a painting, we sort of reconstruct it in our mind—it's referential, and we're making a mental connection to the virtual scene that it's referring to, and we sort of correct the color and accept it in a certain way. And film or even digital recording media doesn't see it the same way that our eyes and mind does.

Rail: I see what you mean.



Robert Polidori, *Villa Oplontis n.3, Torre Annunziata, Italy, 2017*.
Archival pigment print mounted to dibond, 54 x 44 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Polidori: The third problem here is that these frescoes are almost 2,000 years old, and they have—well, they've been “restored.” And the restoration has various sorts of categories. One is that a lot of the frescoes, frankly, were found as pieces on the ground, on the floor, and so they fitted them back up to the wall, like a jigsaw puzzle. So they're basically glued or cemented back up on a wall with filler, which is just rock, concrete, or plaster. And then I think that some of the pieces were somewhat color restored, or at least waxed, and other sorts of chemical processes were used to enhance them. So there's several levels, so to get to see the painting, you're seeing through the various substrate stratas as well as time stratas.

So then, I shoot in film, and I shoot them in large format, because I want to see a lot of detail. And while working them up in Photoshop, which is what you have to do with any scan, you know, I'm trying to match what I remembered they looked like, and who knows how scientific that is or how objective? And two, I found myself in a kind of process where I want to show what's left of the fresco. At the same time, I want to show those subsequent time stratas, where I want to see the concrete cracks, or the filler pieces, I want to see from one layer to another.

So I want to see everything, and there are many stratas to show simultaneously. And also I guess that I enhance the color a good 15 to 20 percent, because when they put that wax on top as lacquer, it also dulls it somewhat. So because I'm making art out of something which is already art, it is a complex issue. And so in a way, to be honest,

they're like 20 percent "repainted." It's time consuming. It's interesting, but it's time consuming. I'm explaining why these are some of the most complex prints I've ever had to make. And plus I'm printing them on an ultra-matte flat paper, because it sort of parallels the material of the frescoes themselves. So for all sorts of reasons they were hard prints to make.

From the point of view of iconography, what I find interesting about painting of that era is that, well, when I look at the figurative part of it, say that I have some prints from this Villa dei Misteri, which is like a big house in Pompeii—

Rail: I'm looking at it right now on my computer.

Polidori: So from the point of view of the figurative painting aspects, they look pretty modern, parts of them look almost like Art Deco or Art Deco-ish, like the Art Deco movement was inspired in some way by Pompeiian or early Roman painting. But what's different about them is their mythic structure. We're not really tied into the Roman gods or the Roman daily life rituals. So a lot of what the subject matter content means, most experts don't know much about. However, the way that the people look, it's like, "gee, that reminds me of a face I saw two weeks ago." [Laughter] So in 2,000 years, the human body hasn't changed all that much. I can relate to these individuals as being people that I could almost know, but what they're doing, I don't know anything about. So I guess cultures can come and go, but biology remains.

Rail: Right.

Polidori: Or physiology remains. And I also see that in the way that they're painted, you see, basically, what Renaissance painting comes from, but the myth structure has been replaced by Christian myths.

Rail: It's interesting, because in describing your photographs in Pompeii, you've already touched on themes that seem to go through a lot of your work. I'm thinking of Versailles, for example, and the problems and issues inherent in any restoration, and what those say about the culture *doing* the restoration. And then, this whole idea about memory: you said that part of the problem with taking a photograph of a painting is that when you're doing the color correction, it's somewhat based on your memory of what the colors looked like. So there's this whole issue of memory that's inherent in what you're doing, too, not just yours, but the memories held in these rooms.

Polidori: I think it's true, even of the restorers—there's a sort of guessing at what it looked like, with everybody guessing or interpreting. But there is one difference, though, a structural difference, between the work that I did in Pompeii and Versailles. One is that Versailles, for me, is about historical revisionism as seen through museum curatorial choices. And when I say historical revisionism, I'm talking about the fact that Versailles lived through a lot, through several centuries and several regimes, and even during the time that Versailles was a seat of government, rooms had gone through several treatments. And curators are constantly restoring for this time period, that time period, or another, or a combination thereof. Where the French government and their curators are mostly knowledgeable about what they're dealing with, in Pompeii, it only takes a generation to lose contact with your past myths and history, and they don't know all that much about it. Not much is written about it, so instead of being historical revisionism, exactly, they're wondering what it's about.

Rail: Right. Trying to figure it out.

Polidori: It's like imagining a past, where with Versailles, it's about resuscitating a past.

Rail: I see what you're saying.

Polidori: My Versailles work is popular for some individuals in America, but it's not popular in France because they see what it's about and it bothers them.

Rail: Oh really?

Polidori: Yeah, it's the same thing with the work that I did in post-Katrina New Orleans. It's popular all over the world except America.



Robert Polidori, *2600 block of Munster Boulevard, New Orleans, LA, 2005.*

Fujicolor crystal archive print mounted to dibond, 50 x 66 inches.

Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Rail: And so when you say "they see what you're doing," you mean they perceive a kind of inherent critique?

Polidori: Well, they see that it's about historical revisionism. In the 1980s when Mitterrand was the president, he was a Louis XIV kind of figure. Well, ha, guess what? They restored a lot of Louis XIV. And then when Sarkozy was in power, well, guess what? They liked a lot of Louis Philippe's stuff, because he was more like a guy that comes from Long Island. So it's like fashion.

Rail: Yeah, sure.

Polidori: Every present moment in history has favorites of the past that it likes to hold up for admiration, and it has others that it dislikes.

Rail: Right. Well, what do people in this country see in your post-Katrina photographs that they find problematic?

Polidori: Well, America is a Protestant country. Protestants don't take so well to pathos, so they think that I'm a reactionary, because I am making misery look beautiful. And so because of this, I am minimizing the plight of the victims. I only get this in Anglo-Saxon countries, the rest of the world doesn't think that way.

Rail: Right. And so what's your answer to that criticism?

Polidori: My punk answer is, "Well, if I made it ugly, would you look at it more?" And my more serious answer is, this is a problem created by wanting to fix political blame as the cause of events. In America, the prevalent culture says that if things go bad, it's your own fault. Therefore pathos is problematic. In art history, with Ruskin, there's the notion of the "pathetic fallacy." You know, it's like when they say in English, "Gee, that's pathetic," and it's actually a *contre-sens*; it's an ironic statement. For them pathos or being pathetic means kitsch. It's below consideration. And this is also why they call what I do "ruin porn." But it doesn't have much to do with pornography at all. It's about death. So that's why some of my work is not always appreciated in America.

Rail: They're also maybe missing a larger societal critique in the work, which is that these things happen for reasons other than a person's individual choices. And that's maybe what people don't want to reckon with.

Polidori: Yes, but there's another thing, too. When I came back, because I worked for six months on that project, and when I made the book, my publisher, Steidl, he knew a curator at the Corcoran in Washington, DC. So I did a book launch at the Corcoran, and I've never lived in DC, okay? And I didn't realize how intensely political it is. So basically, I was faced with an audience, an ultra-liberal audience that was waiting for me to say that, you know, it was all George W. Bush's fault. You know, I'm not a Republican. Okay? And I actually lived in New Orleans during high school. But I can tell you, whether it would have been Clinton or Bush, the outcome would have been identical. And then, you know, when I said that many members of the audience just walked out.

Rail: Really?

Polidori: Yes. Okay, so much for Washington. *[Laughter]* That's a tough town. They say how tough New York is but, hey, DC, it's tough, man.

Rail: Yeah, it's a strange place. *[Laughs]*

Polidori: Yeah, they're not looking at art; they look at art as being a vehicle of a set of ideologies.

Rail: Right.

