



Control Room,  
Reactor 4, Chernobyl,  
2001.

# Seeing Life in Empty Rooms

Robert Polidori's haunting photographs of interiors and buildings reveal the everyday lives left behind in Chernobyl, Havana, New Orleans, and Versailles **BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**



**"I'm a kind of undertaker,"** says Robert Polidori. "I pay reverence to a life that's gone." Whether his subject is the toxic abandoned buildings of Chernobyl, the disheveled rooms of the Palace of Versailles during a restoration, or the decaying architecture of a once grand Havana, the photographer makes haunting and ravishing images that document the layers of history and the traces of past lives.

"I photograph what I call habitats and habitat violation," says the 55-year-old artist, sitting in his immaculate studio in downtown Manhattan. "To me, habitat is differentiated from architecture. Habitat is what societies do to the building—how they occupy it, how they use it. History plays a role. A building could be used one way for a while, and then it's used another way. Socioeconomic and political causes can affect habitat. It's like social portraiture, except there are no people in it."

Polidori's latest series records the devastated homes and streets of New Orleans after the flooding that followed Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005. Some 400 of these color photographs have been reproduced by Editions Steidl in *Robert Polidori: After the Flood*, and a vivid selection of them was shown last fall at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New

Robert Polidori  
at work in Nepal.



**406 Empedrado,  
Courtyard, Havana  
Vieja, 1997.**

York. The frames are filled with images of little houses toppled from their moorings and crammed with chaotic stews of mud-caked possessions; mold spreads over their walls. Shot with unusually long exposures of up to 600 seconds, these photographs make the stagnant atmosphere almost tangible.

Polidori watched the crisis unfolding on TV while in an airport on his way to Dubai. Ten days after the storm, he flew to New Orleans for the *New Yorker*, where he is a staff photographer. After completing his assignment, he stayed for two weeks to shoot on his own, and he returned three times over the following seven months.

"It felt like a war zone," says Polidori, who was born in Montreal but lived in New Orleans in 1965 while his father, a telemetry expert, worked on guidance systems for the *Saturn 5* moon rocket and booster. "It reminded me of Beirut right at the end of the civil war."

He worked his way through the flooded streets and, unchallenged, entered houses that had been marked by the military after they forced open the doors to check for occupants, dead or alive. In dim natural light, wading through the detritus of people's lives thick with the smell of rot, Polidori set up his pictures using a 5-by-7 view camera, an outmoded piece of equipment that he likes for its resolution and ability to make perspective corrections.

"Everyone else making pictures down there was shooting digital, and Robert was shooting sheet-film negatives," says Jeff Rosenheim, a photography curator at the Metropolitan, who wrote the introduction to Polidori's New Orleans book and organized the show at the museum. "I don't think anyone was cutting sheet film to 5 by 7 inches after 1930. There was

no electricity. There was no place to load holders and all those things that 19th-century photographers had to deal with. That's what Robert was doing. He is blessed with perfect understanding of color and balance and the ability to manipulate a camera the way very few people can. This kind of obsessive thing serves the pictures extremely well."

Rosenheim, who lived in New Orleans for five years and has a family there, was keen to collaborate on the project with Polidori. He sees a strong connection between Polidori's work and that of Walker Evans. "Evans was using this staid and reticent but direct mug-shot style, and Robert does the same thing," says Rosenheim. "These pictures look like crime scenes."

The curator was amazed by the response to the show, including a call from a night guard at the museum whose childhood home had been destroyed by the storm and who was so moved by the pictures that he wanted to talk to the photographer. People feel empathy when they look at the pictures, says Rosenheim, or else they feel like intruders. They ask themselves, "Do I have the right to look at this subject with as much freedom as I do here? Have I wandered into a funeral where I shouldn't be?"

This sense of intimacy infuses all of Polidori's work. For him, pictures of rooms are more revealing and personal than pictures of people. "You can take a portrait of someone, but you're really guessing that they are like this or that," he says. "You get a lot more true information about a person's values by what they put on their walls. You could think of all of these houses like little psychological exoskeletons that have been shed.

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2722 Orleans Avenue,  
New Orleans, LA,  
2005.

They're like refugees. I cover different varieties of that phenomenon, whether through storm, through war, through politics."

**The Chernobyl nuclear power plant and** the nearby town of Pripjat had suffered a different kind of catastrophe. When Polidori went to Chernobyl five years after the nuclear accident of April 1986, it was still the center of a contaminated Exclusion Zone. Pripjat, where the plant workers had lived, was abandoned. His pictures from that visit were published in the book *Pripjat and Chernobyl: Zones of Exclusion* in 2003 by Steidl, and the photos were shown last fall at Edwyn Houk in New York. Photos of Southern California will be on view next winter at RoseGallery in Santa Monica, where his works sell for \$19,000. Images from sold-out editions and at auction have fetched up to \$30,000.

