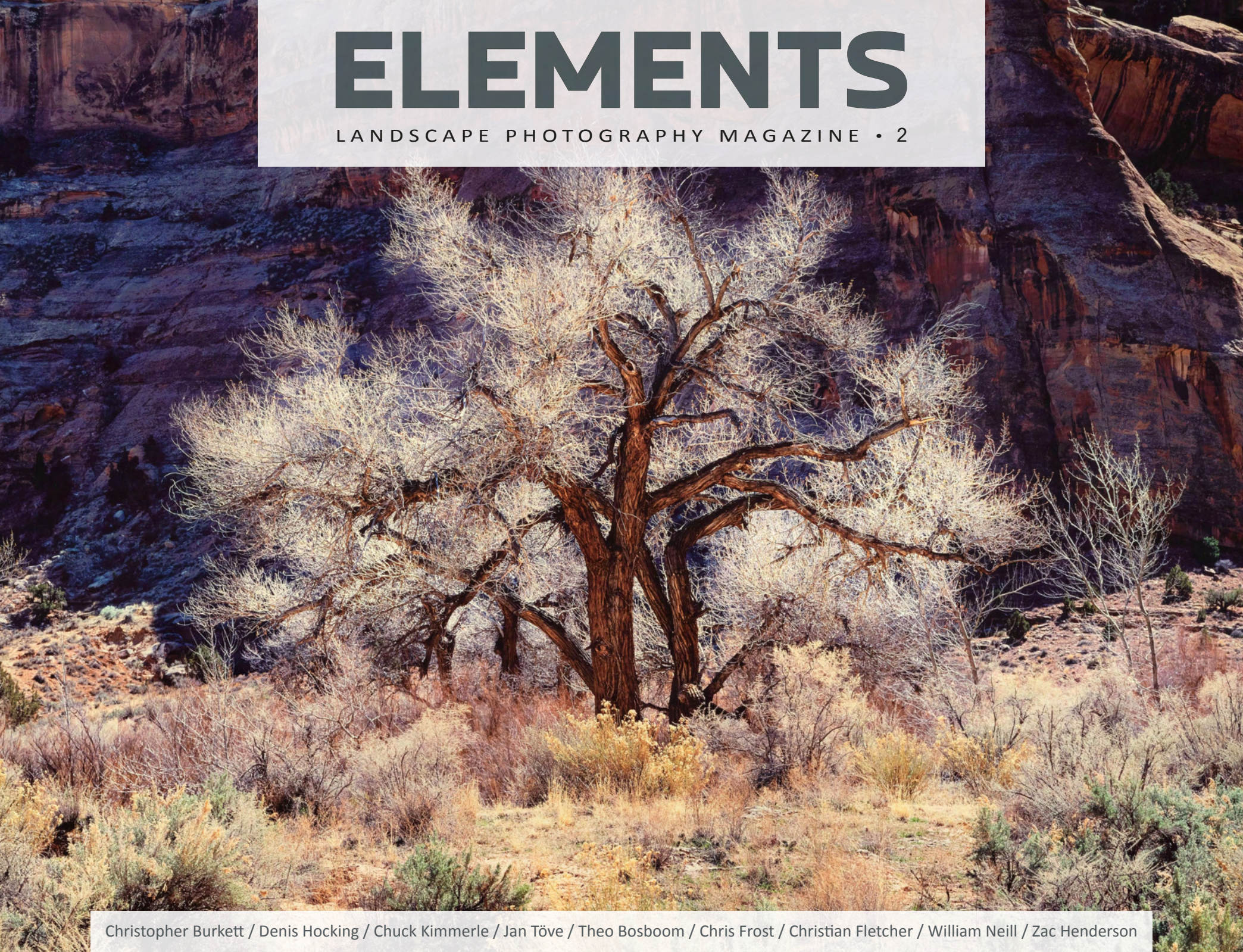


ELEMENTS

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY MAGAZINE • 2

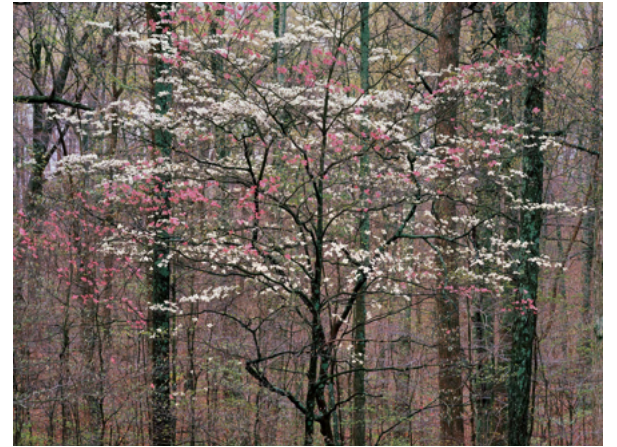


Christopher Burkett / Denis Hocking / Chuck Kimmerle / Jan Töve / Theo Bosboom / Chris Frost / Christian Fletcher / William Neill / Zac Henderson

THE STORY OF

CHRISTOPHER BURKETT

Breathing Life Into the Print



"... we don't see the world the way it is, we see it the way we are."

Growing up

I was born prematurely in 1951 and, as was the custom of the time, spent my first three weeks in an incubator at the hospital. It also happened that I was born severely nearsighted; around -7.0 diopters. My memories go back to earlier than age 2, by which time I was fully conversant.

My nearsightedness was not a hindrance. Not knowing any difference, I assumed the world was as I perceived it. Leaves on the trees were amorphous and beautifully cloudlike. When they fell to the ground, they appeared to solidify into amazingly beautiful, highly detailed sculptures that I closely examined and marvelled at. I recognized people by the fuzzy outlines of their bodies and the way they walked and moved about. Faces were perceived clearly only if 12 inches away. It was a mythical world, filled with wonder and beauty.

I adapted so well that my parents had no idea of the extent of my nearsightedness until I was in first grade when I couldn't read what the teacher wrote on the chalkboard. When I was examined by an ophthalmologist, he had to move me to the adult testing unit where he could add auxiliary lenses to compute the strong optical correction that I needed. A week later I received my first pair of glasses.



In a flash, the infinite details of the world were upon me. It was a miracle! My astonishment and joy knew no bounds. I couldn't stop smiling and exclaiming at the discoveries everywhere I looked. Later that morning when I walked into the classroom, 26 children turned to look at me. I suddenly saw each face with absolute clarity, an almost overpowering experience that I vividly remember 65 years later.

Recent studies indicate at least 50% of our brain is used for vision. As a child grows up, their learning hardwires their brain and is mostly finished around the age of six. It seems possible that the way I perceived the world was influenced by learning to see and visually process fuzzy images.