Polidori: Okay, so, anyway, let's get back to Pompeii. Another fascination that I have for those Pompeian interiors is that those paintings were made, or so historians think, as "memory theaters." You know, they wanted to live a mythic life and the subject is already about memory and the perpetuation of mythic memory.

Rail: What do you mean by memory theater?

Polidori: Have you ever read the book called *The Art of Memory* by Frances Yates?

Rail: No, but I wanted to ask you about it because I read a reference that you made to it and I was really interested.

Polidori: Okay, mnemonic systems were used in antiquity, and the Greeks brought it to the Roman world. This is known through some remaining texts. And the curious part of memory theaters—and they were called memory theaters. Why? Because strangely enough, to remember something perfectly, paradoxically, you have to remember two things. So I'll give you the example. Students of the art of memory—Pythagoras was also a practitioner—had to remain silent for two years. You weren't allowed to speak and you'd have to memorize empty rooms, which were called *locus*, and then you'd have to put strange, out-of-the-ordinary images inside because the mind remembers things out-of-the-ordinary more easily than the banal. It remembers exceptions more than everything that fits the general rule.

Rail: Right, they constructed a sort of memory room.

Polidori: And in these homes, they would make memory rooms of their myths. So even Versailles was structured to be a memory theater. This is an idea that came from the Italians. This wasn't a French idea, it was Florentine.

Rail: It's really fascinating, this idea of the memory theater. I'm looking at some of your photographs from Pompeii, and they're incredibly beautiful. They really do capture all these layers that you're referring to, because although there are metaphorical layers, there are physical layers, too. You can see multiple layers and into these different rooms, so that the subject matter reflects what it's about metaphorically, too.

Polidori: Well, good. Yes, that's what I'm trying to do.

Rail: Can you tell me a bit about how you got started as a photographer to begin with? Weren't you originally interested in film?

Polidori: Yes. Well, I always had a respect for photography, a respect for the camera. I feel that it's—I won't say a magical instrument—but I like that by using the laws of physics, you can make the world's own iconography. So I was always sort of seduced by that idea. I thought that was the modern way to make art. It's a different philosophy. I'm proud to say that I don't consider myself a creator, I'm a medium. I don't invent anything. And I don't pretend to invent, but what I do is I channel stuff, I discover and channel stuff. But I take it from the real world. It's not totally devoid of me, but it's not only me.

Rail: Right.

Polidori: I was 18 years old when I had one of the greatest aesthetic shocks in my life. Seeing Michael Snow's film *Wavelength* (1967) changed my life. And that's a film about the experience of temporality. Michael Snow, he's not so famous in America. But strangely enough, he's the most popular in France, and in Italy. He's a grammarian of

modes of perception. So that got me involved in that whole group of the American avant-garde. But to get back to what I said earlier, when I read that book, *The Art of Memory*, I realized the simple power of the still image. In those days, it didn't look as good on film as it did in a photograph, because the grain moved, it looked too jittery in film. That's changed, but in those days, like in the late '60s and '70s, it looked better in a photograph and you can live with it. Films can impact your life, but you don't live with them in the same way.

Rail: Were you always interested, from the beginning, in this kind of social and psychological portraiture of interiors or neglected or decaying spaces?

Polidori: Yeah. And I even look back at some of my earliest photographs that I took, when I wasn't at all self-conscious of what I was doing. I always had a bent in that direction. Jean, you know, I guess somehow, intuitively, I knew that I was going to live in a time period that was going to be the end of industrialism. And I would say a greater subtext of all my work, it's about the end of the Industrial Age.

Rail: Right.

Polidori: Another thing I want to say, and from a practical point of view, I always thought, well, I wanted to make it as an artist, but I thought if at least I take photographs of the social environment, as it's changing, they'll at least have value just as documents. I was hedging my bets.



Robert Polidori, *Amrut Nagar #2, Mumbai, India, 2011*. Fujicolor crystal archive print mounted to dibond, 60 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Rail: In fact, although your photographs have value as documents, of course, they're obviously also about formal concerns: the composition, the color, the way you use the geometry of the space within the frame. They're beautiful pictures. Can I ask about the work you call "dendritic cities" or "auto-constructed cities"?

Polidori: I'm interested in habitat. Pompeii was a habitat. This term "auto-constructed city" was invented, or coined, I should say, by a Brazilian sociologist. And it means sort of what it says. They're cities whose houses are built by their own inhabitants.

Rail: Right, they're not planned.

Polidori: They're not planned. Here we refer to them as slums, but do we have slums? Yeah, most of the auto-constructed cities are slums. This is true. But in America, maybe the only example is now these tent cities that you find, like in LA, but these people are living in tents, and they're not building a whole lot. Because slums in the United States are usually where disenfranchised classes move into pre-existing housing which was left by a more advantaged social class that had sort of moved on for one reason or another. So they don't need to build their own housing, or they simply don't have the means to, where in many places around the world, like in Brazil, like in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, what happened there was that with industrialization and the modern capitalist regime, people from the hinterland would come to the metropolitan area, and they wouldn't have money, and so they basically squatted on land that was deemed non-exploitable by the prior residents of the city, or the more affluent, like say, in Rio. See, when you get inclines of 30 degrees or more, it's hard to make houses there. And just to get there, it's a lot of exercise to get in and out. So they would squat on that land, and they made their own houses. And also in Mumbai. Yeah, where they're not so much on hills, there they're in troughs, where houses were never built, because when a monsoon comes, they flood. So people with money don't want to build their houses there.

And this kind of housing is all over the world. I would say 30 percent of the world's population lives in this kind of housing, and I find it sort of interesting because I see them as a true type of organic growth, where the more affluent class, they get pre-made industrial houses, you know, made by architects and engineers and with the gridded plan, the gridded Cartesian rational planning, okay? So I see it as kind of an organic versus manufactured force.

Rail: And in your mind what connects your photographs of these kinds of organic, sprawling, urban areas with the interiors?



Robert Polidori, Master plate 4, 60-Feet Road, Dharavi, Mumbai, India, 2008. Archival UV cured ink on linen canvas, 50 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Polidori: Well they're habitats. I'm interested in habitat as a psychological force. For some reason human beings went back to a womb life, we retreated to the womb, we're cave dwellers, and we make inside dwellings. So we retreat to an interior world of our own making. So for me, they used to call me an architectural photographer. I sort of know how to do that, but to me, architectural photography is just product shots. See, what interests me is what human beings do to architecture. And how they use it and how it shapes them. And then, in some of the more fantastic examples that you mentioned in Versailles and in Pompeii, they become self-conscious of this need, of what Freud called the superego. You put on walls, what you want to be or what you think you are.

Rail: Right. And in a place like Pompeii, it's a historical investigation of the psychological state of a group of people so many years ago, it's fascinating to try and figure it out.

Polidori: Yes, but then again, the amazing thing is when you look at the people's faces and their bodies, they look like people left today. I don't think the Romans lived so differently than us except they didn't have electricity and they didn't have flight. But they had everything else.

I consider myself an iconographer, and iconography can have a psychological undercurrent, a deeper undercurrent. You know, abstract art, there's nothing wrong with it, but I don't find it all that deep. And a lot of contemporary painters that are representational, when you examine their paintings, it turns out that they took a photograph first, and made the painting from the photograph. So many of these artists, they say, I'm only using photography. My retort is, "I'm only using art." They regurgitate photography; I regurgitate art. This thing of only using photography—they are being psychologically dishonest with themselves.

Two artists that I've rejected are, one: Marcel Duchamp. I reject the depth of importance of the readymade—it's facile, a clever after-dinner musing of the haute bourgeoisie. And two: Andy Warhol, for the same reasons. His work has the visual vocabulary of commercial advertising, and I reject that it's as deep as they say.

An artist who has influenced me is Bob Dylan; he's an iconographer of words.

Rail: So much of what you do, Robert, seems to involve travel for your work. What's it been like to not be able to do that for the last year?

