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Wednesday, 23 November 2022

Custom Printing: Threat or Menace?

Guest post by Ctein

I'd originally planned this as a comment to one of Mike's previous columns about our current print sale, but then I realized it was better as a standalone column. Still, think of it as a response to some of the excellent questions that several readers asked.

Understand that the questions aren't new ones—we've discussed them in the past, in fact at great length a mere dozen years ago. I am truly surprised y'all don't remember the details of those extended conversations (grin).

For those who are masochistic enough to want to review these *longissimus*, *non legi* [too long, didn't read —Ed.] dialogues, the links are at the bottom of this column.

For the rest of us...

There's a very simple answer to the questions in the vein of, "Should or shouldn't I value a print made by the photographer more than a print made by somebody else?"

Do what your heart tells you!

News flash: Art is not a rational process. Loving art is not a rational thing. The marketplace for art is especially not a rational thing. Any attempt to philosophize your way to a logical answer is doomed to failure. All of you are right!

Jim Marshall prints

Let me give you an example of just how irrational the market is. I was [Jim Marshall's color printer](#) for the last decade of his life. In the last two years I finally convinced him to let me make digital prints as well as dye transfers. In most cases I was printing the same photographs in both media, because they were the popular ones, so we have a kind of controlled experiment here.

You would probably guess—correctly—that the dye transfer prints sold for many of thousands of dollars more than the digital prints, anywhere from \$3,000 to \$10,000 more. Because, y'know, *DYE TRANSFER* (insert "ooooooooohhhh, aaaaahhhhh" here)!

By any logical metric, this should not have been the case. The digital prints were in most cases larger than the dye transfer prints. Technically they were unquestionably better, being more faithful to the tones and colors of the original slides—when that was the goal.

(An aside here, Jim worked almost exclusively with 35mm Kodachrome II and A. Those are Jim's "originals," and they have never been for sale. If you want a Jim Marshall photograph, you buy a print...made by someone like me. Which messes with a whole lot of arguments about originality and ownership, I would think.)

Where was I? Oh yeah. In addition, the prints were more true to Jim's intent and artistic vision, because of course I worked with him and he critiqued what I did. In some cases the changes were subtle, and others they were massive—the print of [Johnny Cash in the studio](#) is the only one of this photograph that was ever printed remotely correctly, because the studio had fluorescent lights that photographed as a bilious green.

So we've ticked off size, technical quality, aesthetic intent, and originality boxes. What's left, rarity? Because, you know...dye transfer (ooooooooh, aaaaahh)!

Except...because we only got started on digital printing at the end of Jim's life, signed digital prints are far rarer. In most cases there are exactly two in existence—one in my collection and one in Jim's estate. Whereas there are between five and seventy signed dye transfers, depending on the popularity of the particular photograph.

By what logic does a Jim Marshall dye transfer print sell for much, much more than a Jim Marshall digital print of the same photograph? None, because it's not logical. It's not supposed to be.

Art has no intrinsic value—it's value lies only in the pleasure it brings to us and we have no way to quantify that. (Thank the gods for that, because if we did some soulless capitalist entity would lock up the property rights and start charging us for it.)

If you did go back and reread all those oh-so-long discussions, you will notice that they didn't resolve anything and that we are asking exactly the same questions today that we asked a dozen years ago. And, I have no doubt will be asking a dozen years hence.

To quote a great philosopher—"Don't worry. Be happy."

Should Mike print his own pictures?

Now, permit me to address the issues I can answer, raised by more than one reader:

1.) "Mike, you could save a lot of money by doing your own printing."

If Mike were to do his own printing, he would earn more money if he did this sale entirely on his own. The way this works is that he gets 60% of the net proceeds and I get 40%, because both Mike and I firmly believe that the artist should get the lion's share of money for their work. Still, Mike is leaving 40% on the table.

But consider that to get that other 40%, he would have to purchase all the materials, do the printing, do all the order tracking, do all the fulfillment, do all the shipping, keep the books, etc. That takes me about 85% of my time, easily more than half an hour per order when all is said and done. I doubt Mike could do it faster. [Ed. note: Mike certainly could not do it faster! Mike might not even be able to do it at all. That's an experiment you probably don't want us to run. —Mike]

Is that really how Mike wants to spend his time? Money is fungible but the 24 hours in a day aren't. And, as Mike recently wrote, "I'm 65, so the way I figure it, I get to live between zero and 40 more years...."

