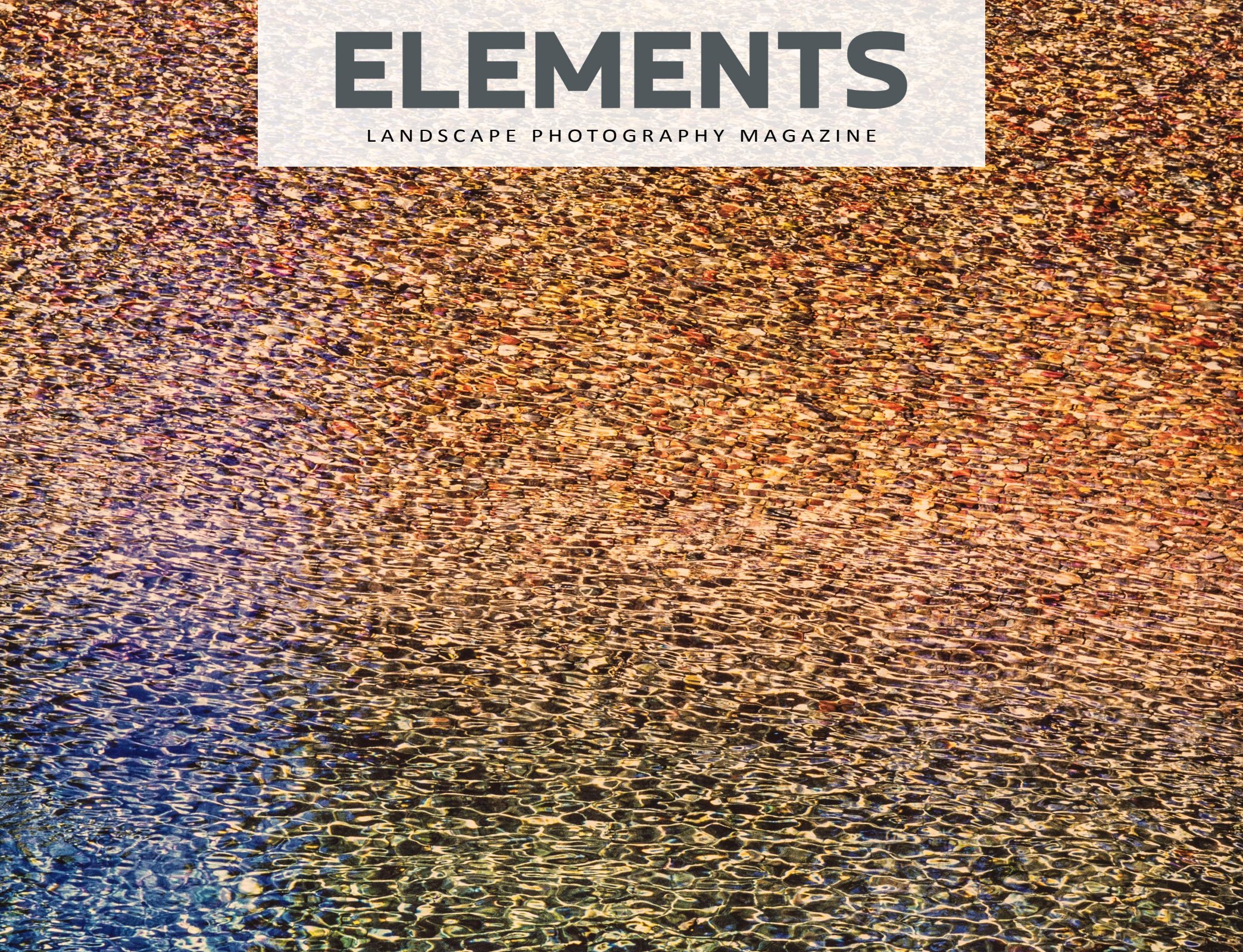


ELEMENTS

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY MAGAZINE



Visiting Christopher Burkett – Part I

Olaf Sztaba

Welcome to the first episode of the series from our visit to Christopher Burkett's studio. Not only we do want to show you his work and methods but also describe our experiences and impressions of the extraordinary man who has dedicated his life to the mastery of photography and his one-of-a-kind printing technique. Consider the PART I as an introduction. The subsequent episodes are going to be more technical so please stay tuned.