Polidori: Yeah, that's been different. Well, it turns out that just a few months before COVID-19 hit, a collector purchased most of my archives, other than my negatives and digital files, which are now on loan to the Briscoe Center at the University of Texas, in Austin. So, you know what they say, that when you die you see your whole life go in front of you in a few seconds. Well, this is like I've seen my whole life go in front of me in about a year and a half.

Rail: Right. [Laughs]

Polidori: So it's been kind of a review. And I've just been stuck here, in the studio, but I don't really mind. I mean, it's different, but I didn't go out and make photos about the wearing of masks and all of that, I really think that, for me, first of all, I'm not so young anymore. And it more or less deals with the inevitable problems of facing death and what that means. So I've been forced to review my past work. It's been like a review.

Rail: In order to prepare the archive to go to this museum?

Polidori: Well, you know, what happened? I haven't parted with my negatives. But they took my contact sheets, press prints, and Polaroids that I used to use as exposure tests, in the days when Polaroids were still available. There's about 30 years worth of that. So now, I have to reorder what's left. And by doing this, it's been a life review. But I want to say, stepping back from this period, I really think what this period, for me, means is a kind of acceptance; there's no escaping this COVID-19 thing. And it's been all over the world. It's one of the few times in my life where everybody in the world is going through the same thing. Almost everybody in the world. And so that's different. Because there's no escaping it.

Rail: It sounds like you've been very productive, though. You had this project to do in your studio, which is kind of nice timing. If it's possible, will you come to New York in April for the show at Kasmin Gallery?

Polidori: I'd like to and I miss New York, you know? I always love New York.

In Images of Ancient Frescoes, Hidden Legacies Are Exposed

See Robert Polidori's photographs of Pompeii and Oplontis, part of a lifelong project to explore memories beneath the surfaces

TONY PERROTTET
MAY 29, 2020



Polidori with his large-format 8x10 view camera, which requires long exposures up to five minutes.
All photos: Robert Polidori for WSJ Magazine

In a career spanning five decades, Robert Polidori has accepted only two assignments for ad campaigns. One of them, in the fall of 2004, held a surprising revelation. “I was brought to Italy by a company that makes electrical systems,” he recalls with a wry laugh. “I never understood the concept. They were tying their designer fittings in with high fashion.” Although the goal of the advertising project remained a mystery (“I’m not a product person”), Polidori was given a car and driver to travel across Italy. The itinerary included Naples—his first visit to the southern coastal city. Polidori swore to come back alone.

“Napoli was a much more sinister place back then,” he says of the mafia’s former grip on the city, “but I knew there would be a lot to photograph.” Lying in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, its ravishing bay is encrusted with history from the Greco-Roman era, the Renaissance and the metropolis’s centuries-long run as the capital of its own wealthy kingdom, a combination that has inspired generations of travelers to declare, “See Naples and die!”

Polidori has long made a habit of traveling around the globe to document haunting, abandoned sites: bullet-ridden Beirut hotels, crumbling mansions in Havana or the ghostly apartment blocks of Chernobyl. In Naples, his imagination was fired by the ancient Roman remains of Pompeii and the bay’s other seaside towns, like Oplontis, that had been buried by the eruption of Vesuvius’s volcano in A.D. 79. He was particularly drawn to the exquisite frescoes in the villas of wealthier residents—depicting mythological scenes, pagan rites, animals and landscapes—excavated after they were rediscovered in the 18th century with their brilliant colors and details intact. The Roman images, which he had first encountered in books as a schoolboy, tapped into Polidori’s fascination with the way memory can be embedded in surfaces. It took time, but the result was a photographic series shot in the summers of 2017 and ‘18.

The artistic roots of the Vesuvius project can be traced to the beginning of his long career. Born in Montreal in 1951 to a French-Canadian mother and a father who had immigrated from Corsica, Polidori moved to the U.S. in 1960 when his father was recruited to work as an engineer for Boeing Aerospace. He grew up between Seattle, Southern California, New Orleans and Florida.



SPEAK, MEMORY A section of the Villa Poppaea in Oplontis, one of the towns carpeted in lethal volcanic ash during Vesuvius’s eruption in A.D. 79

Empty rooms have fascinated Polidori (who has photographed several other feature stories for this magazine) since 1969, when as an 18-year-old at the University of South Florida in Tampa, he saw Michael Snow's underground cult film, *Wavelength*. Although revered by film buffs as a structuralist classic, it has never been a crowd-pleaser: A 45-minute-long shot of a bare New York apartment where obscure characters wander in and out of the frame, the work culminates in a close-up of a photograph on the wall of a rippling ocean, accompanied by a wailing soundtrack. But it changed Polidori's life, inspiring him to quit college and move to Manhattan. The film would reverberate through his career, opening his eyes, he says, to "temporality"—the secret histories that lie within ostensibly vacant spaces.

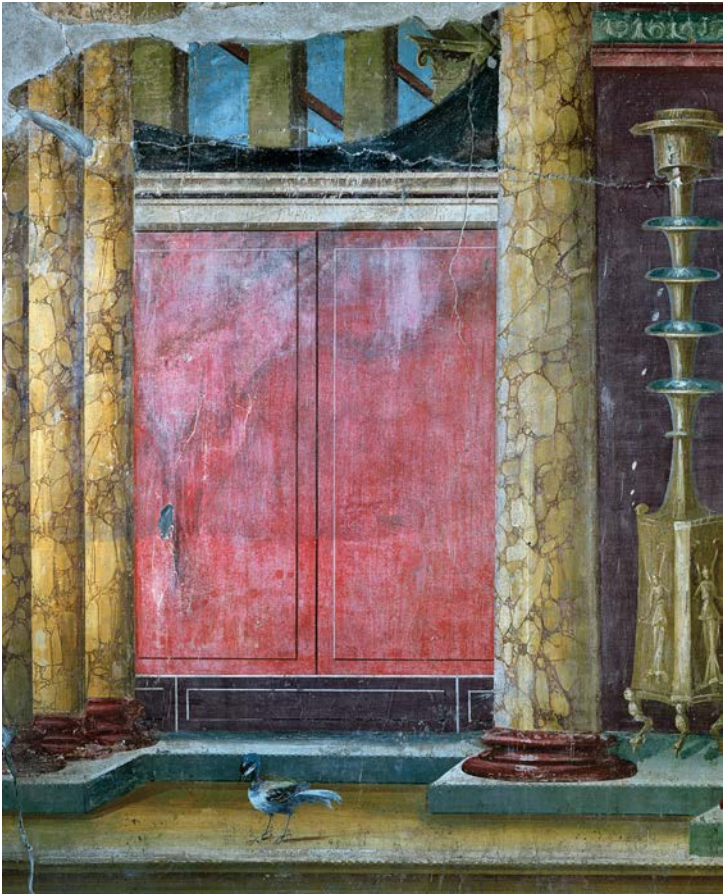
"A lot of my work deals with surfaces that reveal the traces of many layers of the past," he says. "Rooms are the most apt metaphor for notions of memory. They are filing cabinets where internal life resides. People put on the walls of their rooms signs of who they think they are or who they want to be."



SURFACE TENSION A fresco in the Villa Poppaea, which was thought to have been owned by Nero's second wife.

In gritty, Mayor Lindsay-era New York, Polidori at first devoted himself to cinema. In time he found himself living in a Tribeca loft, eating at the Odeon (then a diner for Irish telephone workers) and working at the Anthology Film Archives with Jonas Mekas, a Lithuanian immigrant who is remembered as "the godfather of avant-garde American cinema." Soon he was making 8- and 16mm experimental films that were screened at the Whitney. In the early 1980s, Polidori gave up the moving image for still photography, in part because he grew weary of cinema's "jittery" movements, which he felt did not document vacant spaces effectively. ("The grain vibrates," he says of analog film. "It moves like a swarm of bees.")

