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Thursday, 09 September 2010

How To Make A Chapbook (Part I)

By Chris

I made my first chapbook this summer. "First Snow, Minneapolis -2009," as a gift for my True Pass (more on how that's going to follow). I'm not a poet, but I've been writing a lot lately and I'm a big fan of artists who write themselves. Chapbooks have a long history as a way for artists to express themselves. Chapbooks are usually small, self-contained books of work by the artist. It's a modest short story. For me it's a

The front and back covers of my first chapbook, "First Snow, Minneapolis -2009." 16.5 S x 5.5" pages containing 15.4 S x 4" photographs. Definitely not available through fine bookstores everywhere.

way to publish small bodies of work. Traditionally, chapbooks were produced by poets for publishing a group of poems and by writers for individual short stories. For me it's a way to express a personal selection of photographs.

Think of chapbooks as a way to express "along," as in a good deal or a bargain. That fits chapbooks to a T. Producing a full-blown book of work will typically consume hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars. A chapbook can be created with a few dozen hours work and a few hundred dollars. Or a lot more if you're a perfectionist.

Chapbooks are both sides of paper recently limits one's paper choices. Daylight Stencil Lustre Duo is a lovely paper that folds like heavyweight coated stock. It prints nearly as well as the true photographic inkjet papers: unfortunately it costs about $ 65 a sheet, making for a very expensive book. And Epson's Premium Presentation Matt Double-Sided paper costs one-third as much; it feels like high-quality heavyweight uncoated stock and, unfortunately, prints much the same way. Blacks are unconvincing and there's no subtlety whatsoever to the shadows. Shadows, Otherwise, it's capable of better reproduction than you would normally see in a press-printed book.

I decided I to learn to work within those limits, halving the cost of the book.

Narrative flow

Having decided on form and the substance, one can look to subject matter. This is not your Magnum Opus. Just find a group of images that cohere in some way and don't overthink it. My original notion, an excerpt from the Christmas in California or Final Frontier monographs, was clearly not going to work. Too large a fraction of the photographs in both volumes depend upon rich shades. Fortunately, most photographs, or at least the ones I selected in last week's column on "Themes," it's easy for me to find groups of work within my photographs that share a concept or subject matter commonality, even if that's not what I set out to do when I made them.

I've discussed how one goes about choosing the particular photographs for a book in "Every Picture Tells a Story."

Develop your narrative flow, decide what the front and back matter will look like and whether there will be any text (an artist's statement is nice but not obligatory). We're ready to print.

It took me a couple of days to learn how to make pleasing prints with this paper. I had to stop thinking of them as photographs and to think of them as pages in a book. I wanted a print that was a little softer, a little less contrasty, a little more subtle. Fortunately, it wasn't a lot easier to get pleasing results, and printing went very quickly.

I countered the paper's weak reproduction with screwed tweaks. I substantially increased shadow contrast and saturation. I used soft-radius unsharp masking (see "How To Improve Digital Print Quality") at the 25-30% level routinely, to improve gradation and tonal separation in fine detail. I circumvented the lack of good shadow separation with a Curves adjustment that really kicked up the contrast in the deeper shadows. That forced enough shadow-tone separation into the printed versions that I could work with.

Of course, those finished files would have printed very badly on photo-quality paper: they would have looked harsh and garish. On the Epson Double-Sided paper, they looked quite nice.

Next week, I'll cover layout, printing and production. Until then, start planning your books. I'll post more about your chapbook prints by then!

Chris

Chris's weekly column on TOP appears every Thursday morning.

Featured Comment by Rabi: "That answered a few questions I had about the printing of the chapbook. The prints themselves have a presence and liveliness that I hadn't expected when first touching the paper used for the book. The pictures and silhouettes also felt contemplative and quiet but also uplifting--I really enjoy looking at it."

Posted on Thursday, 09 September 2010 at 12:48 AM in Books, Color, Permalink

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Comments

Chris, I'm really psyched about this project. I've been trying to come up with something to showcase a small number of photos that I can give to friends without making a major production of it(or spending more than I have). This seems perfect. Thanks.

Posted by: Steve Hilbert | Thursday, 09 September 2010 at 01:17 PM

My first thought is to use legal size paper instead, getting closer to a square page, and giving some room for a bigger margin. I'll probably have to print them.

Unfortunately I'm not finding any such paper.

Is there a paper that's photo-printable on one side and text-printable on the other, for my chosen? No, wait, that doesn't work with folded sheets (at least it doesn't work to produce the simple obvious consistent layout I was thinking of).

This is making it hard to be ready for next week's post: my photos and make worksprints until I know the format constraints!

Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Thursday, 09 September 2010 at 01:19 PM

Dear DDB,

Most of the matte papers out there will print fine on the back side for text. Epson Enhanced Matte, for example. And it's moderately priced.

That was going to be my original choice, especially since the monograph photo files are already "tuned" for that paper. Would've made producing the books a snap.

But I really like the overall brown-ness of the Epson Double-Sided paper, and even square 4.5 x 4.5 looks good and is large enough for intimate viewing.

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Illustrating--one way, with fewer photos, might be to do it like an Ace Double. Then your text and photos always have the same orientation. Keeping cover for the exhibit, which'd be solid text...

OK, still stymied.

Sticking with letter-size paper, you can have text and photos on the same page. That's a lot less work than all of the text on folded and tiny sheets that I'm using now. Or you can have a separate text booklet