When you visit the Photography West Gallery in Carmel or the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite you will notice the strong presence of Christopher Burkett's work. His one-of-a-kind large, hand-made Cibachrome prints mesmerize with their vibrant presence. The colour, whether subtle or elaborate, is always masterfully controlled. The contrast too is perfectly adjusted and tuned to perfection – a difficult achievement when working with transparencies. It is difficult to appreciate until you are standing in front of one of the prints.

While providing an immersive experience, each print hints at the enormous physical and mental discipline of the photographer. When Christopher is photographing, for one month of the year he drives around the country with his wife

Ruth in search of subject matter, taking notes and photographing, mostly in his two favourite regions of Colorado, Utah and Appalachia. His massive 8x10 camera is only set up when Christopher has



confidence that the light and composition are right. Unlike in digital photography, he usually needs one exposure. This is just a beginning.

For the rest of the year, Christopher spends time in the darkroom working carefully and rigorously on every print (11-13 hours a day). It all starts with a paper called Cibachrome, made by a Swiss company but no longer in production. Christopher bought 60,000 square feet of the material (to add to his existing inventory of 30,000 square feet of Cibachrome). Part of the reason he spends so much time printing is to battle one of the Cibachrome's characteristics — its expiration date. Even while stored in his freezer warehouse, the material deteriorates over time.



His images are made by hand the old-fashion way and require the highest quality materials, chemical processes, and numerous adjustments, many perfected over the last 30 years. In his own words: “What really brings a print to life are subtleties and refinements. It takes 10% of the work to get the print 90% of the way to where it looks pretty good. It’s tempting to stop there, since it takes 90% more work to complete the subtle final 10% which brings the print to life. There are no shortcuts nor can the process be rushed.”

No wonder that when you talk to art collectors and photographers they always mention Christopher Burkett’s work as the most valuable and important prints they own. It may well be that Christopher Burkett is the best-selling landscape photographer today.

Glowing Autumn Forest, Virginia

When we started ELEMENTS Magazine, Christopher Burkett was at the top of the list of photographers we wanted to feature in our magazine. In fact, in our early days I wrote an email to Christopher inquiring about such a possibility. To my surprise we received a response quite quickly. Soon after, I received a phone call from Ruth, Christopher's wife, who thanked me for the opportunity and gave us some interesting insights into Christopher and the way he works. "Once he finds an interest in something, he will pursue it until he absolutely masters it," she told me.

We started working on the interview. For a week our team, under the leadership of Steven Friedman, worked on ques-

tions for Christopher and after multiple edits we settled on a set of 28 questions. It seemed a lot but relatively few in the context of such iconic work. Upon receiving them, Christopher sent us a very kind email confirming he was working on his answers. We didn't have to wait long. Soon another email arrived but this time Christopher sent us what he described as a "draft" of what looked like a mini-biography done from scratch for our magazine. It wasn't just a draft. It was a cleverly and beautifully written personal account of his life journey from his early days to the present. It included parts about his childhood, monastery life, travels, interests, inspiration, composing images, producing prints and even looking at prints from the

perspective of the human eye's anatomy. It was spectacular writing and one of the best pieces we have ever received. What a class act, I thought!



Then it came to choosing images to accompany the mini biography including the cover image. Christopher started sending us some scans of his work from the iconic “Cottonwood and Light” series, the remarkable and mysterious “Glowing Autumn Forest” and the vibrant and contemporary “Sunrise and Autumn Blueberries,” to name a few. Over the course of the next few days, Christopher kept sending a new version of the same photo making sure the scan and presentation were perfect. At first glance I couldn’t see much difference, yet upon careful inspection, each consequent scan was clearly better. He wanted digital files to be as good and accurate as his prints – not an easy task. We could see that he cares deeply about each image. The interview and the entire issue was a great success.

Over the course of the last two years our team has worked with Christopher on several pieces, whether it was an article, project, or image submission. It was always the absolute best and was delivered ahead of schedule. His relentless push for excellence and mastery at each level of our cooperation was apparent and highly appreciated, a rare quality in today’s social media hype reality. I need to meet this man, I thought.