He also tested large-camera formats, both for higher resolution and artistic control. “I thought, Why don’t my photographs look as good as those of my heroes? I realized I needed a 4x5-view camera with perspective control. Art history shows that camera movements on three axes are needed to perform perspective corrections.” His touchstone was Italy: “It all goes back to the Renaissance, with the camera obscura”—a pinhole box used to project images upside down. “Canaletto would use it to trace images with paper. That’s where the laws of perspective come from.”



AT THE DOOR A detail of a fresco in Oplontis.

Within a few years Polidori had progressed to an 8x10-inch camera, an unwieldy contraption that resembles the field cameras of the Victorian age, mounted on a tripod with a lens plane that extends like an accordion and requires exposures of up to five minutes. The resulting images were extraordinarily detailed and could be blown up to sizes that were larger than life. He regards himself as a vessel for these images: “Artists think they are creators. I’m not a creator, I’m a medium. Things are brought to me through a camera. I look at photography as a divinatory process. I point the camera, I ask a question, I need to decipher the answer.”

Polidori’s first visit to Italy did not occur until his late 30s, when he was invited in 1988 to shoot the residence of fashion designer Enrico Coveri in Florence. Over the next 20 years, he was on the road constantly, he says, but returned to Italy whenever assignments allowed. “I wasn’t born rich,” he says. “I was dependent on jobs. Photography is an industrial art; it’s expensive.”

In Sicily, he photographed the grand Palazzo Biscari in Catania and the Villa Niscemi, former home of Duke Fulco di Verdura, in Palermo. In and around Rome, he spent a month shooting the imposing Rationalist architecture of the Mussolini era. The scenes were devoid of people, but included textures—decaying paintings, a stain, peeling paint—that evoked generations of habitation. At the same time, Polidori was exploring the wider world. His evocative series on post-Katrina New Orleans, shown in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2006, was described by architecture critic Michael Kimmelman as “our modern Pompeii.”



FEATHERED FRIEND A detail of a fresco in the Villa Poppaea.

“A lot of my work deals with surfaces that reveal the traces of many layers of the past,” says Polidori.

Polidori’s interest in the real Pompeii was revived in 2008, when he returned to Naples with the help of Eduardo Castaldo, a then-little-known Neapolitan photojournalist whom Polidori had hired as his assistant. (Castaldo has since made a reputation for himself covering the Middle East and as a set photographer for the HBO adaptation of Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*.) The pair had an inauspicious start in Naples, as Polidori tried to document the city’s garbage crisis. “It didn’t go very well,” Castaldo says with a laugh, especially when they entered a city dump controlled by the Italian military without permission. “Robert was bitten by a dog,” he says. “And then detained.”

The visit improved dramatically when Polidori was granted access to the National Archaeological Museum, then in a state of disrepair. Created in the 18th century by Bourbon monarchs to house antiquities from the Kingdom of Naples, including Roman relics unearthed after systematic excavation of the bay began in 1738, it included lurid

erotic images of lovers and phallic deities, for years kept off-limits from the public in a special room (the notorious Gabinetto Segreto, or “Secret Cabinet”). Polidori was particularly struck by chunks of frescoed walls that had been cut out from villas and transferred to the museum intact. “One piece of wall would be exhibited on another wall,” he marvels. “It was like taking the skin off something. I was fascinated by the surreal qualities of the images.”



FEAST YOUR EYES A fresco from the triclinium, or formal dining area, of the Villa Popaea demonstrates a sophisticated sense of perspective.

He also made his first day trip to Pompeii, about a half hour by car from downtown Naples, as “a psychic break” from the colorful but often menacing city. He’d always had superficial interest in Neapolitan art and antiquities, he says, “but up-close scrutiny gave me a much deeper understanding.” For a start, the frescoes of Pompeii “appeared strangely contemporary,” he recalls. More important was what lay just under the surface: “Upon first viewing, they seem like elaborate decorative motifs. On closer scrutiny, the images have a deeper psychological content. That’s what I want to draw out of them.”

The frescoes brought him back to the 1960s, when along with *Wavelength* Polidori discovered a once-popular 1966 book by the English historian Frances Yates called *The Art of Memory*. Yates championed classical mnemonics, a key part of Roman education considered as important as reading and espoused by the orator Cicero. Its central principle was that human memory can be visualized as an empty house where myriad facts are mentally placed in rooms for

easy recall. Yates's idea endures in popular culture today: In the BBC TV series *Sherlock*, an updated Holmes played by Benedict Cumberbatch visits his "mind palace" to retrieve arcane information.



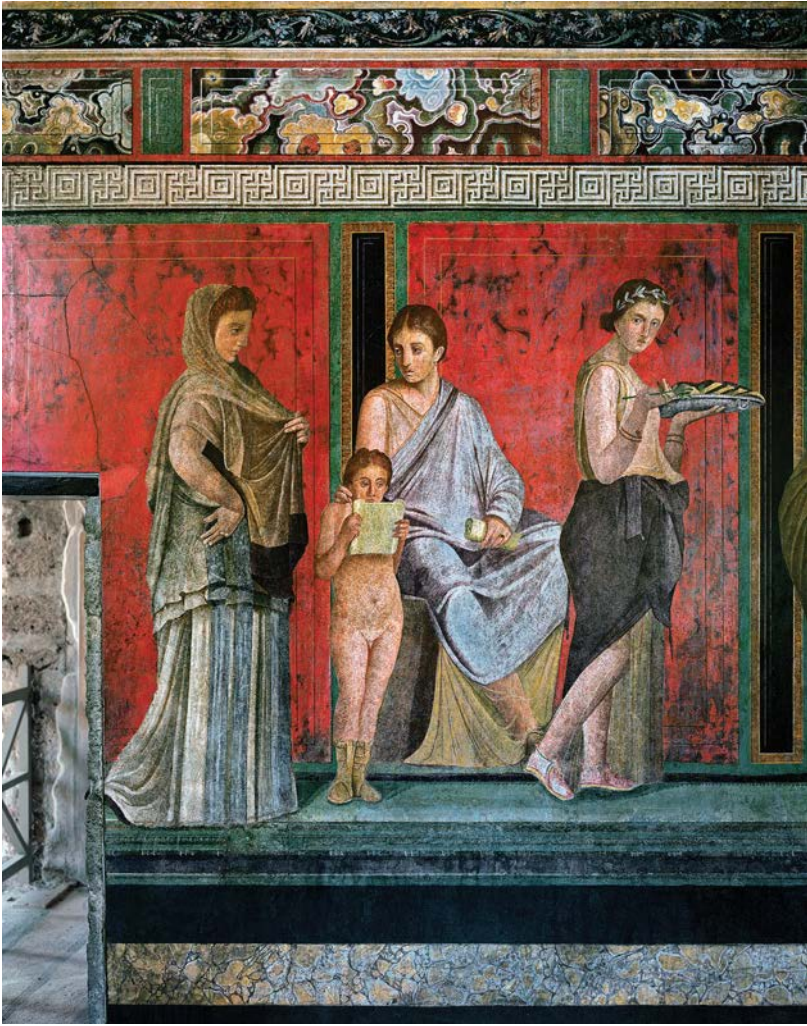
"Interiors are metaphors for the states of being of one person or culture," Polidori says.

Polidori sees ancient frescoes as iterations of memory systems. Some scholars agree: An academic study on the so-called House of the Tragic Poet shows how a visit to the villa would unfold like a cinema montage, as guests wandered past a series of mythological images, including scenes from Homer, in the order chosen by the host. Other classicists consider the idea provocative but impossible to prove. "It has to be speculation," says Paul Cartledge, professor emeritus of Greek culture at the University of Cambridge. "Art history in the ancient world was purely about form, not content. We can't even say for sure what the Parthenon friezes represent, because no single text tells us what the artist Phidias thought he was doing."