Mike has talked often about balancing the time he spends doing all the things he wants and needs to do. Do you think he really wants to add running print sales to that?

That is a rhetorical question.

(If you're thinking along the lines of, "Maybe Mike could do all the printing and Ctein could do all the order fulfillment, etc.?" Nuh uh —wouldn't save him much because I'd still need at least 30% rather than the original 40% to cover my time.)

2.) "Mike, you would get a better print, one more true to your artistic vision, if you did your own printing."

Nope. For one really simple reason. I'm a much better printer than Mike is. That's not immodest speaking, that's accuracy. I do it for a living, and it's one of my areas of expertise. There are rare occasions when I don't do a single thing to the file Mike sends me to improve. It doesn't happen often. The great majority of the time, though, I am improving upon what Mike has created, *by his artistic judgment*. Not mine, his.

Sometimes the improvements are very subtle. Sometimes they are not. After I went in and "fixed" the "Wet Asphalt" photograph, entirely on my own initiative and intuition, Mike wrote this comment back: "That looks better than mine actually...I think I flattened the tone of the road a little too much. You added some more life to it and it doesn't detract from what I wanted the picture to do. And yours looks more like wetness."

I intuited the need for that wetness and I knew how to get there (it was very easy for me). I helped him realize his own vision for his own picture. It happens with a lot of my clients, even very famous ones.

In short, You won't be getting anything that Mike isn't utterly happy with. In truth, none of my clients ever do.

Because that's my job.

Ctein

Links:

- "What is Custom Printing?"
- "Do 'Real' Photographers Print?"
- "Custom Printing and Artistic Ownership"
- "The Importance (or Not) of the Print[ing]"

Ctein was was one of the world's few master dye transfer printmakers for many years. When Kodak announced the discontinuation of dye transfer materials, in 1992, he mortgaged his house and laid in a massive supply of dye transfer materials. He told me in the early years of inkjet that he would switch when digital inkjet could exceed the quality of dye transfer; before his supply of dye transfer materials had run out, he had switched. He closed his darkroom in 2013. He now makes custom digital inkjet prints for a wide variety of professional and private clients.

Featured Comments from:

Bob Johnston [no relation —Ed.]: "Anyone can make a print but it takes an awful lot of knowledge, effort and practice to make a fine print. This is just as true today as it was in darkroom days. Mike is very fortunate to have Ctein print for him."

William Schneider: "I believe that printing benefits from the 'two heads are better than one' principal. It is easy to overlook (or even wistfully ignore!) a printing decision made while working alone. In the past, another printer and I would meet twice a week to look over each other's darkroom prints. A fresh set of eyes could instantly spot issues to which I had become blind."

Jeff: "I've always made my own black-and-white prints, darkroom and digital. But I'm just an amateur enthusiast, not a professional requiring volume production. All of photography requires understanding of tools and techniques, but primarily depends on critical judgment and decision making. I would no sooner outsource my printing than I would my shooting. It's all part of a whole, reflecting my skill and judgment, and the final framed print is my reward for the effort. When a print 'sings' (occasionally), that's special. Sure, someone else might do it differently, or better, but that's not the point for me. I especially enjoy deciding on the print size, typically smaller than others might prefer, and aspect ratio (where the edges are placed); what feels right for each picture. But the result isn't final until I custom cut the mat for each print and assemble the framing. All mine, from start to finish, for better or worse. Joy.

"That said, I can surely appreciate why others take a different approach; no right or wrong. Seems that there has always been far fewer great printers than great photographers. I might not qualify as either, but I sure do enjoy the process and the resultant output. Meanwhile, my vintage silver print collection serves as aspiration and keeps me humble."

Daniele: "Thinking about it from my perspective, as a guitar maker, I can't put too much value on the autonomy of the art product: in my field, the end result is the performance (either recorded or live); it really needs both an instrument maker and a musician, both highly specialized in their profession. While technically and actually true that a maker can perform and a player build his own instrument, in practice it produces good results extremely rarely, if ever at all; great results, I can't think of any."

Posted on Wednesday, 23 November 2022 at 09:32 PM in [Ctein: Printers and Printers](#) | Permalink

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Comments

I can't remember the last time I encountered a piece of writing that made me want to stand up, applaud and yell "Bravo!" like this blog post did. Well done, Ctein.

Posted by: robert c | Wednesday, 23 November 2022 at 11:11 PM

Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?

;-)

Posted by: Bob Campbell | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 07:37 AM

quite the ctome on custom shipping and handling

Posted by: GMS | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 07:54 AM

Bravo, Ctein and Mike!

