

## **Photography and the Tyranny of Progress**

I suppose a natural part of aging is becoming a curmudgeon. But sometimes progress does deserve a boot in the rear. Particularly when progress is so insistent that it seems impossible to reject, even when the outcome is unwelcome.

To take a case in point, I do not regret adding color to my black-and-white photography in the 1980's, or moving toward digital cameras at the turn of the millennium. I do regret not yet recanting these new-fangled things and returning to what made me happier.

I migrated to a color darkroom and then to a digital workflow because I could. In 1968 home darkrooms were almost definitionally for developing black and white film and printing black and white pictures. The Yale Art & Architecture School darkroom had eight or ten high end Leica enlargers, and a line of gallon-size baths – developer, stop bath, fixer, hypo clear and a final wash – kept fresh by bursary students. But nothing for color. Color was seen as the province of commercial labs, too demanding in terms of chemistry and temperature control for even a fairly sophisticated and well-equipped darkroom like the A&A school operated.

But Kodak, Cibachrome and others found ways to simplify the color process for use in home darkrooms. So sometime in the late 70's or early 80's, I filled a large styrofoam chest with water, and used a fish tank heater and thermometer to control the temperature of my chemicals with passable precision. I loaded my color paper into a small plastic cylinder in total darkness, poured in the developer through a light-baffled opening, and set the contraption on a base which rotated it. Several chemicals later, I opened the cylinder and out came a color print ready for final washing.

This seemed such a marvel that I never much thought whether it was worth all the effort, much less whether I still enjoyed the process, as opposed to getting some pleasure from showing the novelty of a color print to my tepidly interested family and friends.

The next new thing, of course, was digital photography. When Photoshop came along, and the first digital cameras began to appear, I thought this might develop into a workable approach in five or ten years. Initially I bought a scanner to process film negatives into digital files. Photoshop allowed me to tinker with the image that appeared on my computer monitor. Books on “color management” allowed me to make the picture that came out of my color printer match – well, almost match -- the monitor image.

The technology raced forward. Within ten years or so, the unthinkable happened. Film and film cameras disappeared. My wife's Kodak stock (she's from Rochester) became

Confederate war bonds. My darkroom became a storeroom. My computer setup grew on steroids. Huge arrays of hard drives. Printers that could barely be maneuvered up the stairs to my attic home office. I could manipulate images until they bore no more resemblance to reality than a Russian photograph of the (surviving) officials on the reviewing stand for a May Day parade.

Digital photographs could never match the resolution of a contact print from a large format negative, or the dynamic range of a water bath developed negative done with the best chemicals. But in most other ways digital prints were technically as good as what had gone before. Certainly they could be churned out faster. My wedding photographer friends could auto process a few key shots of the bride, sync the settings for the next several hundred, adjust a few of those that had special issues, and post the whole collection online almost before the reception was over. Amateurs like me could go to far flung wonders of the world, fire off a few thousand shots, process a few hundred of the best in the same way as the wedding photographer, and print the pick of the litter before friends even know we were home.

A Brave New World? Well, Huxley's original seemed pretty neat on first acquaintance, too. Even if the final product was as good or better in most cases and the process was orders of magnitude faster, something had disappeared for me. The deep satisfaction of working in my original black and white darkroom.

My venture into color printing had never been much fun. The process was exacting, and the image could only be manipulated in limited ways, because most of the development required a fixed suite of chemicals processed inside a cylinder being rotated to evenly bathe the paper with only a few ounces of this solution or that. Surely it was a triumph to be able to enter a world previously reserved for commercial laboratories, but at what cost?

Digital photography did away with the darkroom altogether. My photo processing became just another way to spend too much time in front of my computer monitor. What's wrong with that? A darkroom was a lot of trouble, right?

Wrong. I loved my darkroom. First and foremost, it was dark, except for the orangish glow of a safelight. That made it a refuge, spiritually and physically. People knew that a darkroom door couldn't be opened, short of a true emergency. My daughter made a sign for my darkroom door, "Do Not Open. You'll Let the Dark Out."

A darkroom also had to be set up for black and white printing. Trays had to be lined up and filled with chemical baths. A washing tray with flowing water was needed. Supplies had to

be positioned so that they could be handled in the quasi-darkness – the negatives to be printed in protective sleeves, several types of paper in light-proof boxes to vary the surface texture and contrast of prints, devices for burning and dodging when areas of a negative needed to be darkened or lightened, and so forth. That all meant that an evening or an afternoon had to be set aside for a printing session.

Developing black-and-white paper after exposing it under the enlarger provided a thrill that never wore out. The image miraculously began to appear on the exposed paper 20 or 30 seconds after it was slid into the developing tray. Manipulations of the image were tactile and physical. Burning and dodging during the exposure to increase or decrease the amount of light reaching the paper. Rubbing a print in the developing tray to add a bit of local contrast here or there. Extending or shortening the time in the developer tray to darken or lighten the overall print somewhat. Moving the paper through the succeeding trays at appropriate intervals to produce a stable print without stains from overprocessing. Swirling prints in the final wash to make sure prints were washed separately rather than sticking together. Drying prints between sheets of blotting paper or with a heated metal drum. When I was done, I felt I had done something that required care and focus and a measure of skill. The print was my picture.

That all disappeared when I acceded to digital photography and printing, although it took me a while to realize the loss. The only physical step was walking over to a printer. The rest was done on a keyboard like a spreadsheet or presentation outline, with a little sketching on a tablet for local adjustments. I could do my processing in chunks as large or small as I liked, often just as a short break from other work. The final print was usually as good or better than my darkroom product in almost all ways. But it was a busman's holiday from other work on my computer.

Can or should I go back to a black and white wet darkroom? Most of my film cameras seem to still work (at least the shutters fire). The mechanism for focusing my enlarger wore out and I foolishly trashed the whole thing. But most of my other equipment and tools are still on shelves and in drawers in my darkroom. My safelights are even still hanging from the ceiling. And I'm sure I can pick up a used enlarger on Craig's List.

There's even been something of a resurgence of interest in film photography. A few film cameras have appeared on the market, and there's a decent-but-not-great collection of films available, many pretending to be older films. Serious photo stores have started to offer film processing again and a few offer developing chemicals.

But stores report that most customers just want their film developed and scanned as digital files. Most people don't want prints, let alone their negatives. So it seems mostly a novelty, not a real return to film photography.

There's a reason for this, of course. Real film photography and darkroom printing is just way too slow compared with digital photography, it has a significant learning curve, and the final product is no better in many cases a digital file. Especially since few people want prints, rather than something that can be posted to social media or perhaps displayed on a television screen. (Even in the camera club where I lurk at the fringes, only a tiny percentage of the members do any printing at all; photographs are displayed only through a projector onto a screen, for the most part.)

Maybe I'll re-create my darkroom and see whether I can do black-and-white prints more satisfying than my printers churn out. For straightforward, well-exposed images where fine detail isn't central, the results will be similar. For photos where processing nuance is important, the results will be mixed and more debatable. But unfortunately I don't see film photography becoming dominant in my work. Too bad.