As I grew older, I began to realize that I didn't fit in very well with most children. One of my schoolteachers told my mother, "In our class we have two leaders, 23 followers and then there's Christopher." That's like a synopsis of my life.

I graduated from high school in 1969 with a 4.0 grade average, scored high on the SAT tests and received a full scholarship to Oregon State University. After a term and a half I dropped out. I found it more boring than high school and I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. There were so many things I could do but I knew that when I made a choice it would exclude all other choices. I didn't want to dabble, I wanted to go deep.

I hitchhiked around the USA and Canada for a few months, owned a very quick sports car, worked in the woods for a while and in 1971 joined a Christian Order, where I spent seven years as a Brother. At the time, this group was non-denominational but eventually became Eastern Orthodox Christian.



"SINCE WHAT I WAS SEEING WAS LIGHT, PHOTOGRAPHY ('WRITING WITH LIGHT') SEEMED THE BEST WAY TO DO THIS. HOW HARD COULD IT BE? I'M STILL WORKING ON THAT ANSWER."

Semi-monastic Life

My life as a Brother was one of prayer, religious services and work in the community. We all took vows of humility, obedience, service, purity and poverty. After about five years of this life, there were times when I left church after communion and saw light in the world. Not just physical light but a tangible, spiritual light that filled the world. The light I was seeing and experiencing was an undeserved gift. It was a treasure beyond measure and I wanted to find a way to share this light with others.

If I learned to paint what I was seeing, people might dismiss it as the product of a creative imagination. Since

what I was seeing was light, photography (“writing with light”) seemed the best way to do this. How hard could it be? I’m still working on that answer.

After I became an Orthodox Christian, I understood that what I was experiencing and what inspired me is what is referred to as “uncreated light.” That is, light that is not physical but spiritual. It permeates creation and is an attribute of the Holy Spirit. I was attempting to use limited, physical materials to show people something which is unlimited and not physical. This was going to be quite a job.

