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Friday, 08 March 2019

The Beauty of Physical Prints

...Or, why I chose the Ctein prints I chose for the current print sale.

[**UPDATE**: *Sale ended 2 p.m. EST Saturday, March 9th, 2019. Thanks to all who participated!*]

Printmaking—a word that encompasses making photographic prints, and the prints themselves—has always been an exceedingly important part of my enjoyment of photography. I'm both a part of the audience and a maker. I like objects. I like pictures of all sorts. But I especially enjoy well-made photographic prints.



Having done it professionally for a spell in the '80s and '90s, I'm aware of some of the problems and pitfalls. Without a doubt, one of the problems is representing light—or, I should say, representing light with reference more to the experience of seeing the real

light than with reference to the photographic conventions we've all come to take for granted (some of us with more sanguinity than others). Few things in my opinion are more difficult to get right than Christmas lights. I don't personally care for photographs of Christmas lights, but they're a subject that Ctein has pursued for years and clearly greatly enjoys, so I thought, why not? I thought his bereft fans hereabouts would approve of seeing samples from various themes in his work. I envisioned this as a print that people might frame but put away for 11 months of the year, and then bring out for holiday guests! But the amazing thing is how close he got to the visual impression you'd get seeing those lights. They seem to glow. And it's just not easy to print objects so they seem to be emitting light.

As far as the icefall print is concerned, I could gas on for a while about the quasi-abstract properties, the movement of the lines, the richness of detail that pulls your eye around and about inside the print, and the tension of field-flatness versus the sense of bas-relief that you get from the three-dimensional ice. But really, for me, the ice print is just about those astounding blues. It seems like there are only a few colors and yet at the same time dozens of colors, all them shifting and shimmering, playing off each other; the color seems bright and vivid yet at the same time subtle and gentle. I don't know quite how he does this. Anyway all those tensions (never mind the tension inherent in a vertical wall of ice in the first place) make the print both quiet—yet another contradiction?—but with a lot going on.



The star of the show in my humble opinion is the Canadian Northern lights photograph, taken on a cold night near Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. Primarily, it's a spectacular display; you can almost hear the eerie "music of the spheres"

as a ghostly soundtrack to the visuals. There are a couple more things I like about it. The leaning traffic sign—recognizable by its shape—and the receding line of telephone poles (you can hardly see them in the JPEG) give the scene on the ground a desolate, remote feel, intimating the inhospitable vibe of the cold nighttime landscape. Then in the middle of the picture there is just a hint of pink or reddish color, which gives the flagrant greens more depth and subtlety. Finally the stars. You can see what must be thousands of them (unlike the four thousand holes in Blackburn, Lancashire, I'm not going to count them all). How the printer (human) and the printer (machine) managed to image such tiny pinpoints of white I'm not even going to ask. The JPEG just can't begin to resolve all this. Again, this print is something of a printmaker's virtuoso trick—taking light of such fathomless complexity and translating it into the limited range, palette, and resolution of pigment ink on paper such that it really does convey not just the *visual* impression but the *emotional* impression of real light, real sky. It's remarkable.

It's what realistic, naturalistic, representational fine printmaking is all about in photography. Love it. Isn't it a shame that just as the best-ever (or best-ever-so-far) method of color printing really comes of age, with such gorgeous materials, the making of fine prints itself is starting to go out of fashion? Even *I* look at 99% of the photographs I see on screens—and *I love* prints.

Don't forget Ctein's return visit here is going to be brief—this sale lasts only three days. It ends tomorrow. [**UPDATE**: *Sale ended 2 p.m. EST Saturday, March 9th, 2019. Thanks to all who participated!*]

All I can tell you if that if you like the pictures you will like the prints. Very enjoyable to look at, and a pleasure to see.

Mike

(To see all the comments, click on the "Comments" link below.)

Featured Comments from:

David Dyer-Bennet: "I've seen, not the print sale versions, but other versions of the aurora print, and I think the Christmas lights print (I've seen a number of Christmas lights prints and am thus not utterly certain it was exactly that image), and they are everything Mike says they are. As for the colors in the icefall print, my answer is 'that's what's there when you see it.' (I'm only moderately confident it's the waterfall I'm thinking of; but the colors are a property of ice, not a property of the particular waterfall; you'll see similar colors in many glacier and iceberg photos). And in my experience they seem reasonably compatible with modern digital color imaging (not always the case). Which makes them no less gorgeous, and the higher compositional elements of that image no less excellent."

Posted on Friday, 08 March 2019 at 02:42 PM in [Ctein](#), [Print Offers](#), [Printers and Printing](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

After many years of amateur photography and viewing photographs on screen, in books, and in galleries I've realized that a very large print that would not look better smaller is my favorite viewing experience.

I've also set as a personal challenge to fill three large walls in my home with my own very large prints. It's hard. That great shot I took of my daughter doesn't look as great when her head is double life size.

I am fortunate to have access to a local print maker who prints for top level professionals and he is willing to humor me and print my images. He printed a dp2 Quattro image I made of Fall colors along the Mississippi and now I only have two walls to fill.

Posted by: Steve S | [Friday, 08 March 2019 at 05:30 PM](#)

I keep missing print sales so I'm glad that I caught this one -- and for Ctein prints! I've been lusting after some of his dye transfers for years. Can't wait to see them.

Posted by: Jim Causey | [Saturday, 09 March 2019 at 12:35 PM](#)

I miss Ctein's occasional articles on TOP. Has enough time passed that he might return with an article once in a while?

Posted by: Dave Riedel | [Sunday, 10 March 2019 at 12:47 PM](#)

@ Jim Causey: these are not dye transfer prints but inkjet prints.

Posted by: Henk | [Monday, 11 March 2019 at 11:22 AM](#)

The comments to this entry are closed.

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