The invitation came soon after. Our team was thrilled and excited. Fortunately, Christopher and Ruth live in a small town south of Portland, which is a reasonable drive from Vancouver, BC. We got clear instructions from Ruth and Christopher and in early June we parked our car in the Burketts’ driveway.



As we got out of the car, Ruth, energetic and confident, hugged us as if we had known each other for a long time. Christopher emerged from the house, tall and stoic with his signature beard and glasses. We hugged and proceeded to their beautiful living room finished with wood and natural materials which we later found out had all been handpicked by Christopher. The furniture was classic and elegant and of course, a massive print on the main wall completed the whole. We immediately felt at home. We chatted for a while about family and photography, and even touched on current politics. What struck me right away was his warmth, humility, and calmness. He wouldn't speak unnecessarily but once he did express himself, it was articulated in an intense way. There was

a certain nobility to his persona, I thought. I wanted to get to know him better.

One of the first things Ruth and Christopher showed us was their beautiful garden full of trees and flowers. It was amazing to watch Christopher leading the walk, often stopping by a tree and explaining its origin and unique characteristics, sometimes going deep into biology. I was struck by how much he knew about each tree. It was part of a larger theme. Each time we were discussing the natural world I could see his enchantment with landscape and habitat. It was stimulating and perhaps a bit embarrassing as my knowledge was lacking in comparison to his encyclopedic memory. "What a mind!" I thought.



Sunrise and Autumn Blueberries, Maine

When dinner time arrived, Christopher decided to cook a special recipe from one of his many cookbooks. It included preparing rice in a Japanese-made rice cooker, which he explained makes an excellent rice. Of course, the dinner was delicious.



As we toured the house two themes emerged: photography and religious paintings. One of the topics which we covered extensively during the visit was the topic of his inspiration. Those of you who read Christopher's biography in the April 2021 issue of the ELEMENTS Magazine know that he is a spiritual person and views his photographic practice as an extension of his beliefs. "I just capture light illuminating this world," Christopher explained when we touched on this topic. It was clear that the depth of Christopher's faith has enormous impact on the way he conducts himself both as a human being and a photographer.

As the evening approached, it was time to plan the next day. Christopher invited us to the studio where he creates his Cibachrome prints. I went to bed excited to see the process of crafting these unique prints the next day, but even my highest expectations couldn't match what I would see.



Frosted Grass and Lavender Blueberry, Maine

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Visiting Christopher Burkett – Part II

Olaf Sztaba

This is Part II describing our visit to Christopher Burkett's home and studio. You can read Part I in the September issue of the ELEMENTS Magazine.

It felt surreal to open my eyes next morning and see Christopher Burkett's prints around our bed. That was not the only creation we could see from our room. Our windows faced an exquisite garden thoughtfully arranged to create a beautiful whole.

Following a tasty breakfast at Bob's Red Mill's headquarters, we went to Christopher's studio – a 10-minute drive from his house. We pulled out in front of the building that looked like an old train station just beside the train tracks. Before we entered the building, Christopher gave us a brief history of the place. It had taken him nine months to restore it to a state that it could be used for a studio. The basement was completely redesigned to fit all the photographic equipment, which, as you

will later read, is truly impressive. In fact, a truck with lift was needed to move some large pieces of equipment, together with three semi-trucks of darkroom equipment. Then it took a month just to set everything up.



As we entered the building, we met Christopher's assistant who helps with daily tasks. At the entrance was a big print ready to ship in its custom box which was designed to ensure the prints are received in pristine condition. As we discussed the



packaging, we entered the inspection and packing room. Christopher showed us a computerized mat cutter with standardized mat sizes (he doesn't crop his work) and the boxes that were custom made for his books. Interestingly, Christopher's iconic "Intimations of Paradise" book was printed in an edition of 10,000 copies and there are only a couple of hundred left. If you haven't done so yet we strongly suggest adding this book to your photo library. It sets a benchmark in terms of quality of print. Another story involves the production of the book but I'll leave that for another time.



