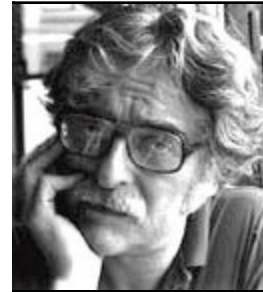


Archival Prints: 'Inkjet' No Longer a Dirty Word

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by *Bill Pierce*



I'm told that Paul Strand printed on platinum for as long as possible, holding out against silver and even having the folks who were producing his paper double-coat it so it was more platinum than most platinum.

Meanwhile, not too far away in the space-time continuum, Edward Weston was printing on Azo, a Kodak silver contact paper that was a workhorse commercial paper. Weston didn't even use furry Gaevelux, a paper that incorporated real peach fuzz and was used by "real" artists. (Well, he did use an amidol paper developer that was as far from D-72 as you could get. It stained your fingernails ebony black. While this wasn't going to make him look like a member of "Kiss," it was a touch of the rebel artist in a man thought well of by the ladies.)

We're going through the same thing now, except that Weston's silver prints (and his few color dye transfers) are being challenged by inkjet prints.

Photojournalists aren't that aware of the mini-conflict involving prints. They've been digital for a long while and do most of their editing and image preparation looking at pictures on a computer screen. They don't deal with images printed on paper. (It's a little like the magazine photographers who were among the first to shoot color journalism. They shot transparency film, edited with a loupe on a light table and presented their selects with a projector.)

Printing doesn't come into the picture until it's time to exhibit the pictures, long after the news deadline has passed. And, yet, it is in the exhibits and filing cabinets of museums and galleries that much of the reputation and the messages of the finest photojournalists — Smith, Cartier-Bresson, Brady, Arbus, McCullin, and hundreds of others — rests. They don't rest in the negatives. They don't rest in the digital files. They rest in "archival" prints that a photographer thinks are good enough to sign.

That term "archival" is a bit rubbery. It doesn't talk about storage or exhibition conditions. And it hints at a life not unlike that of well-preserved Egyptian artifacts. I prefer Henry Wilhelm's more explicit recommendations. His Web site can be found at <http://www.wilhelm-research.com/>. If your primary interest is in traditional silver and color prints, try to find a copy of his and Carol Brower's book, "The

Permanence and Care of Color Photographs." [ISBN 0-911515-00-3] or download the text from his Web site.

In any respect, all other things being equal, color prints don't last as long as black-and-white ones. This is true whether they are "C" prints or inkjets. Pigment inkjet prints do well. In 2004, Wilhelm, testing the Epson Stylus 1800, came up with a life of greater than 250 years for prints on Epson Watercolor Paper exhibited behind anti-UV glass. And Wilhelm is a pessimist compared to some of his predecessors.

The very best figures for earlier "chemical" papers goes to one of the Fujicolors with 105 years under similar conditions. Most of the other quality materials come in at under 60 years.

The current black-and-white pigment inks from Epson, Canon and Hewlett-Packard have not been fully tested by Wilhelm. Who can say anything outside of the fact that they should last a lot longer than color — especially now that we have acid-free, heavyweight papers for both glossy and matte inkjet prints? I have heard informed guesses of as much as 700 years, but at those times you are talking as much about how you store something as what you are storing.

Compared to black-and-white silver printing, chemical color printing was complicated. But lots of photographers did it in their own darkrooms. And if they didn't, there were lots of small labs that worked closely with the photographer.

Graham Nash and Mac Holbert were the first to see that Iris printers, essentially big, expensive inkjet machines used to make proofs before a press run, could be excellent printers for "fine-art" color photography.

But, even in an improved form, the Iris prints only got a 25-year rating from Henry Wilhelm.

And, because of the expense, complexity and size of these machines, unlike chemical processes, they didn't turn up in a lot of small darkrooms and immediately become accepted by a new generation of photographers.

In truth, a big, expensive machine used, essentially, to make proofs before a press run, turning out art, made a lot of folks uncomfortable. Jack Duganne coined the term "giclee" to distinguish a digital fine-art print from its commercial cousins. Truth is, it became a snob word for those who choked on the word "inkjet."

But time passed. (1) Pigment inks replaced dye; the images lasted longer and maintained their characteristics on a far greater variety of papers. (2) Top-flight print houses like Nash Editions ended up using the same printers as the rest of us. (They're better than us because of the experience and skill, not the cost of their printers.) (3) And, hopefully, no one chokes on the word "inkjet."

Fahey-Klein, one of the best photo galleries in Los Angeles, started exhibiting serious photography when most photo galleries in the area were still showing pictures of movie stars. They have done three shows that I have seen that featured inkjet prints. An exhibition of new work by Jim Nachtwey was printed by Jim. I don't mean that Jim stood around at a lab trading thoughts with a printer. He set up an Epson printer in his space in New York and he and his assistant printed the show.

Eric Meola currently has a show in England of his Bruce Springsteen pictures. He printed the show himself on an Epson 7800 because, after making some tests, he felt the inkjet was producing the best results.

Eric's old boss, Pete Turner, currently has a show at Eastman House. He used Epson printers and, as he says, "I don't have to outsource my printing anymore."

The biggest, most expensive inkjet printer I know of is the Epson Stylus Pro 9800. It costs less than my 4x5 Durst enlarger and a handful of lenses. And you don't need a darkroom to set up the Epson.

I understand collectors' fears that an inkjet printer attached to a computer can turn out hundreds of soulless, identical prints at the touch of a button. That's certainly one of the fears that surfaced when silver replaced platinum. And, indeed, if you ever saw one of the automated print houses that turned out actors' headshots, it seems a bad dream that could come true. What protects the collector is laziness. You make an inkjet print and in spite of all your screen matching, it looks a little light. You make a darker one. It's good, but now the shadows on the face are too dark. After awhile you've got six prints, each slightly different, and are bored to tears. You go to bed and hope you never have to print that picture again. Same as silver; laziness, that's what protects the collector. Short of that, print a small edition and promise to be a good person.

[P.S.: Eric Meola's pigment inkjet prints that are being exhibited at Snap, the fine-art gallery in Birmingham, England, that specializes in music, are essentially the same images as the ones in his book, "Born to Run: The Unseen Photos." For those of you who can't afford a plane ticket to Birmingham, the book hits shelves on October 10, close to the time that *The Digital Journalist's* regular viewers will be visiting this issue on the Web.]

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