

Essay by
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Photogravure's end?

» « “An artist's relation to the process can often be more important than the content of the image.” CHUCK CLOSE

It took a microscope for us to work out what was going wrong with our photogravure plates. Seduced by the process—the Talbot-Kllic dust-grain photogravure process to be exact—we were aiming high, Steiglitz-high, in pursuit of the rich, velvety continuous-tone images photogravure grants those prepared to endure its rigours. Cleveland in the summer of 2002 was all Midwestern humidity. Across the Institute of Art parking lot, a new Gehry building was going up slowly; its aching beautiful steel curves reflected alternately the heavy grey skies, the blinding sun. Day after day, we etched into our own metal plates, only to find in each hopeful proof the highlight areas blown out. Eventually, Holly thought to borrow a microscope under which we saw how the aquatint wasn't fusing to the thickest areas of gelatin, that the gelatin was rehydrating in the humid air, and the aquatint was sloughing away completely in the ferric chloride baths.

Talk like this—technical, obscure, persnickety—is the shop talk of the artist. Photogravurist Lothar Osterburg describes printmaking as a living museum of historic processes. To many, photogravure is the Rolls Royce of photographic printing, the crown jewel in this living museum. Historically important in securing photography's place as an art in its own right beyond its simple

reproductive capabilities, photogravure continues to attract the attention of both practitioners and collectors who recognise the rare aura of a process that for some expresses the truthfulness of reality more keenly than any other photographic technique.

The photogravures Holly Morrison and I made for our book *The Extinguishing of Stars* spoiled me for other photo printing techniques. I planned here to write a love letter to the process. Instead, I discovered in August 2009 that the gelatin tissue mentioned above (the surface upon which the positive image is exposed, allowing a negative to be adhered to the copper plate) was discontinued by its last manufacturer, Autotype. Whilst not completely unexpected, the end was abrupt: existing customers were allocated portions of the remaining supply, and efforts to acquire production formulae and records have fallen on deaf ears.

Artists have always made do and improvised. As commercial equipment becomes obsolete, it often shifts into the hands of artists who, whilst innovative, are still often at the mercy of commercial manufacturers for the consumables used in their chosen crafts. The recent year alone has seen the discontinuation of both Kodachrome and Polaroid films. In 2006, British artist Tacita Dean travelled to France to film the last production

run of the Kodak 16mm film she has used to make her work since the early 1990s. When asked what would be lost if a suitable alternative to Autotype's gravure tissue is not found, NY-based master printer Craig Zammello answered “Photogravure. Period.”

This dire prospect, which led many printers to stockpile material and re-consider future plans, has been somewhat diverted by the swift actions of Richard Sullivan of Bostick & Sullivan, suppliers of chemicals and papers used in the alternative photography world. Sullivan's interest in alternative photography techniques was sparked by the chance purchase of the G,H,I volume of a photographic encyclopaedia in Los Angeles in the late 1970's. His successful attempt at gum printing led to a career both as a practitioner and as a supplier of the rare chemical compounds and papers used in processes including platinum printing, kallitype and carbon printing. Sullivan, who was once personally invited to take up a position at an early Microsoft by Bill Gates, now finds himself trying to nut out the formulae used by Autotype and the gravure tissue manufacturers that preceded them and on what kind of substrate on which to coat the gelatin and how best to stop it curling and cracking. Messages posted to his online forum keep practitioners informed of his progress and he solicits their

advice and feedback. So far, in the months since Autotype announced the discontinuation of its tissue, Sullivan has produced three batches of feasible tissue and sent them for testing with many of the world's pre-eminent photogravurists, including Zammello, Osterburg, Jon Goodman and Erika Greenberg Schneider. Results so far have been hopeful. For Sullivan, it's clear that a successful tissue isn't just a chance to add another product to his inventory, though he's businessman enough to keep questions of viability in sight. Some practitioners are also conducting small-scale tests of

their own, coating their own papers, wondering if it's possible or even desirable to add this complex step to an already bewilderingly complicated working process. For some, the thought is unthinkable, for others, part of the challenge of working in a medium moving further and further away from contemporary practice. Jon Goodman provides a timely reminder that photogravure existed before the availability of commercially-produced gelatin tissue. As an artist who mills his own inks, Goodman understands more than most the freedom in controlling all aspects of creative production.

Photogravure occupies that unique space in which commercial technologies and the capabilities of the human hand produce images so rich, so magical, that if lost, it will be the loss of a way of seeing. The future of photogravure is in this final artisanal step away from industry, and in public recognition of the value of images made this way: the bite of ferric chloride, the wipe of finely-milled ink, the pressure of a plate pushed into soft paper, the revealing of images clear and deep. We are nearing the end of the analogue era—if we want to preserve the best of it, we have to act now and remember again what we once forgot. **U**



- 1 The gelatin tissue is adhered to the copper plate and processed in warm, agitated water.
- 2 The plate is hand-wiped, pushing ink into the etched surface.
- 3 The bevelled edge of the plate is carefully cleaned with a solvent-dipped Q-Tip to prevent ink blotches marring the print.

RESOURCES

www.photogravure.com

jgoodgravure.com

home.earthlink.net/~lotharosterburg

www.idlewildpress.com