Swirling Veratrum, Alaska

Then we moved on to an adjacent room full of Cibachrome prints already matted on shelves and in boxes and drawers in various sizes. It was quite a sight to see. Next we went to a print viewing room

(yes, there is one room just for viewing prints). On one wall you see “black velvet” which Christopher informed us is “one of the blackest substances known to man” for its light-absorbing quality.

He put one of his prints on the table and showed us how the velvet prevents reflections. On the other wall is a white board with a shelf where he displays his matted prints for viewing. When we entered the room the “White Callas at Dawn” was on display – one of the prints Christopher was working on. The print looked great to me, yet Christopher pointed out that the colour balance was slightly off and needed to be corrected. As we viewed the subtleties of the print, he explained how our eyes see a photographic print – a fascinating and important topic, which he studies in depth (we hope Christopher will write an article about this topic for us in the future).





Sunset, Native Koa Trees, Hawaii

One of the techniques Christopher uses when assessing his new prints is to compare it to a master print. The comparison helps him make the right judgement about the brand-new print. He pays a lot of attention to colour balance, density, contrast, and dodging and burning - comparing all elements in the print to previous versions. Each and every print he makes goes through this meticulous process.

The importance of the printing process cannot be overstated. "I spent most of my life for the last 35 years printing," he quipped and offered us an example. "In 1989 Ruth and I went for a two-month trip and the rest of the year I spent in the darkroom. After that, we used to take three-to-five-week trips, and the remain-

der of the year printing." In fact the last photo trip Christopher took was seven years ago. All this time he has dedicated to mastering printing techniques and pro-

ducing Cibachrome prints. I asked him what would prompt him to go on another trip. "I would only go if inspired to do so," he answered resolutely.



It would be interesting to know about some of his favourite locations, I thought. Christopher explained, “We have been in all 50 states with my best results in the fall in Utah, Colorado, and Appalachia, as I respond the best to forests. What is also interesting is that I find some photographs on the way where I didn’t expect to find a photograph. When I see something that has photographic potential I stop and photograph in that area until I don’t see anything else.” He pointed out that Ruth, his wife, does all the driving so he can focus on seeing. “I don’t have any preconceived notions or ideas – it is a very interesting

thing from a creative standpoint. I am just looking and seeing CLEARLY and DEEPLY. At the same time in the back of my memory, I see all the photographs I have already taken.” Christopher calls it “visual literacy.” The moment I heard this term I loved it. As I process what I’d just heard, Christopher continues, “I am not comparing what is in front of me to the images I have already seen and/or taken but they inform the experience in some difficult to explain way.” He adds, “If I am not inspired by something, how can anyone be inspired by my print?!”

"I DON'T HAVE ANY PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS OR IDEAS - IT IS A VERY INTERESTING THING FROM A CREATIVE STANDPOINT. I AM JUST LOOKING AND SEEING *CLEARLY* AND *DEEPLY*. AT THE SAME TIME IN THE BACK OF MY MEMORY, I SEE ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS I HAVE ALREADY TAKEN."



Silver Maple and Rock Wall, Virginia

One question came up naturally. What is easier – capturing an image in the field or printing it? Christopher took a moment to think and then answered, “Taking an image is the easiest and quickest part. However, bringing life out of it in the final print takes days of work. Of course, you need to have a worthwhile image to begin with. Having said that, it is a completely different experience. Usually when I photograph, at one point I cannot wait to get to the darkroom and then when I am in the darkroom for extended time I cannot wait to go out and photograph. In a sense, both activities influence and complement each other. One cannot exist without the other. The

creative process of creating a photograph has such a mysterious quality to it.”

At that moment, his eyes got brighter and he appeared to enter a much deeper, almost intimate sphere of photography, as if I was not there. He remarked in a stoical and measured voice, “Sometimes I know I have a special image – we drive and don’t say anything for an hour; the glow stays with you.” He trembles, his face lights up and becomes graceful and pensive, his eyes lock on some unspecified point in front of him as if he had left the room and was re-living the moment. I can see Christopher is deeply and profoundly moved. I am speechless. No words are spoken.

“TAKING AN IMAGE IS THE EASIEST AND QUICKEST PART. HOWEVER, BRINGING LIFE OUT OF IT IN THE FINAL PRINT TAKES DAYS OF WORK...”