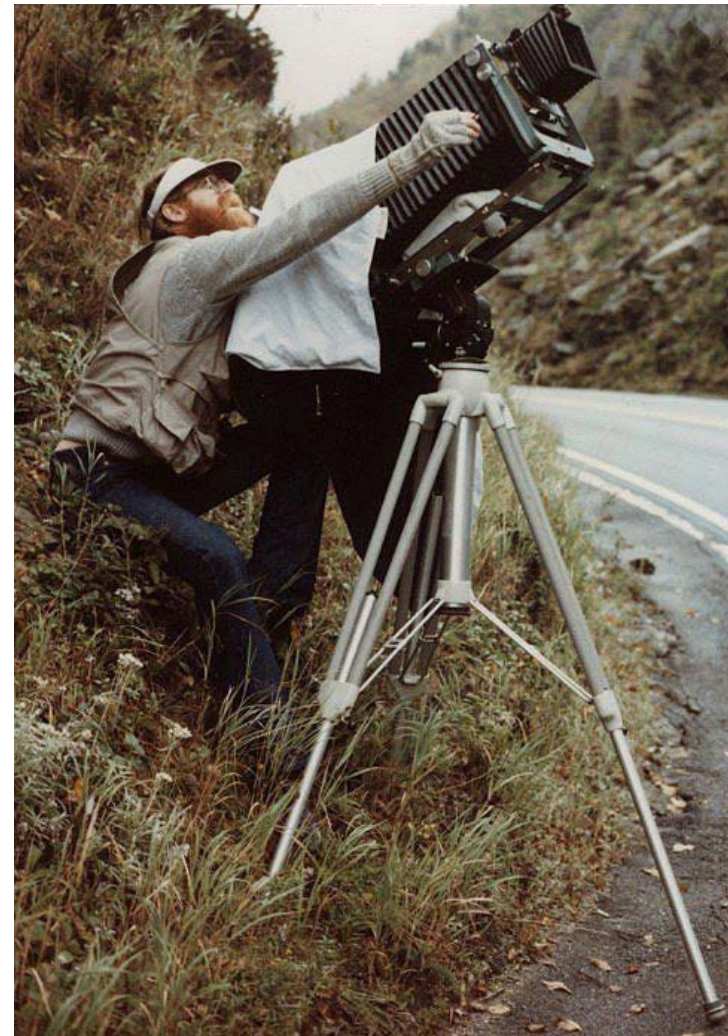


Beginning to Photograph

I began photographing in black and white using minimal materials. I learned the Zone System from the original Basic Photo Series by Ansel Adams. Printing was frustrating. Eventually I was able to get prints that looked reasonably good but I had to do a lot of dodging and burning to make it happen. What was I doing wrong? Then I read an article in *Darkroom and Creative Camera Techniques* magazine which showed the steps Ansel went through to make a print. He did lots of dodging and burning! Duh, that's how you fine tune the image to bring it to life!

In 1979 I made the decision to leave the religious order to devote my life to photography. I married Ruth, who had also been in that order and we've now been married 42 years.

I began my serious photographic work using a 2-1/4 x 3-1/4 Crown Graphic with an Ektar lens, then a used Hasselblad. Although I started out in B/W, I quickly changed to shooting colour transparency film and began to make Cibachrome prints at a rental lab in Portland, Oregon. As I worked on developing my photographic skills, I also learned to run printing presses and within a year was operating a 40" four-colour printing press. Ruth received training and was a career paramedic for 10 years.



In 1984 I attended a Friends of Photography Publishing workshop, where I met two of the instructors: Dave Gardner, of Gardner Fulmer Lithograph, and Eleanor Caponigro, a graphic designer. Dave was about to print the *Ansel Adams Autobiography* and he invited me to come to southern California to help print the book. I accepted his offer and spent three months there, running a press third shift. Dave was pleased with my work and offered to give me a job as night shift foreman but I told him I couldn't do that because my goal was to do photography fulltime.

