

The Magic of the Darkroom



In some ways I pity people who have come into photography via the digital world and have, or may never, experience the thrill and magic of making a print in a traditional darkroom be it black & white or colour. In the next few issues we will explore many facets of traditional photography. From film choices and workings right through to making a print. Not always in order, but in context to the subject. This article will skip around a bit but the intention is to inform you just what is possible.

If you have been reading my articles over the years you will know that I have a preference for film capture and then the darkroom process. I am not opposed to digital technology, for I use that too sometimes, I just prefer to use film and especially black & white film for then I can complete the process of photography and print an image in the darkroom. (I even print cibachromes/ilfochromes sometimes) It is a process that I find challenging at times, exhilarating most of the time and just so rewarding all of the time. Printing for me is not a chore, it is a joy. Especially when I have a new negative.

Part of the reason I prefer to print black & white myself is that I believe that no one else really knows what you want from your negative. The decisions you make so often are spontaneous and relate to how the print looks as you print it. It's all very well to start off with an idea prior to printing, but chances are that as you print you will try things to improve or add atmosphere to the print.

As I have said printing for me is fun and I think that a finely crafted silver rich fibre base print has no equal. My view is not a Lone Ranger. It is shared by several million others around the globe. Of course there are *prints* and there are **prints** and so much that makes a b&w print so wonderful is not only the darkroom skills of the printer but the content of the picture as well. Like any creative process there is a certain amount of talent and skill that goes into the making of a fine print. They just don't happen. Look at any elite sportsman or musician or *anyone* in the creative field. Their talent is probably innate, and most probably had been fostered and nurtured early on and then worked on through the years.

Not unlike a fine print actually. If the initial contact proof shows promise then it is from this that we decide to attempt to make a telling print. As an example the prints I have

offered with this article came about firstly because I liked the content (I must have initially otherwise I wouldn't have taken them) on the contact sheet. Usually it is the scene before me that inspires me to make an image. Once the image is captured I use every bit of darkroom knowledge I possess to eek out all the detail that the negative holds. And of course we need to start with a negative that has a full range of printable tones in the areas where we wish to have detail. Sometimes not an easy task. An example of this is if we have important detail we wish to see in the highlight areas then there is no point in that area being washed out or likewise if the shadow area is vital to the image then an underexposed negative will not help the detail that we require.

At our disposal are techniques that allow us to expand or contract the overall contrast of a negative purely by the amount of time we develop that negative or negatives for or by dilution of the chemicals. Expansion and contraction are usually achieved by lengthening or shortening the amount of time we develop for.

Camera choice can also have a bearing on the image we make and sometimes just the one type of camera is not always the answer. Sure it will make an image for you, but it may not give you the results you were hoping for. But who can afford 2 or 3 different cameras? Yes that is why they invented the word compromise!

As already stated starting with a good negative is essential, however I think the real skill comes from, not only your darkroom skills, but your interpretation of that negative. We have at our disposal, printing papers that allow us to print any contrast we like from one box of paper. For many fine art printers graded papers are a thing of the past as the quality of VC papers has improved so much in recent years. Towards the end of the 1990's and the early part of this century VC papers have been refined, tweaked and massaged into becoming papers of exceptional quality with an exquisite tonal range.

The ability to be able to print via the filters of a colour head or a VCCE head through stepless gradations is just fantastic or if you are restricted to filters under or above the lens then you can move up or down the scale in 1/2 step increments, but unfortunately the number of fine papers is declining. There are still quite a few around, but our choice is not as it was just a little while ago. My first choice went west and now my second choice has gone under. Back to the testing table I guess.

Some print developers reportedly allow us, in a subtle sort of way, to alter print colour, contrast and shadow or highlight detail. My experience of all of these has not been anything I could write a thesis on and I have found that if they do that at all then it is so subtle, that for me it not worth the journey to try and achieve those changes that way. Over recent years stuck wholly and solely to Dektol. This is one of the great all purposes developers that is hard to beat. If I want colour change then I use a warm tone paper or I tone the print. If I want contrast change or anything else I do so via the printing procedure.

Stop bath is stop bath and should not be substituted for plain water. For plain water does not stop or remove the developer, it just dilutes it further and if used will allow the developer to carry over into the Hypo or fixer bath which in turn will exhaust the fixer (Hypo) quicker.