Forest Light, Colorado

I have visited many photographers in my life but I have never seen anyone so moved by the experience of taking a photographic image. I feel dazzled, inspired and hungry for more. One thought crosses my mind. I have never met anyone who would take a digital image and without seeing it on the back screen stayed visibly shaken and quiet for an hour. I sometimes wonder if digital makes us feel and experience less. Does digital remove this extra emotional and spiritual dimension of image-making? I don't know.

As we continued our conversation, Christopher pointed out that when he was using his 8x10 camera, he would go under the darkcloth and move the camera slightly to the left or right, subtly adjusting and improving the composition. He says, "Normally we scan the image and our eyes put it all together, but there is a way when you look at the centre of the area and you allow your vision to encompass the whole thing at once. It is often the case when I print it – sometimes years later - that I can then see how all

these pieces fit together. The other way to think about it is that you start from darkness and go to the light."

Almost every sentence carries a profound meaning. I know that I need to go through every word once again to fully uncover what was just shared with me. I am so thrilled that we recorded our conversations. It must be written down and shared, I thought. Yet, it was just the beginning of a remarkable day with Christopher Burkett.

Christopher Burkett
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Visiting Christopher Burkett – Part III

Olaf Sztaba

This is Part III of the series describing our visit to Christopher Burkett's home and studio. You can read Parts I and II in the September and November 2023 issues of the ELEMENTS Magazine.



After an absorbing and insightful conversation about photography while looking at Christopher's prints in the viewing room, it was the time to enter the workspace where the prints are made. The first room houses two massive 8x10 Durst horizontal enlargers which project images onto a 4x8' vacuum easel with movable panels. The

enlargers have massive keyboards with countless buttons which control parameters such as yellow, magenta, cyan, and neutral density, all adjustable in increments of 0.1CC, the finest adjustment of any enlarger, which allow him extremely precise color balance adjustments, one of the crucial steps to make exhibition quality Cibachrome prints.



As we stand by the enlarger, Christopher goes deep into the inner workings of the machine. We listen with amazement and each time we have a query, Christopher answers it beforehand as though he anticipates our ideas. The enlargers have a complete set of Apo-EL-Nikkor enlarging lenses ranging from 105mm to 480mm. The extremely rare 480mm lens, for 8x10" enlargement, weighs an astonishing 22 pounds. These lenses have the highest image clarity, resolution and nearly perfect aberration corrections and have their highest performance at an optimum aperture of $f/8$. The neutral density adjustment of the enlarger allows Christopher to add up to 2 f /stops of perfectly balanced neutral density so he can always use these lenses at their optimum aperture.

To maximize image quality, the vacuum easel is aligned with both the lens and the film carrier in the enlarger to within \pm one mm over the entire 4x8' surface. Focusing the projected image also has to be within \pm 1 mm to fully optimize the clarity and fine detail contrast of the Apo-EL-Nikkor lenses, which can exceed 200 lpm. The enlarger needs to be vibration free, which the Durst enlargers are, as Christopher made exposures with and without (the carefully balanced) cooling fans on. He replaced the enlarger bellows with black velvet lined interlaced boxes to eliminate all flare in the enlarger, flare being the nemesis of tonal separation, as well as using optically coated lens grade optically flat glass in the enlarger film carriers. Christopher explained that these are some of

the many factors which are optimized to obtain maximum image quality. Nothing is unimportant: the total effect is cumulative.





In front of the enlarger is the vacuum easel where the Cibachrome paper is attached. Christopher shows us the dozens of magnetic phosphorescent arrows which he uses to point to different areas of each print that he needs to work on. As he works on dodging and burning, he writes down all his changes, print after print. Even small details

are taken care of, for example, he built a black box with a light inside so he can see his notes, keeping in mind that all lights are turned off and he is printing on paper that is dark brown. He often needs to turn the lights off 7 to 10 minutes before he makes a print so his eyes can see the faint image that is projected on the dark brown paper.



