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That question did seriously concern me a decade ago. I mean, I know I'm good; I'm really good. But in the brave new world of digital printing, there are an awful lot of good printers (people, that is) out there. My career was built on a highly bespoke product, and my prices were set accordingly. When everyone can own the same printer (machine, that is) I do, even if they don't know how to use it as well as I do, am I still going to stand out enough to keep in that kind of business.

I really didn't know the answer to that. If I had been forced by accident or circumstance to close my darkroom 10 years ago, I would've suffered some considerable anxiety over my new position in the photographic universe.

Since then I've found that I'm good enough at this that I still stand out amongst the pack, even having lost the advantage of a rare and valuable medium. I suppose I'm still one of the best color printers out there, but “one” might now mean in the top 100 or even 1000 instead of 10.

Whatever, it seems I can still make a living selling relatively expensive printing services and decently priced prints (and I've never been big on selling high-priced prints; it's just the cost and time consumption of dye transfer demanded it).

Consequently, I agree with you; the master darkroom printers will be increasingly valued because they will be increasingly rare. Mind you, they WILL have to be a master printer; the medium is not so big a crutch that they can afford to turn out lame results (pun intended). But it definitely gives a leg up.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 19 April 2012 at 12:28 AM

It's a curve. Once you get into digital photography, it feels so good, it's so fast, smooth and easy, you start hating shooting film. After a few years of dumping and giving away all your darkroom, you start missing the sense of crafting images instead of taking pictures, in the words of Sally Mann. You miss the photographic object all by itself, the beauty of holding a piece of paper done with your own hands. Pushing Command P doesn't substitute that in any way. I am right now suffering a new form of angst: having a catalog of half a million pictures in my LR database and a lots of hard drives, each with a duplicate, that has to be updated and upgraded and rechecked constantly, shooting 8x10 feels liberating. Just 2 plates and you move on. I realize how strong an effect it has on ones mind the idea of being limited by hard facts (a limites amount of film). It is so difficult for me to shoot final statements with a digital camera, because I always end up making sketches and leaving for later the editing stage. Shooting film, especially LF, forces you to further refine what you have to say the moment you are shooting, and ten thousand pictures later. I usually have more keepers shooting film and less archive problems.
I would keep both ways of making images. Horses for courses.

Posted by: Sergio Bartelsman | Thursday, 19 April 2012 at 07:49 AM

I believe that shutting down companies is something of a management specialty (some managers specialize in it); if it's going to be done it makes a huge difference how it is done. It requires the kind of difference in thinking that Ctein mentions; you're not trying optimize for the long run, but for a fairly clearly-delimited short run, and that's entirely different.

Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Thursday, 19 April 2012 at 03:45 PM

Strange timing. I have just gone in the opposite direction. After 10 years of doing nothing but digital printing from digital capture and scanned 120 negatives, I have just cleaned out my darkroom. Layers of dust that would have had Miss Haversham in intensive care have been removed. Enlargers, timers, safelights, densitometers are cleaned off and still work. I have just spent £500 on chemicals, paper and sundries and am looking forward to going back to where I started. Somehow digital prints from my Epson 3880 just don't do it for me anymore.

Mind you my darkroom is in a basement and couldn't be reconfigured to any useable space.

Posted by: Philip Flower | Thursday, 19 April 2012 at 05:58 PM

Dear Ctein -

Sorry, no offense intended.

I know other fine photographers who work from scanned negatives and claim to make better (and larger) prints than they ever did on the darkroom.

But, it just ain't the same. If I ever see an 8x10 inkjet print that has the qualities of an 8x10 contact print, I might change my mind.

My opinion remains humble.

Cheers

Posted by: Jon Leatherwood | Thursday, 19 April 2012 at 09:54 PM

Dear John L,

Darkroom enlargements from 35mm and medium format also don't have the qualities of a well-made large-format contact print.

So what?

Are you equally dismissive of film photographers and darkroom printers who never indulged in such? I mean, other than for clients I 'd be one of those, so that shoe would fit. As would something over 99% of the serious "analog" photographers/printers in the world.

It's OK to say that is why YOU like and do analog work. It's a different thing when you try to establish your particular preference as saying something universal about the field.

Observe that I did not disagree with Sergio, who shares some of your predilections, because he was talking about what works for him.

pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Friday, 20 April 2012 at 11:25 AM

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