In 1985 I taught myself how to operate high-end lithographic laser drum scanners. My technical abilities and fundamental understanding of colour photographic printing allowed me to rise to journeyman level in two months. In 1987 Eleanor Caponigro introduced me to Stephen Stinehour of Meridan-Stinehour Press, which printed art and photography books of the



highest quality. Stephen contacted me and asked me to move to Connecticut to run a four-colour press. I told him no, I was making a transition to fulltime photography, so he asked me to come and train two scanner operators for three months, which I agreed to do.

So in 1987 I quit my job, bought an 8 x 10 camera with two lenses and six film holders and drove to Connecticut in the springtime, photographing along the way. When I had finished with the teaching job, Ruth got a leave of absence from her paramedic work and joined me in Connecticut. I bought one more lens and six more film holders and off we went. We ended up photographing throughout the USA and northeastern Canada for five months, camping out in a small pup tent. This was the longest

photo trip we had made but there would be many more over the next 27 years.



Photographing

I never had any photography or darkroom classes of any kind. I can only explain how I work and what I've learned through my experience.

There is a certain mystery to the creative process. If your goal is to end up with an image filled with depth and meaning you have to be active and inspired, but you can't force it to happen. When I'm looking for a worthwhile photograph, I've learned to turn off mental verbalizations and the constant "word chatter" we usually experience. My mind, body and soul are alert, attentive, focused and (ideally) at peace. Seeing becomes everything.

Since I've used the same film and print materials for 40 years, when I view a scene I see it not just as it is in nature but through the eyes of how film will respond and how Cibachrome print materials will present the final image through my darkroom work. My compositions are completely intuitive, not "mind driven." I'm technically very precise when calculating the exposure and taking the picture but that's after the image is seen and composed on the ground glass. At that point I sometimes need to quietly talk to myself as I go through the mechanical steps of getting the image onto the film.

Composing an image with an 8x10 camera has the advantage that you work with a full 8x10 image on the ground glass. You can see the interrelationships of all the details in the composition. The way we normally view things is that our eyes scan back and forth, up and down and we piece it all together. But there is another way of seeing I use when composing a photograph.

I view the center of the 8 x 10" image on the ground glass, then relax and then let my attention expand to see the entire image as one whole, without moving my eyes from the centre. Maintaining that way of viewing, I make slight adjustments to the view camera position, such as up or down, left or right. I know the composition is just right when I get a "snap" of interior confirmation. This may sound kind of "woo-woo" but that's what happens. I almost never crop an image and I usually take only one view of a scene, and often just one exposure. On a month-long photo trip, travelling 7,000 miles (or more) I customarily make only about 50 photographs. It's just the way I work, not something I planned out or that I have some kind of philosophy about.



Ruth helps a tremendous amount and has been with me on most of my photographic trips. She does nearly all the driving, hauls gear, dusts off film holders and writes down film exposure information. The most critical help she provides is when I'm focusing the 8x10 camera. Time is of the essence, since lighting conditions are fugitive and wind can be a constant problem.

As I make focusing adjustments under the dark cloth I call out *f*/stops to her and she opens and closes the lens in response. My eyes adapt to the dark and I can see the differences between the depth of field at *f*/32, *f*/45 and *f*/64. Her help allows me to be precise with focusing and selecting the best *f*/stop for the photograph. After I make the exposure I open up the lens and she comes around to view the image on the ground glass. She's often surprised at the peaceful, cohesive composition found in the midst of a visually complex and apparently chaotic scene.

I now have 12 lenses for my 8x10 camera but I use the 600mm and 800mm lenses the most. These are 2x normal and 2-2/3x normal, like 90mm and 120mm on a 35mm full frame camera. Before a trip I measure the shutter speeds on all the lenses and mark +/- factors on each lens board of all the shutter speeds. I use a 1° spot metre to visualize where the tones in the scene will fall on the scale and a modified version of the Zone System to calculate the exposure to within 1/6 of an f/stop.

When I go out to photograph I don't have a preconceived idea of what I will find. I often find an image when we're on our way to photograph somewhere else. Although my subject matter is quite varied, including what Ruth calls "weed-filled ditches," I'm drawn to forests and have had the best results in the aspen forests of Colorado/Utah and the mixed hardwood forests of Appalachia.



The aspen forests of Colorado and Utah are filled with light: white tree trunks, yellow and gold foliage, light brown dried grass and clear blue skies. What's not to like? The Appalachian forests have hundreds of varieties of trees and steep mountainsides. Every day in autumn the trees and leaves are different and moving a few feet in any direction results in a different photograph.