After his Naples visit, Polidori went to Florence to document another series of frescoes by the Renaissance artist Fra Angelico in the Convent of San Marco. For Castaldo, the shoot was an education, as he observed Polidori's meticulous, contemplative and hugely time-consuming process. "I was a wire photographer, taking hundreds of news images on a 35mm digital camera," Castaldo recalls. "Robert was doing the complete opposite, creating just one or two images a day on color negatives. It was a great experience to see him working. Large format forces you to really think about each image. You don't release the shutter if you are not sure. With digital, you shoot nonstop, even if you are not sure."

After collaborating in this spiritual setting, Castaldo later suggested to Polidori that he return to Naples to photograph its sacred sites. Some 150 survived in the city center from the 15th to the 18th centuries, when Naples

was the opulent heart of its (often besieged) southern kingdom. “I photograph people, not empty places,” Castaldo says. “But it was a perfect subject for Robert.”



RITE OF PASSAGE A detail of a fresco from Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries. It may depict one of the “mystery cults” that survived in southern Italy from earlier Greek times.

By 2017, when Polidori set himself up in the city with his wife and daughter, “the ambience in Napoli had completely changed from ominous to user-friendly,” he says. As he took photographs, the continuity between the Christian imagery and the pagan frescoes of Pompeii leapt out. “It dawned on me that Christianity is a foreign cult imposed on Italy,” he says. “The frescoes were the traces of the original local Greco-Roman people’s culture.”

After gaining permission from Italy’s Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Polidori went on a series of day trips to Pompeii and other ancient sites around the Bay of Naples, where security guards ushered him into sites normally locked to the public. There were discoveries: One of the most lavishly decorated villas he found was in the lesser-known town of Oplontis, a summer beach resort for aristocrats when the bay served as a summer escape—the Hamptons of antiquity. It’s believed to have been owned by Poppaea Sabina, the second wife of the Emperor Nero, who suffered a

tragic fate: According to the historian Suetonius, she died after her crazed husband kicked her in the stomach while she was pregnant.

After Polidori visited again in the summer of 2018, Studio Trisorio exhibited his ancient Roman images alongside his photographs of abandoned Christian churches. The show went over well in Naples, says Castaldo. “In Italy, we are used to seeing these amazing places all the time. But it is also important to observe them from the outside. Robert arrives with a virgin eye.”

While Italy has been an inspiration for Polidori, it is not an obsession. “Italy has had two important lives,” he says, “the Roman period and the Renaissance, which is rare in world cultures. It has been at the top of its game twice. It’s also great going there. But there are a lot of places I find interesting. I have an interest in the totality of human culture. I photograph all over the world.”

Polidori’s other artistic focus, which won him a Guggenheim Fellowship this year, is in some ways the complete opposite of his more famous images devoid of people. He has long documented “auto-constructed cities”—urban spaces built by their own inhabitants. They include the favelas of Rio de Janeiro; settlements in Mumbai; and areas in Amman, Jordan, inhabited by Palestinians expelled from Kuwait during the first Gulf War. (Polidori had hoped to start traveling the globe this summer to extend the project, although his plans are on hold as the Covid-19 crisis unfolds.) “In the U.S., slums take over abandoned neighborhoods,” he says. “But in the so-called Third World, people from the hinterland—subsistence farmers—flock to cities as laborers. They squat and build shacks and settlements.” To capture these, as many as 22 photographs are digitally “stitched” together to create enormous panoramas—and a sense of order that, to a casual eye, might otherwise look like chaos.

Although people do appear in these sprawling new images, one of which extends 40 feet, like an enormous Chinese scroll, Polidori sees continuity with his work on empty rooms: “The interiors are metaphors for the states of being of one person or culture. My new work is about the external, nesting characteristics of a collectivity. Each house is next to another house, like books on a bookshelf. But each has its own little world inside.”

AnOther

Mesmerising Photographs of Frescoes in a Florentine Monastery

Architectural photographer Robert Polidori turns his lens to the paintings of Fra Angelico in Florence – to beguiling effect

DAISY WOODWARD
MARCH 19, 2018



The Mocking of Christ by Fra Angelico, Cell 7,
Museum of San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010 © Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

Canadian American photographer Robert Polidori has devoted much of his esteemed career to exploring the effects of time, nature and human intervention on buildings and landscapes. His works are both poetic and melancholy, his treatment of spaces reverent. He views rooms as “memory theatres”, and deftly employs his medium to elevate their status to that of precious relics, regardless of their current condition. His previous projects have spanned devastated New Orleans homes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, through to the crumbling buildings of Havana, majestic in their faded splendour. Earlier this month, a 2010 series of Polidori’s photographs depicting the interior of the Convento di San Marco in Florence went on display at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, allowing audiences the chance to enjoy the full power of the image-maker’s large-scale works in person.



Adoration of Kings, by Fra Angelico, Museum of San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery



Crucifixion with the Virgin and Sts Cosmas, John the Evangelist and Peter Martyr by Fra Angelico, Cell 38 (foreground), Adoration of the Magi and Man of Sorrows, by Fra Angelico, Cell 39 (background) Museum of San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

The Dominican-monastery-turned-museum invited Polidori to lens the celebrated frescoes of Renaissance painter and Dominican monk Fra Angelico which adorn many of its walls. Considered some of the most important paintings of the early Renaissance, these mesmeric, pastel-hued works, including the painter’s iconic depiction of *The Annunciation*, were designed not merely as storytelling devices, as was the purpose of paintings in the previous Byzantine period, but as tools for reflection. They depict the life of Christ with striking realism: the figures are fleshed out with flowing robes and realistic features, while architectural spaces are rendered in impressive perspective. For the monks living in the convent, they served as daily reminders of Christ’s mortal suffering and the universal condition of mankind.



Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints by Fra Angelico #1,
San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy
Paul Kasmin Gallery



Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints by Fra Angelico #11,
San Marco Monastery Museum, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori,
Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

In his capturing of the frescoes, Polidori has explored their harmonious integration with the spaces they fill, while masterfully enhancing their beauty. The arch-like framing of *The Mocking of Christ*, for instance, is pleasingly mirrored by the shape of the doorway to its right, while the *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints* is lensed through a roundel in the wall of the adjoining room – a clever use of architectural detailing to enhance the painting’s visibility, which also makes for a particularly pleasing photograph. A sense of meditative calm pervades the series, an apt encapsulation of both the works’ intended function and Polidori’s unique ability to capture the essence of spaces and the history they’ve born witness to. Happy (zen) Monday!



The Last Supper, or Communion of the Apostles by Fra Angelico, Cell 35,
Museum of San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery



The Capture of Christ by Fra Angelico, Cell 33,
Museum of San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery



Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints by Fra Angelico #3,
San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

Robert Polidori: Fra Angelico / Opus Operantis runs until April 14, 2018, at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