Posted by: Mark Sampson | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 11:20 AM

Everyone should have their own Ctein.

Posted by: Stan B. | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 01:01 PM

There are other differences.

About 30+ years ago I bought some B/W prints which I was told were printed by the photographer and signed by him. Many years later I was interested in more photos and happened to see the same photo available for sale.

I was shocked at the quality which I was told were printed by the photographer's son which had a stamp of certification. Buyer beware!

Regarding the quality of prints and my firm belief that prints rather than digital files are what we should be "leaving behind" I wonder what Ctein would say about the huge advances in printing quality/longevity of prints on quality paper from printers such as the Epson P900 and its print inks. I would suggest that most amateurs can get excellent prints albeit not to the ultimate quality he can achieve but certainly a quality which is very good.

Posted by: louis mceullagh | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 05:26 PM

From my own practice of printing on 17x22 with a 15x20 image area m4/3 is the perfect sized file without cropping. Did you crop the files from the Sigma camera or did you maintain the 2/3 proportions?

[I shoot with the 4:3 ratio enabled but of course the DNG files are 3:2. I'm not doctrinaire about it; I don't tend to like radical cropping but I'll adjust if need be. The one that convinced me to relax about it was this one:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/156825285@N07/52326134569/1public/>

I forced" this into 4:3 when actually it looks better with more air on both sides. So now I figure I'll just give each individual picture what it needs. --Mike]

Posted by: Richard Alan Fox | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 05:01 PM

Printing is an art all on it's own and being a photographer DOES NOT make anyone a printer.

Josef Koudelka and others at Magnum had the privilege to have Voja Mitrovic in a darkroom, masterfully printing their images like nobody else would have done, and they all treasure that!

Mitrovic was what we all know as a "Master Printer". He like Ctein, printed, the others triggered their cameras!

Posted by: Anonymous | Thursday, 24 November 2022 at 07:05 PM

I understand Daniele's featured comment, but nobody has suggested that a photographer needs to build his/her own camera gear, or manufacture his/her own paper, to reach optimal results. As Ansel said (loosely), the print IS the performance, not just the taking the shot (the negative).

Posted by: Jeff | Friday, 25 November 2022 at 12:10 PM

I'm constantly surprised at the number of people that conflates an agency/lab printer's output with the photographer's worth. The printer might be excellent, and I bet that's the secret behind all of those arrogant star photographers who declare they don't need a meter because they are so hip they can "read the light" and never need one.

Patently, that's bullshit. You need only turn a few degrees to the side to get a quite different recommendation from your meter, and that's with black/white! A skilled photographer has to be able to understand the part of the overall image that is the most important to him, and concentrate on getting that bit exposed correctly. The surrounding stuff can be adjusted either way, and nobody really knows or cares. Those who believe this nonsense of the amazing technical genius with a camera need to expose themselves to the rigours of working at a need for living. Once that's under their belt, those scales fall from the eyes and the hype is seen for what it is.

As I've mentioned before, only when you process your own stuff can you see how accurate or otherwise your exposure technique actually is; if the closest relationship you have with your negs is the contact sheet, you are already too far removed to draw lessons on how to do better the next time.

Posted by: Bob Campbell | Friday, 25 November 2022 at 12:01 PM

Dear Rob,

Which has what to do with anything?

pax / Ctein

Posted by: Ctein | Friday, 25 November 2022 at 06:05 PM

Not trying to poke any holes in Daniele's commentary, but there was one anomaly that comes to mind. Bryan May, of Queen fame, built a guitar out of reclaimed wood from a fireplace mantel. That guitar has remained his primary instrument over most of his professional playing and recording career.

This singularity refutes nothing.

For what it's worth, I print because I'm a bit of a masochist and find a bit of satisfaction in expanding my skills. I'm certainly under no delusion that an accomplished master printer could not handily exceed the quality of my output, and in a more timely fashion.

Posted by: D Glen | Sunday, 27 November 2022 at 08:51 AM

From the sound of it, perhaps Ctein should get the 60%!

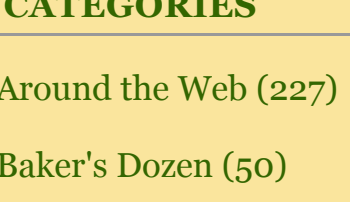
Posted by: Steve Deutsch | Sunday, 27 November 2022 at 09:16 PM

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