When I'm looking for photographs in the midst of complex forest scenes I often visualize the forest in what I might call a 3D mapping framework. This framework allows me to anticipate what photographs might be possible from different points of view throughout the scene. The possibilities are infinite and constantly in flux. Each year brings many opportunities, some years more than others. Each trip is a unique adventure.

"WHEN I'M LOOKING FOR A WORTHWHILE PHOTOGRAPH, I'VE LEARNED TO TURN OFF MENTAL VERBALIZATIONS AND THE CONSTANT 'WORD CHATTER' WE USUALLY EXPERIENCE. MY MIND, BODY AND SOUL ARE ALERT, ATTENTIVE, FOCUSED AND (IDEALLY) AT PEACE. SEEING BECOMES EVERYTHING."



On our various photo trips I carry Delorme state atlas maps and make notes of areas where I see photographic potential and those where I find none, with the year and date noted. These notes help but are general guides and not how we travel day by day. We stop when I see photographic potential and leave when I feel I've done all I can there. That could be one hour, it could be one week.

There are times when I instantly see a photograph and know precisely the spot to put my tripod and which lens to use. Sometimes I see the photographic potential in a scene but it takes time to find a worthwhile composition. At other times I see tremendous potential but no matter what I do I can't find a photograph. Sometimes the weather is variable but with great possibilities and after I'm ready to make an exposure I have to pull the camera off the tripod, wait for the rain to pass, then try again and again until I get the image. Or not. One time in South Dakota I attempted to photograph a scene of multicoloured cattails, illumined with glowing light. The wind was a teaser, dying down almost all the way,

then picking up. I had my hand on the shutter release for two hours, waiting for a one second exposure and never got that shot. So I switched to my Hasselblad. Due to the greater depth of field at a wider aperture which is made possible by using a smaller film format, it allows me to use a 1/15 second exposure to make the photograph.

Every minute of every day the light which fills creation is present, surrounding and filling all things. But there are only a few moments when all the conditions come together to make an image that has the possibility of having that light shine forth in the final photographic print.

Most of my photographic work has been done in the 27-year period from 1987 to 2014. I'm not actively photographing nowadays but haven't precluded it. I have much to do as I continue to make Cibachrome prints, occasionally finding time to do a bit of writing about my photography, with Ruth making helpful suggestions.



Printing

Getting an image on film is one thing. Making a print is another. Most of my life has been spent in the darkroom. I photographed for about one month each year and worked long days in the darkroom for 11 months. Fortunately, I only need 4-5 hours of sleep, because when I work in the darkroom it's usually 13 hours a day. For over 30 years my customary workweek has been 65-70 hours, most of it enjoyable. Some days not so much. I couldn't sustain this schedule on my own but the inspiration I've been blessed with is like the wind in my sails and the days, weeks and years have just flown by.

We built my current darkroom in the basement of our studio 20 years ago. I have two 8x10 Durst enlargers, an HL 2501 and HL 2506 which have colour balance adjustments in 0.1cc increments, including separate neutral density controls. This allows me to use my Apo-EL-Nikkor enlarging lenses at their optimum apertures of $f/8$. There's a 52" Kreonite Cibachrome print processor with precise temperature and speed controls. A separate room for making contrast and colour correction masks, with HEPA filters on the fresh air intake, clean room booth filters and fans above the work area, a long sink for developing masking films and a JOBO ATL machine for experimenting with Cibachrome chemistry changes. And lots of other stuff.

In the workspace on the first floor we have a computerized mat cutter, print storage drawers and many shelves filled with boxes of finished prints. We also pressure mount prints (back mounted, never face mounted) using a heated roller system. When we do, my assistant and I wear Tyvek "bunny suits" like those used in a clean room. We have a separate print viewing room with track lights and a movable rail to use with mats of various sizes. I can view prints as far as 30' away, when needed. The second floor houses matted prints, shipping materials and custom-made shipping boxes for various sizes of prints.

I only print on Cibachrome (Ilfochrome Classic Deluxe CPS.1K). About 20 years ago I modified my P3 chemistry with help and advice from the Ilford photo chemists in Switzerland. With their help and some experiments on my own, we tweaked the chemistry to give more contrast to the print material. This makes it more difficult to work with, since contrast masking, dodging and burning and processing are more critical, but give more tonal separation and thus potentially more luminosity to the Cibachrome prints.