Hypo can be either a Rapid Fixer or a non rapid fixer like F24. If you intend to tone your prints then under no circumstances use a hardener in the fix as toning will be more difficult and can create uneven toning.

Hypo clearing agent is exactly what it is and helps reduce excess hypo prior to washing. If you choose not to use it then your wash times will be longer.

As you have read it is all there to be explored and the 3 prints that I have offered you here have all been treated to some of or most of the above.

Boat Shed, South Island New Zealand.

After a week of touring the South Island teaching a workshop, I had a few days to myself before I flew back home. I had spent the night in Dunedin on the South East coast and was up before the birds that morning in the hope of finding a scene that inspired me. When I first saw this scene I thought the sun to be too low in the sky so I thought I would keep looking around and head back to it in 20 to 30 minutes time. When I did so I just loved what I saw so set up my camera to make the photograph.

I was using a Linhof 4 x 5" and TRI-X film. The lens I chose was a 210 mm (about the same as a 75 mm on 35 mm). Because I wanted to maintain some tone in the sky I used a Lee Orange 21 graduated filter that I had specially made for such a situation. (see the Lee Filters website in the UK) This darkened the sky area only and also reduced the contrast slightly because the lower part of the scene wasn't getting any filtration, just clear glass. During printing I have also burnt the sky down as well to get some of the cloud detail that was hanging there.

I made just one negative of the scene. I suppose with such a large sky area I really should have made two negatives. That ever elusive hunk of dirt that floats around in all cameras usually plants itself right in the middle of the sky. Fortunately it didn't so I was a happy black duck when it came to printing the negative. Not so recently when I did a commercial job using my digital camera. Twenty shots in then dirt on the sensor for the next 70 odd. Retouching each one was not a pleasant task. Least with 4 x 5" sheet film it gets on to one sheet and that's it. Oh well!

Snow Gum Detail, Bogong High Plains

Photographing a close up of anything is easiest when the subject plane is parallel to the film plane and the subject is flat. Stepping outside this comfort zone requires a high dose

of depth of field. In my 2005 calendar I had a photograph of an ice puddle. I was directly above it when I took the shot and nothing protruded upwards towards the lens. The only thing I had to worry about was composition and of course focus.

The Snow Gum Trunk is a different kettle of fish. The branch in the top right corner creates the headaches as far as focus goes. Once I had my basic composition I pulled back with the camera so as to include more of the tree knowing that if it ever made it to a print I would then crop in to the desired framing.

Although I stopped the lens down to its minimum aperture to maximize my depth of field I increased it further by moving the camera back a little. Even though I did this the top of the trunk in the top right hand corner is just starting to lose sharpness, but I am comfortable with this. I get nervous when the focus is way out and becomes distracting especially when it's in a more central or important part of the picture.

To me the essence of the photograph is the lava type flow of the wrinkles just below that exciting trunk. In some ways that branch gives us a reference point. A point of identification.

Increasing the contrast when printing from Grade 2 1/2 for the straight print to Grade 3 for the finished print, highlights both the lighter and darker elements in the print and with a small amount of bleaching, well that just takes it that one step further. Also darkening some of the lighter parts of the picture in the corners and edges makes us concentrate our vision more to the centre and so hopefully maintains a more sustained interest in the photograph.

Red Gums, Mansfield

I made this image in the year 2000. It was one of those stormy days in the background and bright sun on the other side. When I first printed this that same year I was mildly interested in it, but ended up putting it away and forgetting about it. The straight print was printed at grade 0, high contrast neg you see. Last year when I was doing my bimonthly negative check I came across it again and had another go at printing it, this time using a technique that was around in the 1920's. During the enlarger exposure you diffuse the image and it just alters things slightly. The type of diffuser you use will give varying results. I have also increased the filtration to Grade 1.

This print is fairly simple to print. A bit of dodging on the trees and clouds, a little bit of burning in lower left side and Bob's your uncle. If only they all could be that simple, but in today's darkroom there really isn't much you can't do so never be put off.

I know in some cases I have glossed over some of the techniques here, but in the coming issues we will cover these things and more, in much more detail. In the meantime I urge you to practice and try different things. Read some "How To" books and get out there and do it. Just keep practicing and learn your craft. Technique is one thing and self expression

is another. If you put them together in a photograph then you just may end up with something special or fantastic.

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