DAMN⁵⁷

07-08-2016

DAMN⁵⁷ magazine / ROBERT POLIDORI

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

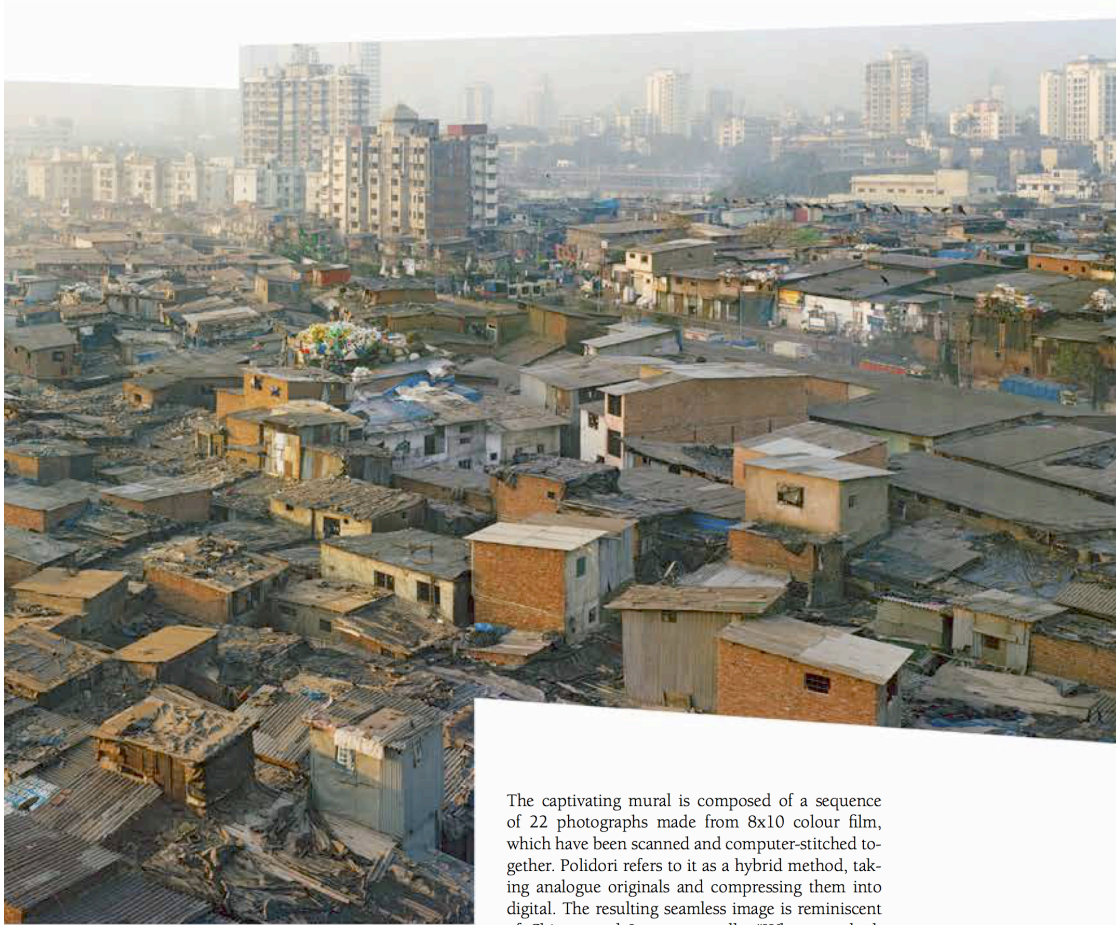
*Robert Polidori documents
the ramshackle*



Robert Polidori photographs human habitats and environments. With his meticulously detailed, large-format colour-film photos, he creates images as a visual acknowledgement or commendation of the present day situation and the history that has devised it, within the confines of a single frame. Beginning his career in avant-garde film, he assisted Jonas Mekas at the Anthology Film Archives in New York, which critically shaped his approach to his métier. Having become known for his images documenting decay, desolation, and destruction in Havana, Chernobyl, and New Orleans, Polidori has since set his sights on population and urban growth in dendritic cities worldwide.

TEXT Anna Sansom
IMAGES © Robert Polidori, courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



The captivating mural is composed of a sequence of 22 photographs made from 8x10 colour film, which have been scanned and computer-stitched together. Polidori refers to it as a hybrid method, taking analogue originals and compressing them into digital. The resulting seamless image is reminiscent of Chinese and Japanese scrolls. "When you look at it in detail, it's an incredible collage of a collaged building", he says, referring to how it was made in segments by groups of people combining pieces of corrugated iron sheet. "It's built with recycled materials from demolished buildings and is completely improvised by people with no architectural or engineering knowledge." Polidori's interest in this type of auto-constructed city dates back to 1996 when he was in Amman and saw a vernacular edifice fabricated by Palestinian refugees. "This got me into survivors taking squatted land into their own hands", he says. "The slums of Mumbai are of particular importance because such a big part of the population lives in them."

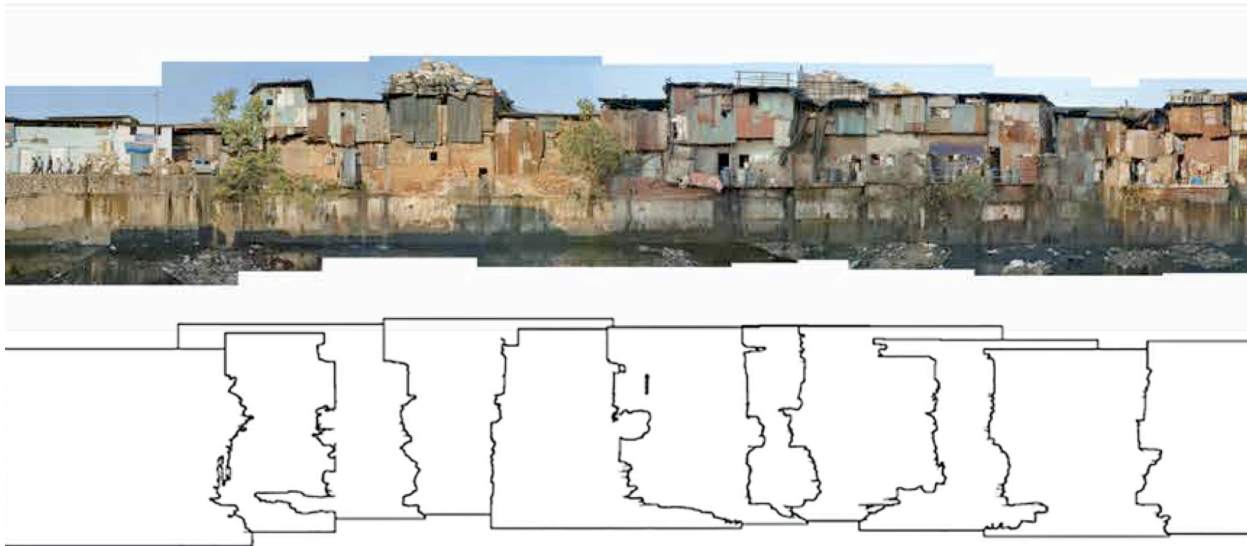
Robert Polidori made his name photographing the soul and desolation of interiors. Amongst these are the decaying houses in Havana; Chernobyl and the ghost town of Pripjat in the aftermath of the nuclear meltdown; and destroyed homes in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. He also documented the restoration of the Château de Versailles, a pivotal moment in the palace's history. For the last nine years, the Canadian-born, California-based photographer has been focusing his view camera on another subject: auto-constructed cities. Whether it is Amman, Jordan; Mumbai, India; or Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, these teeming metropolises have been built by impoverished inhabitants. Polidori calls these places 'dendritic', appropriating the term used for the branching extensions of a cell structure. His new work, including a large mural of a Mumbai street known as 60 Feet Road, is being presented in his upcoming exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York.

Polidori came across 60 Feet Road by chance while taking a detour to avoid rush-hour traffic. "I was in a taxi and thought this place was amazing", he explains. "It's the seat of a plastic-recycling industry where Indians are doing industrial tasks by hand. Even though they're living in poverty, there's incred-

Dharavi #1, Mumbai (from the Dendritic Cities series), 2008

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

DAMN⁵⁷ magazine / ROBERT POLIDORI



60 Feet Road, Dharavi, Mumbai, 2008

Hotel Petra #7, Beirut, 2010
Hotel Petra is a former luxury hotel in Beirut. Having been damaged during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), it was left to deteriorate for 20 years. The images serve as a metaphor for the after-effects of war, with the grandeur gradually slipping away and succumbing to decay.

ible ingenuity coming out of organic needs.” To facilitate his activity, he had fixers and police protection. “Everything in Mumbai is complicated due to the movie industry”, he laments. “Because there’d been riots in the area, the police wouldn’t let me shoot without protection. Anywhere in India, when you take out a camera with a tripod, you attract a crowd, which can be up to 500 people in an hour. And violence happens when crowds run amok.”