Even though my Kreonite processor is very precise and all the chemical tanks hold 100 liters, when I make prints I put only one print at a time in the processor, which keeps the density and colour balance to within 0.1cc. – the printing I do is that critical. It takes almost ½ hour for each test strip or print to be processed. Even when reprinting an image it takes four hours or more of setup and tests before I'm ready to make a good print. When I'm printing, I work in complete silence: no phone calls, no emails and no conversations or interruptions. On those days, my entire life is dedicated to attempting to create a print filled with life and light.

Colour printing is done in a completely dark room with no safelights. The Cibachrome material is placed on a wall-mounted vertical vacuum easel which is aligned with the horizontal enlargers to within +/- 1mm. I have a digital metronome that counts out precise seconds which I use to time the dodging and burning of each print. Most times I simultaneously use two wands that have interchangeable sizes of ovals for dodging. The dodging and burning can be very critical, sometimes needing to be within a fraction of a second in certain areas.



I first make tests on paper which is about 1/6 of the final print size until the colour balance and density is close to what I want. Next, I make full-sized prints which go into mats and are examined in the print viewing room. Then the real work begins.

I view the print from various distances, ranging from 30 feet to one foot away, since we experience prints differently depending on how far away we are. From a far distance I can judge the overall composition and cohesiveness of all parts of the image. From a medium distance the structural details emerge and I pay attention to how my eye is led in various ways throughout the image.

At this point I fine tune the image by adjusting overall density, local densities with dodging and burning, and very fine adjustments in colour balance. Just as when I photograph, I turn off all mental verbalization and “word chatter” and observe what I am seeing and experiencing right now. Silently holding these perceptions, I consider how I can breathe more life into the image. Then I go back to the darkroom, where I precisely repeat the dodging and burning I did before but with a few subtle changes which will give the print more life and luminosity.

Eventually, after many hours and sometimes days of work, I reach a point where I can't find a way to improve it anymore. Then I usually wait until the next day when I take a fresh look at it. If I'm confident this is the best I can do, I make a series of prints, one at a time, examining each one in a mat with proper lighting to ensure consistency. On a good day I can make ten prints of one image. To obtain the highest quality, I can't rush the process.

The luminosity present in my Cibachrome prints is a combination of factors that must work together: a precise colour balance which results in the proper amount of colour contrast within subtle values, balanced tonal values throughout the image which is the framework for the image, including the right contrast and tone reproduction throughout the scale, and luminous highlights which still hold just enough detail. Balancing all the factors that make an image come to life is complex and there is no set formula.

It's not just about the reproduction of an image, it's all about the light. I work on each print until I can see and feel the light practically bursting forth. If I can't see and feel it, how can anyone else? Even so, I'm usually left with the feeling that even with the best I can do, there's still more that's possible. The next time I print it I'll try to make it even better.

That said, after the process is done and I pull open the drawer or open the box weeks later, the prints take my breath away, every time! I have seen no other print material that has the depth and beauty of a well-made Cibachrome. They are a wonder to me and I have no desire to print on anything else. The entire process from photographing the image to making the final exhibition print leaves me with the feeling that somehow, I'm as much a spectator as a participant.



Ink on Paper

We self-published two books: *Intimations of Paradise* in 1999 and *Resplendent Light* in 2004. One of the primary reasons I learned to run four-colour printing presses and lithographic drum scanners was so I could obtain the very best quality when I had my photographic work reproduced with ink on paper.

The colour separations for the books were made by scanning 20 x 24" Cibachrome prints on high-end lithographic drum scanners. I worked with the colour separation companies to adjust the separations to match the photographs as closely as possible, including doing some of the final colour adjustments myself. When doing the press OKs, we would get the press sheets fairly close to the press proofs and then use my actual Cibachrome prints to get the closest match. Usually press OKs are done under 5,000°K lights but since no one reads books under those lights, we made a custom viewing booth with halogen flood lights to do the colour OKs.

We laid out the photos for the books in a checkerboard fashion so we would be able to adjust the colour balance for each photograph on press without compromise. We had a special paper size made for each book, using the best paper from Germany. Each photo is printed with a gloss spot varnish.