Morning Sunlight, Forest and Fog, Kentucky

How does he do dodging and burning? Since he's doing positive-to-positive printing, dodging darkens specific areas and is done using carbon fibre wands with interchangeable oval shapes at their ends which control the amount of light falling on specific areas of the print. These wands need to be in motion all the time to blend and feather specific density changes as he carefully shapes the image into a cohesive whole. Burning is the opposite; areas of the print are lightened as they are exposed with more light through holes in black foamcore or sometimes specific detailed areas are exposed with precisely cut out cards registered right on the vacuum easel. Everything is timed to

perfection using a metronome. Some critical areas need to be dodged or burned to within fractions of a second. There are times when he uses different color balances when burning in areas to correct for uneven color balances in the image or for reciprocity color failure (longer exposures cause a color shift). His enlargers have 99 memory channels, so he programs different color balances and recalls them as needed as he goes through the process of making each print. Some images require 3 or 4 different color balances. All this work is done seamlessly to bring the image to life with no evidence of the work done. The goal is to produce a Cibachrome print full of life and light.

It is fascinating to see how Christopher explains this sophisticated dance in great detail. Given the complexity and choreography required for each print, the final consistency is quite amazing. In fact, his mastery over this process makes it almost impossible to distinguish between one print or another made during the same printing session since they are so consistent. Christopher compares it to a symphony which requires all members to be excellent and perform at their best during consecutive performances. He said “When a concert violinist plays a complex piece, they’ve mastered their instrument to such an extent so they can fully express the drama, nuances, and exuberant life in the music. To bring a photographic

image to life we need to have that same level of mastery over our printing techniques and materials so we can achieve the same consistent results at the very highest level.”



Green Veratrum, Alaska

Then we move to a second room full of processing machinery, where the prints are developed in 100 liter tanks using custom modified Cibachrome developer, custom modified Cibachrome bleach, rapid fixer, four individually tempered



wash-tanks and a powerful dryer section. Each print takes close to 30 minutes to go through the process. You can see a combination of nine pumps with multiple connections, which recirculate solutions and individually tempered water throughout the machine. Christopher describes each element in the massive machine. The temperature of each tank is within 0.1°F and the total processing time is accurate to the second. His attention to detail is impressive, from the infra-red electric eyes which measure the amount of material being processed and calculates the needed amount of replenishment chemistry, to the turbocharged dryer section and custom designed transparent top where you can examine prints as they pass through the dryer. Even with this precise processor, Christopher only processes one Cibachrome print at a time to ensure absolutely consistent results and carefully examines each print in a mat in his print viewing room before making another. Color and density adjustments in 0.1 or 0.2 cc increments are gradually necessary as a printing day progresses.



Oxbow Aspen, Colorado

We walk to a third room where contrast masks and other types of specialty masks are created. Christopher points to HEPA filters and other solutions which ensure minimal or no dust. For another hour, he goes through all the tools and techniques he uses to create and register all sorts of masks. As we discuss masking, Christopher reaches for a binder full of charts and measurements for different types of film including many different developer types, concentrations and development times. All the graphs are made by him from his own film tests, and continuously updated over more than 40 years. Then we move to another counter on which we find two stereo Leica microscopes which he uses to examine and

work on different types of unsharp contrast masks as well as sharp color isolation and detail masks, which preserve shape and shading in reds, magentas, blues and occasionally yellows. Christopher shows us several transparencies and discusses the work that goes into printing them. It is fascinating to examine them through the microscope. It is a most revealing experience, especially comparing transparencies to the final prints. It makes us appreciate all the work that goes into making each print.







Iridescent Charred Tree, California

Finally, we go back to the viewing room to see more prints and discuss the stories behind them. We spend the rest of the day at Ruth and Christopher's beautiful home, sharing a meal and stories.

As our visit comes to an end, we gather our thoughts and go through all we have witnessed in the last two days. The level of craftsmanship on display is almost non-existent in today's world. It's like the experience of Japanese sword makers who mastered their craft over generations.

As I write these words and look at one of Christopher's prints, I know each print is timeless and cannot be replicated by anyone else. In fact, given that Cibachrome paper is no longer produced, and given his mastery, it is unlikely that the craft at this level will be passed on to future generations. That makes each print crafted by Christopher Burkett even more valuable.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Christopher and his wife Ruth who hosted my wife, Kasia and me, and shared their knowledge so generously.

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