He photographed the entire façade, spanning 12 metres, in one morning. Beginning on the right-

hand side, Polidori moved his view camera 22 times whilst maintaining the same flat perspective. “It lies between architectural drawing and mapping strategy”, he says of his approach. The extraordinary level of detail captures people in intimate moments, brushing their teeth and washing themselves. Several inhabitants are staring inquiringly at the photographer. Did Polidori feel that he was invading their personal space? “People who don’t like being photographed walk back inside and those who stay become implicitly OK with it”, he replies. “I was a couple of metres away, not on their property. They’re aware of that subtlety and the cross-cultural looks between each other.”

Polidori’s arresting photography invites controversy. His book *After the Flood* (2006), about abandoned homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, was criticised for capitalising on the disaster. His work has also been accused of lacking integrity, transgressing ethical principles by rendering tragic or violent situations artificially beautiful, as he told *The Independent* newspaper in 2010. Yet Polidori sees it as a historical document that has a sociological dimension. “I don’t have a political axe to grind, I like to photograph places that won’t exist anymore”, he insists. “The path of modern civilisation and economic imperatives is taking away these kinds of places like 60 Feet Road. I’m making a record because in a decade it will be gone.”

According to Polidori, the vast tracts of squatted land are bulldozed in stages. Temporary high-rises are constructed to offer transitional accommodation while remaining plots are removed, then a permanent tower block is built. “The same thing is happening to the favelas in Rio”, he adds. Polidori denies that there is a ‘poverty porn’ component to

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

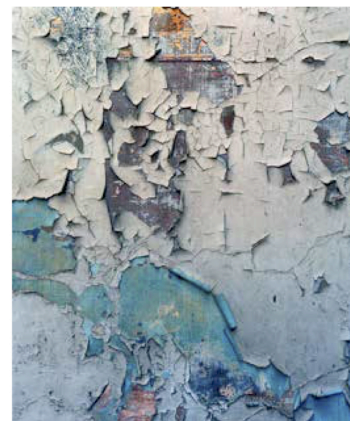


his work. "I didn't make these pictures to glorify the poverty of others", he pronounces. "It's respectful look at the incredible phenomenon of an organically-made habitat." He concedes, however, that to the residents of Mumbai, Western photographers can seem exploitative. "I was in another slum near the airport and a young girl of seven or eight said to me, 'All Westerners are photographing our trash.'" Has he considered exhibiting this work in Mumbai? "I would love to do an exhibition there and try to get

people from all layers of society to come", he says. "My gut feeling is that the work would be appreciated 50 or 60 years from now, when those neighbourhoods no longer exist." •

Robert Polidori's exhibition is at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, 8 September – 15 October. paulkasmingallery.com

60 Feet Road (Bhatiya Nagar Façades) and Hotel Petra are published by Steidl. steidl.de



Hotel Petra Wall Detail #1, Beirut, 2010

Hotel Petra #10, Beirut, 2010

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

INTERIOR DESIGN[®] *magazine*

Robert Polidori to Exhibit Monumental Works at New York's Paul Kasmin Gallery

By Athena Waligore

August 24, 2016



Hotel Petra #10, Beirut, 2010. Aqueous Inkjet on Parrot Angelica Universal Photomatte paper mounted on Dibond. Image courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Renowned for his highly detailed photographs, Robert Polidori has turned his cameras on the layered spaces of Havana, the remnants of labor and habitation in Chernobyl after the nuclear accident, and, for which he is perhaps most well-known, the abandoned houses and destroyed neighborhoods of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

More recently, Polidori has been visiting India to capture aspects of urban life there. "In India, I have the impression of looking at a few thousand years of continuous uninterrupted human history. Traces of time are everywhere, residing alongside colonies of contemporary modernity," writes the artist.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



Dharavi #1, Mumbai, 2008. Archival UV cured ink on linen canvas. Image courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Three monumental images taken in Mumbai will be on display in “Ecophilia / Chronostasis,” opening September 8th at the [Paul Kasmin Gallery](#) in New York. To create the largest photograph, 60 Feet Road, large-format film was scanned and digitally combined into one continuous forty-foot image meant to represent the length of the narrow street. “He wanted the photographs to focus beyond a single isolated section or view, while also having the subject serve as the guide for the framing of the image,” says Mariska Nietzsche, director of Paul Kasmin Gallery.



60 Feet Road, Dharavi, Mumbai, 2008. Epson archival inkjet print on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

This is the gallery’s inaugural exhibition with the photographer, and it will also include a set of images of a once luxurious hotel damaged during Lebanon’s civil war. Lingering on buckling and peeling paint for these photographs, Polidori poetically riffs on art history while exposing the residue of an abandoned relic.

“Ecophilia / Chronostasis” opens September 8 at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 515 West 27th Street, New York, NY, through October 15, 2016.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



20 New York Gallery Exhibitions Everyone Should See This Fall
August 25, 2016



Robert Polidori, *Hotel Petra #6*, Beirut, Lebanon (2010).
Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

The editors at artnet News searched New York City high and low for the most exciting, bizarre, and thought-provoking exhibitions this fall. From Chelsea to the Lower East Side, we've got you covered.

"Robert Polidori: Ecophilia/Chronostasis" at Paul Kasmin

Don't feel bad if you think the title of this show is a mouthful. We had to consult dictionary.com before we realized these are made up words that we're not sure we understand the meaning of. The upshot? The chance to see the master photographer's moodily beautiful color-saturated prints of "dendritic cities," a series he began in 2007. Polidori appropriated the term "dendritic" from the branching extensions of a cell structure (yes, that term shows up on dictionary.com), to describe auto-constructed cities that have appeared as a result of industrialism in cities all over the world, including Amman, Mumbai, and Rio de Janeiro. Along with photographs from his 2010 project in Lebanon, titled "Hotel Petra," the show will feature three large photographs taken in India, including a mural of a street in Mumbai, known as 60 Feet Road. Instead of isolating a particular section or façade of the street, Polidori photographed the entire length of 60 Feet Road. (Eileen Kinsella)

"Robert Polidori: Ecophilia/Chronostasis" is on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 515 West 27th Street, from September 8–October 15, 2016.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

artnet® news

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August 25, 2016



Robert Polidori, *Hotel Petra #6, Beirut, Lebanon* (2010).
Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Robert Polidori, “Ecophilia/Chronostasis” at Paul Kasmin

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“Robert Polidori: Ecophilia/Chronostasis” is on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 515 West 27th Street, from September 8–October 15, 2016.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

Alain.R.Truong

Paul Kasmin Gallery to open its inaugural exhibition of acclaimed photographer Robert Polidori
September 4, 2016



Robert Polidori, *Dharavi #1, Mumbai, 2008*. Archival UV cured ink on linen canvas.

NEW YORK, NY.- Paul Kasmin Gallery announces its inaugural exhibition of acclaimed photographer Robert Polidori, on view from September 8 to October 15, 2016 at 515 W. 27th Street.

This exhibition will be the first U.S. show to feature Polidori's "dendritic cities" images, a body of work begun in 2007. He appropriates the term "dendritic" from the branching extensions of a cell structure and uses it to describe the auto-constructed cities (as opposed to pre-planned urban developments) that have appeared as a result of industrialism in cities around the world, including Amman, Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition will feature three monumental photographs taken in India, including an expansive mural of a street in Mumbai known locally as "60 Feet Road."