One photo in the *Intimations* book, "Blue Glacial Ice" had deep blues in it that were very difficult to match. After the ink dried, I wasn't satisfied with the colour so I created the film for a touch plate at the printing company and custom mixed the colour we would add. The touch plate image was printed on top of the already varnished image, with another coat of varnish to seal it in place. It worked perfectly. On the *Resplendent Light* book we paid for each press sheet to be flipped over and run through the press a third time so that both sides of the sheet would be polished. We used special Japanese cloth on the covers of both books. We also had Special Edition books made that are hand-bound with special fabrics and gold stamped leather rounded spines. Each special edition book comes with an 11 x 14" or 11 x 11" Cibachrome print.

No publisher would be willing to pay the money to do the job the way we did it. The costs add up: we spent \$240,000 to print 10,000 copies of *Intimations of Paradise* and \$175,000 to print 6,000 copies of *Resplendent Light* and currently \$3,000 a year to store the inventory. It is unlikely we will publish any more books, now that we are in the Kindle era where printed books are often not as treasured.



The Impact of Digital Photography

Digital photography is a marvel. It has great potential for creative work as well as practical everyday applications. It has many strengths but it is a different medium from analogue photography. There is room for both. There is an organic quality to the tonal relationships and colours in good analogue work that I don't find in digital. For example, I can open up dark values in images and change overall colour balance in an organic way that simply can't be done digitally. I know this from being proficient in both mediums.

Another difficulty with digital is that the images are no longer trustworthy. Photoshop is not just a noun, it's a verb. Most people's camera is their phone. To many people, photography is easy and images are not valued and disposable.

Seeing is no longer believing. This distrust extends to analogue work, which is inseparable or unknown to the majority of people nowadays. I remember a woman asking me if I "put that tree in the centre of the photograph." I told her I didn't do digital work and she replied, "I know that, but did you put that tree in the centre of the photograph?" It's a different world from the one I'm used to.

My analogue photographic image controls are limited. I can adjust density, overall colour balance, contrast and tone reproduction and small adjustments to sharpness. There is a physical link from the scene to the film and to the print communicated through light, written by light. A pixel is not a photon.



Working with Galleries

I have been extremely fortunate to have made a living for over 30 years solely from the sale of my Cibachrome photographs in galleries. I've had as many as 14 galleries representing me at one time and a total of 56 different galleries over the years, some big, some small. It's not as glamorous as it might seem. The greatest blessing is that it has allowed me to focus all my time and energy on my photographic work.

Galleries work on a consignment basis. You create the work, then ship it at your expense. They promote your work, sell it and receive a 50% commission. You can have a good business relationship if you have the right gallery represent you. Make sure your work is a good fit with the gallery and that your work will be properly displayed and have good lighting. You need to keep track of your work, have a contract and do an inventory at the gallery once a year. Don't put work in a gallery that won't frame it. They need to have some skin in the game and confidence in being able to sell your work. Be cautious with new galleries – they have a high failure rate.

You need to be prepared to consistently supply the gallery with high quality prints, delivered promptly. Being business-like does not have to compromise your art.

If you make digital prints you will need to make them limited editions. This is tricky because it's hard to know which prints are going to sell well. Most limited editions never sell out. Don't have a super low edition, like four prints. Don't let the gallery dictate your edition size, it's your work. Price your work realistically but not too low. Your work has value.

I have open editions but have six price tiers as the prints sell. The price increases are not at specific numbers but on how quickly the print is selling. For example, if I sell 40 prints of an image in three years, the price goes up. But if I sell 40 prints in 10 years and currently sell two per year, the price stays the same. My editions will ultimately all be limited because I will run out of Cibachrome materials.





Conclusion

I've been a dedicated photographer for 47 years now. From the very beginning I was inspired to do only one thing with my photography: to attempt to share the light and life which fills the world. Everything I've done since then has been to achieve that goal.

My advice to the new generation of photographers is to find something positive and uplifting to do with your photogra-

phy, something you feel inspired to do. If you're not inspired how can you expect others to be inspired by your work? Avoid gimmicks or being different just to be different. Don't force a style on your work, let it develop naturally. If you have photo instructors don't let them put out the spark that lives within you. Believe in your work but be honest about it. Remember: we don't see the world the way it is, we see it the way we are.

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