

ON LEARNING PLATINUM PALLADIUM (PT/PD) PRINTING

My only formal training in Pt/Pd printing came from looking over the shoulders of my students as a guest instructor taught them the process one weekend over ten years ago. I made a few prints as well, but from then on, I have been self taught. At the beginning I relied on Bostick & Sullivan's catalog, complete with a recipe for avocado soup, and reprints of their old literature. Historic writings helped as well, as did the then-Bible of alternative processes, Keepers of Light. I often found sound advice in conversations with other printers, rare and hard-to-find as they then were. Today, the Internet provides plenty of resources.

What became clear within the first few months of my research was not only that each new source contained different information, but that they often contained contrary information. One could argue that for every photographer there is a new process, but Pt/Pd printers were not only different in their opinions, but often dogmatic in them as well. One person might say that the only clearing agent worth considering is hydrochloric acid while another would say that hydrochloric acid should be avoided at all costs. One printer once told me that, only because I was a friend of so-and-so, who was also a friend of his, would he tell me his secret about the best brush to use for coating sensitizer. Why all the dogma, why all the mystery? Perhaps photographers feel that part of the preciousness of the prints lies in keeping the process enigmatic. Perhaps they somehow feel that mystery adds value. Or maybe simply the relative lack of information on the process invites dogma and bullheadedness. Or maybe its simply that there are more Pt/Pd printers than there are Pt/Pd teachers.

In any case, the situation can be terribly frustrating for the beginning student and begs the question: How best do I learn the process? In the broadest terms, the answer is simple: take a workshop, read the literature, talk to other printers and practice, practice, practice. But the situation is not so easy: workshops aren't nearly as plentiful as they are in other areas of photography, the literature is often filled with contradictory information, and some printers' answers are brusque and/or incomplete. Which isn't to say it can't be done -- there are good workshops, worthwhile publications and tremendously helpful photographers -- but one must approach them all with a particular method and mindfulness to learn well and learn fully.

Workshops are and should be intensive. After a weekend learning Pt/Pd one should leave with as many questions as answers, but, still, a fundamental understanding of the process and, most importantly, a methodical way of working which will enable the student to go home and pursue the process as a self-learner. This ability to teach oneself comes from both the student and teacher. As a student, you must ask many questions, but do so by providing a context in which the answers truly serve you. Its not enough to ask the instructor, "What developer do you use?" but you must ask "What other developers are available and why don't you use them?" And an instructor's likes and dislikes aren't necessarily enough. If she answers that she prefers the tones of one developer, ask what tones are available from others and ask if she has examples to show. Ask questions which not only give you specific answers, but answers which contribute to a broader understanding of the process.

While a student need not be a chemist or physicist to understand the process, some understanding of the chemical and physical properties of the materials and processes helps considerably. I've heard some instructors say to students that one can't enlarge onto Pt/Pd prints simply because it won't work. But what is learned by that answer? Nothing. Much is learned, however, if one hears about the nature of the exposure of light sensitive materials, about how the quantity and quality of light are important to consider, about how the light-sensitive materials of the process respond to particular wavelengths, etc. The answer need not be long and technical, but should be informative and complete. To a great degree it is the teacher's responsibility to provide a full answer, but it is also helpful if the student asks questions in a way that an answer fits into a larger picture of the process and its many variables.

As a student, you should also be prepared for the dogma and ready to question it, whether it appears in person or in print. What I explain to my students is that the process they will learn that in my workshop is the process as I now practice it, a process which might have been different six months ago and might be different again six months from now. But I also try to explain why I made the changes I did and how they relate to the overall process of printing so that they can go home not only able to print with a handful of techniques, but also able to understand how and why those techniques might be changed and with what result. If the instructor doesn't provide the context, pry it from him and don't be satisfied with simple answers and simple solutions. Hope for the same from other printers, but don't expect it; some printers are educators, others aren't.

And as for practice? Of course, it is essential, but practice can be as confusing as it is illuminating if done haphazardly. Keep copious notes: each print I make has on it data concerning the sensitizer, developer, light

source and more. Keep things simple at first. Choose one paper, developer, clearing agent, brush and coating method and exposure system and stick with it until you are comfortable with the process. Once you feel comfortable enough to explore the variables, do so in a methodical manner. For example, choose one negative and make a print on several different papers, then introduce several different developers, and so on. By working slowly and carefully, you will develop on your own a wealth of information; by working haphazardly you will only have chaos and a pile of prints.

Pt/Pd printing is notorious for the many variables which affect the process. Perhaps obvious are the ones which similarly affect silver printing: the type of paper, the developer, the temperature of the chemicals. Less obvious, and more difficult to control, are others such as the humidity of the room one prints in, the method of coating the paper, the level of quality control in the manufacture of the paper. These additional variables, whether familiar or not, can often be frustrating for the beginning student because images may vary considerably due to effects seemingly outside one's control. First, one *can* control these variables to a significant degree; it just takes some ingenuity, practice, and precise work habits. Second, hard as one may try, some variables appear which affect the printing process and the only thing to do is to change one's attitude towards the process. One must learn to tolerate and even appreciate these differences and not expect or only be satisfied with complete control. A little bit of surrender to the process goes a long way in mastering it.

I am committed to Pt/Pd printing: I practice it, I teach it. But I also know, from experience as a student and a teacher, that learning it can be confusing and frustrating, but tremendously satisfying as well. One can learn from others or teach one's self. While Pt/Pd printing is not nearly as mystifying or difficult as myths may suggest, it still requires of the beginning student a particular method and style of learning -- you must take an active role in the learning and persistently press any source for answers which help you understand the specifics and generalities of the process. Don't be intimidated by contradictory information or incomplete answers and don't be dissuaded by the many "failures" you'll inevitably experience. Many photographers agree that one of the most useful tools in a darkroom is a very large wastebasket. Learning how to print with Pt/Pd can be relatively easy as long as your methods and temperament are prepared for a process made unnecessarily difficult to learn through misinformation and mystique.

Resources for the beginning printer

Keepers of Light, William Crawford, Morgan and Morgan

Pt/Pd Printing, Dick Arentz, available from author, 1640 N. Spyglass Way, Flagstaff, AZ, 86004

The New Platinum Print by Richard Sullivan and Carl Weese, available through Bostick & Sullivan

Bostick & Sullivan, suppliers of materials for handcoating, useful catalog and other publications, P.O. Box 16639, Santa Fe, NM, 87506, 505-474-0890

The "alt-photo" list is an electronic mailing list with nearly 500 members working with non-silver processes. Each day, one will receive, on average, between 10-50 email messages; many are related to Pt/Pd. To subscribe, send an email message to alt-photo-process-request@sask.usask.ca with the following text in the body of the message: subscribe alt-photo-process-1 (the last character is the letter "l", not a number). Within a day you will automatically be subscribed to the list and will receive a confirmation and faq via email.

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