

## WHY PLATINUM/PALLADIUM (Pt/Pd) PRINTING?

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Ten years ago I organized a summer intensive in photography for high school students and brought in several guest instructors, including one who taught Pt/Pd printing. I had seen a few Pt/Pd prints before, but had never seen the printing process. By the end of that weekend, I was hooked. It was not only the beauty of the images which seduced me, but the beauty of the process as well.

The qualities of a Pt/Pd print have long been heralded by photographers, curators, critics and collectors; it has a long, rich and delicate tonal scale and unmatched archival quality. What might be a monochromatic black on a silver print, for example, will be rendered as a series of subtly differentiated tones in a Pt/Pd print. Similarly, middle and highlight tones are more delicately defined. Since the prints are hand-coated onto rag paper, the image actually sits in the fiber of the paper so the texture and weave of the paper become integral to the image compared to silver prints where the emulsion layer sits on top of, rather than in, the paper surface. Pt/Pd prints therefore, have a tactile quality unique to handcoated non-silver materials. The long scale and tactility of a Pt/Pd print are what cause many people to describe them as "precious" or "jewel-like."

Their archival quality is often noted as well. Platinum and palladium were titled "noble metals" by the alchemists because they were impervious to all solvents save *aqua regia*, the King's Water, a potent mix of hydrochloric and nitric acids. This makes the metals among the most archival available, far more resistant to light, oxidation, and chemical contamination than silver; well made prints from the mid-1800's show no fading or staining. A well processed Pt/Pd print lasts as long as the substrate it is printed on; the paper will fall apart before the metals show any change.

The tones, look and archival properties of Pt/Pd impress me, though to different degrees and for different reasons. The tones and the feel of the print are qualities which appeal to my senses and aesthetic; they engage me visually and emotionally and allow me to render subjects in a way I prefer to other photographic media. These unique qualities served the images accompanying this article in many ways. These photographs were taken from a series on Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, a "natural" oasis in the middle of the city marveled at by millions of visitors every year. Many are unaware that this is one of the largest manmade parks in the world, designed and built in 1870's and situated on what was once over a thousand acres of sand. The park is as cultural as it is natural, the result of man's careful, but usually hidden interventions. I wanted to highlight moments of these interventions; in some images, man's hand is obvious, in others concealed. Most of the images are printed fairly soft and warm, a quality many associate with Pt/Pd and also with 19th century romantic American landscape photography and its associated ideas of a transcendent and divine landscape. I was particularly interested in how those associations would add irony and contrast to images which revealed the cultural influence on the natural world. This is particularly the case with "Large Tree in Palms, Lower DeLaveaga Dell."

Pt/Pd need not always be soft, however. It is also capable of significant contrast and deep, rich blacks, qualities which I also exploited in this series. For example, the combination of the tone and tactility of a Pt/Pd print enable me to print low values very differently and more favorably than how I print them in silver. I rarely print a large area to Dmax on a silver print; it would quickly become a "blackhole" that would suck the viewers' attention into a small area of the image and away from other more important parts. Black on a Pt/Pd print, however, looks very different than it does on a silver print; even if printed to where there is no texture in tonal terms, the physical texture of the paper always remains and breathes life into it, thereby avoiding this "blackhole" phenomenon. In the image "Water Fountain in Rose Garden", much of the background is printed at or near maximum density, but the texture of the paper keeps it from suffering in ways a silver print would. In a series of photographs of a burned out house, this technique was exploited often as in the photograph "Bathroom Sink." These near-black renderings successfully portrayed the charred surfaces and conveyed their dark depths.

The archival properties of Pt/Pd are intriguing to me, though less as fact than intellectual amusement. While collectors and curators might rattle on and on about the long-lasting Pt/Pd print, the temporal nature of photography doesn't particularly bother me. While the marketplace might favor a photograph lasting for centuries or more, I'd prefer to be motivated by internal rather than external forces, especially those as fickle as consumers' taste or a dealer's fashion. Choosing Pt/Pd means choosing not only an object of a particular kind, but a process of a particular kind.

Much of the process of making a Pt/Pd print which I enjoy lies in the difference it offers to a typical darkroom experience. A Pt/Pd print takes enormous amounts of UV light to produce an image; the sun usually qualifies, save for the inevitable San Francisco foggy days, but I and other printers usually prefer the consistency of powerful UV printers. Since room light usually has little ambient UV light, one can print out of the darkroom and I enjoy that. I also like working with chemicals that don't smell, though they do require safe handling, and I especially enjoy not having to work with fixer. These are conveniences, but ones I appreciate. More importantly, I like the pace of the process and even its inconsistencies. Pt/Pd printing is time- and labor-intensive; one must first mix the sensitizer, then coat the paper, dry the paper, print it with exposures counted in minutes rather than seconds and then process the print through a series of chemicals; this process can sometimes be as "quick" as 30 minutes, but might last longer than an hour. While many might be driven batty by the process, I find it a fine antidote to the times and pressures of a typical workday. I like the slowing down that Pt/Pd printing requires and appreciate the attention to detail which is critical to the process.

It is also a process affected by many variables: the humidity of the room one prints in, the temperature of the sensitizer and chemicals, the way one coats the paper, the side of the bed one woke up on. I see these as welcome challenges, not impediments, as variables to use in making a print, rather than as obstacles to overcome. If one isn't naturally patient, if one isn't inclined to being methodical, then he must become both to work with Pt/Pd. I'm not naturally patient, though becoming so, at least at moments, serves me well; perhaps now I'm talking about character development, rather than technique, but perhaps the former is as important as the latter in being a photographer.

Pt/Pd prints are undeniably beautiful, though this doesn't make them the only choice for all photographs or for all photographers. Printing with Pt/Pd requires unusual amounts of patience and perseverance. I've made the choice to print with Pt/Pd because I choose to see the world as it renders it and to work as it requires. Its not everyone's choice, nor should it be, but its mine and I've found the results very gratifying.

#### My current technique

I use a mixture of Platinum and Palladium (usually 2:3) for my sensitizer, using Arches Platine or Aquarelle paper. My printer is equipped with 24", 40 watt Super Actinic fluorescent lights (slightly more violet/visible light than the commonly recommended "blacklights," but faster, too). All my prints are processed in Jobo drums, using Potassium Oxalate developer for 5 minutes with Sodium Dichromate as a developer-additive for my sole contrast control agent. This is followed by a 2-minute water rinse, three clearing baths of 5 minutes each using Kodak Hypo Clear and 30 minutes in an archival washer. Chemicals and the water rinse are at 85° and the final wash at 75°. Prints are dried face up on fiberglass screens. Dry prints which pass muster are soaked for a minute in Liquitex Acrylic Gloss medium, mixed 1:6 or 1:8 with water, which adds the slightest amount of gloss, increases Dmax and low value separation, and slightly cools print color.

#### Author

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