Long sensitive to the shared terrain between photography and cartography, Polidori has stepped outside of the traditional photographic "frame" of an image, and instead has adopted an approach where the framing is based upon the subject of the image. As Polidori describes it, "*its execution came to demand labors more in line with mapping strategies than traditional photographic compositional framing.*"

Rather than isolating one particular section or façade of the narrow street, Polidori set out to photograph the entire length of the 60 Feet Road within one long continuous printed photograph. Like a tracking shot within a film, Polidori has compiled 22 separate photographs into one. The sequence of 8x10 color sheet film has been scanned and computer-stitched into a continuous déroulement, like an Asian scroll. Spanning a length of forty feet, viewers can fix their attention on minute details that would otherwise go unnoticed. In "Amrut Nagar," comprising four separate panels, Polidori photographs a complete 180° view of a populated mountainside from one single vantage point.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



Robert Polidori, *Hotel Petra # 6, Beirut, Lebanon*, 2010. Aqueous Inkjet on Parrot Angelica Universal. Photomatte paper mounted on Dibond.

Also on show is a selection of photographs from Polidori's 2010 project in Lebanon, "Hotel Petra." The photographs explore the interior of a once grand and luxurious hotel in downtown Beirut that was severely damaged during the civil war of the 1980s and left abandoned for 20 years. In contrast to the teeming metropolises in the "dendritic cities," the photographs of Hotel Petra reveal a building quietly succumbing to natural forms of decay and abandonment: countless layers of paint have flaked and faded away, resulting in a multilayered palette of color and design. This site gives a voice to Polidori's thesis on modern painting, inasmuch as the compositions of gradually evolving and decaying paint closely resemble the intentional concerns of many modern and contemporary painters; only in this case the genesis of the phenomena was neither fixed nor intentional, but rather the unintentional summation of subsequent labors of various painters and workmen acting and modifying their surfaces at different times over decades, and as such, can be seen as "natural" or "unconscious" collective super-ego documents. This slow deterioration bears witness to the history as "seen" and "lived" by the walls themselves. Polidori captures the poetic quality of the ruin, and in the photographic stillness, the rooms are portrayed as metaphors and vessels for memory.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

Coinciding with the exhibition, Steidl will be releasing two new publications: *Hotel Petra* and *60 Feet Road (Bhatiya Nagar Facades)*, which focuses entirely on the single photograph of the city block. Texts by the photographer are included in both books.

Robert Polidori (b. 1951) has published over fifteen monographs, most recently *Chronophagia* and the two volume *Rio*. These publications follow the three volume *Parcours Muséologique Revisité*, an extensive compilation of the thirty years he has spent photographing the Château de Versailles. He has received the World Press Award (1998) and the Alfred Eisenstaedt Award for Magazine Photography (1999, 2000). Over the course of his career, he has had several major solo exhibitions, notably a mid-career retrospective at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, "Fotografias" at the Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de Janeiro, and "After the Flood" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006, which presented his photographs of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. His work is held in numerous collections including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. He lives and works in Ojai, California.

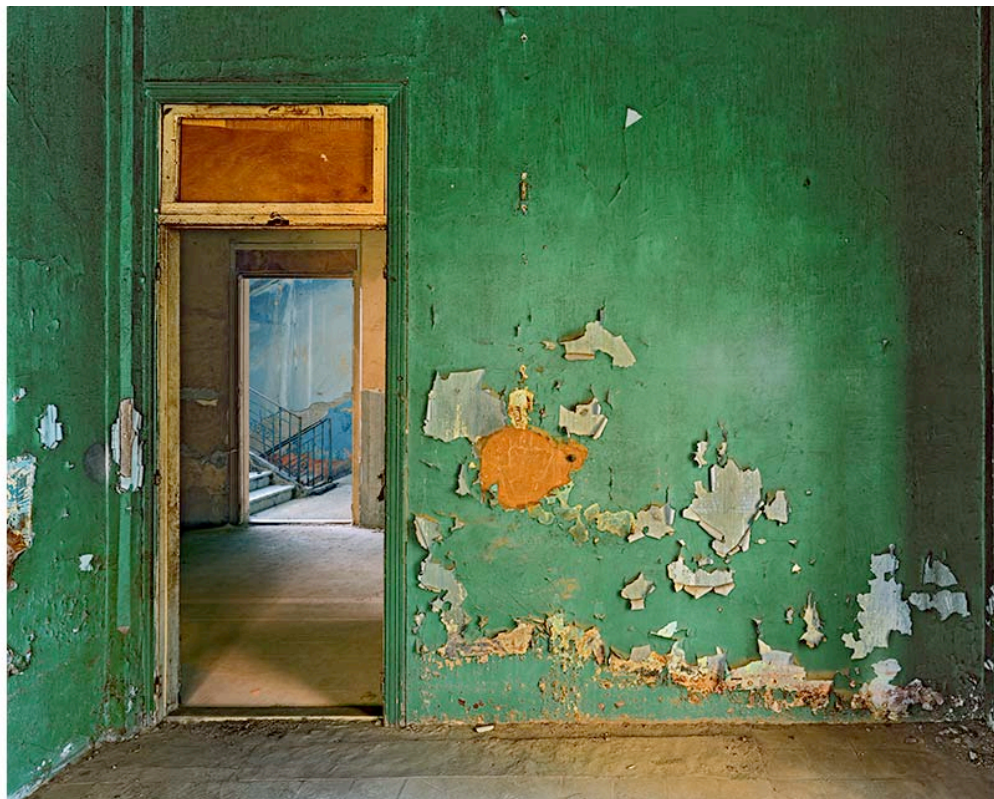


Robert Polidori, *Hotel Petra Wall Detail #1, Beirut, Lebanon, 2010*.
Epson archival inkjet print mounted to dibond.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

artdaily.org

Paul Kasmin Gallery to open its inaugural exhibition of acclaimed photographer Robert Polidori
September 8, 2016



Hotel Petra #7

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PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

Alain.R.Truong

Paul Kasmin Gallery to open its inaugural exhibition of acclaimed photographer Robert Polidori
September 4, 2016



Robert Polidori, *Dharavi #1, Mumbai, 2008*. Archival UV cured ink on linen canvas.

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Robert Polidori, *Hotel Petra Wall Detail #1, Beirut, Lebanon, 2010*.
Epson archival inkjet print mounted to dibond.

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

PRIVATE ✈️ AIR

September | October 2016

PHOTO FOCUS – URBAN IMAGES

In a world obsessed with selfies, it is nice to know that the art of photography is alive and well with the talent of Robert Polidori who will be featured in an upcoming inaugural exhibit at the Paul Kasmin Gallery.

By: E.J. Webber



Robert Polidori, *Hotel Petra Wall Detail #1*, Beirut, Lebanon, 2010.
Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Coinciding with the exhibition's opening reception on Thursday September 8, 2016, *Steidl*, the international German-language publisher of photography books based in Göttingen, Germany will be releasing two new publications: *Hotel Petra* and *60 Feet Road* that focuses on the single photograph of a city block taken by Polidori in India. The unusualness of this monumental work by

Polidori includes the expansive mural of a street in Mumbai known locally as the *60 Feet Road*. The photographer set out to photograph the entire length of the *60 Feet Road* within one long continuous printed photograph.

Polidori's photographs have been shown in a number of galleries around the world, but this will be the first U.S. show to focus on the body of work begun by the artist in 2007. The high level of detail of his photographs allows the viewer to question things more and more, as well as still be touched by the mood of the images. He describes his work using the phrase "dendritic cities," the tree like branching of nerve cells in physiology to describe the auto-constructed cities that have appeared as a result of industrialism, and are visible in places such as Amman, Mumbai, and Rio de Janeiro. He has said that, "When there is more detail, when images are soft, they just remain evocative, or in your imagination. You get a mood, and it remains on the emotional level."

The sensitivity to stepping out of the traditional photographic composition and framing of his architectural and urban photos, allows him to adopt an approach more in line with the subject of an image. That is his magic. ✈️