Polidori's manner is hard to locate precisely in time and place. With his thick, dark hair combed back and his slightly anachronistic suspenders, he looks younger than his years. His voice has a trace of a French accent and rises in a staccato inflection to emphasize certain phrases. In conversation he ranges from Bob Dylan to Jung to Jean-Luc Godard to global warming, all of which, he says, inform his work.

On the road half the year, Polidori has worked in India, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, and Syria. He says Las Vegas is the least accessible city in the United States, and breaks into a high-decibel imitation of a cop screaming at him to get off private property. Chernobyl, on the other hand, was not a problem. "Russians are easy," Polidori recalls. "You pay,

you get access. You don't pay, you don't get access. The Arab world is like that, too. It's a matter of hitting the right guy, and then it's

accessible." He is trying to get into North Korea and the Vatican. "I'm Catholic, and I've been trying to get into the rooms at the Vatican for five years," he says. "I will get there."

A peripatetic life comes naturally to Polidori. He spent his childhood in Montreal before his father's work took the family to Washington state, California, Louisiana, and Florida. After a year of college in Florida, he left for New York, where he met the avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas. Polidori worked for several years at Anthology Film Archives, founded by Mekas, while learning to make his own structuralist films, which he describes as being about the conception of time. He finished his undergraduate degree at Antioch College in Ohio, then earned his master's in film from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1980.

Polidori's frustration with the insular world of avant-garde film led to his shift from cinema to photography. "These films didn't have a need to socially relate to any audience," he says. "You'd go to a screening, and the other people were all filmmakers competing for the same grant money. It was really depressing." In 1983 he moved to Paris, where he would live for 15 years, and began photographing Versailles. During these years, under the presidency of François Mitterrand, the palace was undergoing a major restoration, including a suite of rooms that dated to the reign of Louis XV.

"Mitterrand was a Louis XV kind of guy," says Polidori. "We value periods of the past from where our heads are at in

🔊 **The first rock-and-roll composition is Ravel's *Bolero* because it's laid down**



**Former Vestibule of  
Madame Adelaide's  
Apartment, 1985.**

the present. To me, that work is about historical revisionism. Just as individuals place objects of personal value on their walls as their means of self-reflection, so does a society in its museums." In this series, which he published in his first book—*Versailles*, with a text by Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, released in 1991 by Editions Menges—the vast rooms washed in diffuse natural light look like deserted stage sets, with ornate picture frames and bedsteads stripped of their contents, furniture draped in drop cloths, and unframed canvases leaning against the walls.

Polidori found that his affinity for interiors suited the medium of photography. "You should take photos of things that don't move, and you should make movies of things that move," he says. "It's simplistic, and you can make a case for the contrary, but my rule is more often true." When he began taking photos, he knew little about the history of photography. He admired Walker Evans but had seen few of his photos.

In some ways, music has had a more overt influence on his work. He remembers the Beatles' arrival in America in 1963 as a life-changing event, listens to a lot of music, and plays guitar in his downtime. "I'm very influenced by the sense of uprootedness in all the various American folk musics," he says, adding that he hates punk music because you don't hear the layers. "The first rock-and-roll composition is Ravel's *Bolero* because it's laid down by tracks. I try to arrange my pictures the way that tracks are laid down."

He does this using Photoshop, and he likes working in 5-by-7 negative partly because it's a better record and has more information he can extract. Opening on his computer a raw scan of a

photo of an abandoned hospital entrance in Chernobyl and comparing it with his finished image, Polidori shows how he draws out the details from

parts too shadowy or blanched by sun, and how he rebalances the color. "You sort of discompose the image and bring up different parts that are there," he says. He is very hands-on and exacting with his technical processes. "It's not like I'm imposing," he explains. "I make it like the way that it was."

Whether he is coaxing the most out of his negatives or exposing himself to the radioactivity of Chernobyl and the fetid ruins of New Orleans—where he developed a bad case of asthma—Polidori demands a lot of himself. When he's in the field, compositional decisions become paramount.

"The thing and the image of the thing are not the same," he says. "We have binocular vision, and the camera is monocular. There are all sorts of perceptual processes to take into consideration. What I want is an image that is the way the mind remembers things. I want an image that is emblematic."

He points to a 34-by-48-inch C-print on his studio wall, a shot of the facade of a modest New Orleans home, tightly compressed between two neighboring houses, which doesn't seem so out of the ordinary—except for the mud-streaked car skewed at a sharp angle in front.

"It's all a matter of context, what elements end up being in the picture," he says. "I could have cut out that house on the left side. But it's there so you can deduce that there are adjacencies of these kind of houses. The peripheries hint at what's not in the picture. A good picture asks certain questions, and answers only some." ■

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