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INTERVISTA A
BEN MAHELER

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Classic **CAMERA BLACK & WHITE**

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BEN MAHLER,
OIL PRINTING MASTER

Belgian by nationality, Ben Mahler does not like to talk about himself and prefers to let his prints speak for him. He calls himself "ego-less", in the manner of Banksy, whose works are in the foreground while the artist remains invisible, whereas in today's world, art seems to be quite artist-centred.
And yet, I managed to get some personal information from him.

Ben, would you like to tell us about the journey that led you to your current choices?

I studied photography thirty years ago. The course focused on artistic photography and for the darkroom, on silver gelatin printing. I attended a few lectures on the old masters (Steichen, Demachy, ...) and their techniques, but I think we were too young to fully grasp the significance of all early photography aspects .

We visited an exhibition in Paris and there I saw for the first time works by Russian pictorialist masters. Pictures often made with very simple cameras, but just as often beautifully shot. The atmosphere and the soul of these images were fantastic. I had never seen such silver gelatin prints before. Later on, I had the opportunity to look at the early work of Dirk Braeckman. Silver gelatin prints, but for the processing of which he used sponges and other means. I think that this type of "alternative" approach to classical photography influenced me a lot.

At that time, I also started to use liquid photographic emulsions, to sensitise large aluminum plates on which I printed my images.

How to make an oil print
Summary of the article published in CCB&W #89

Gélatin
This is the fundamental component, along with ink, of the oil print.

It is important to use a gelatin that resists without damage to the inking, carried out with a brush. The hardness of a gelatin is characterised by its Bloom degree, which is the result of a penetrometric test: the higher the Bloom degree (e.g. 250, 300), the harder the gelatin.

Paper preparation
A sheet of good watercolour paper is coated with an 8 to10% solution of this gelatin. The paper is then completely dried.

Paper sensitizing
This can be carried out with a 5% potassium dichromate solution used as is, or even better with an 8% ammonium dichromate solution diluted 1:2 or 1:3 with acetone at the time of use. A solution containing acetone dries very quickly in the air and is preferable to a pure water solution, whenever possible.

It is preferable to apply the solution with a very soft brush rather than by immersion.

Once the coating is completed, dry quickly with a hair dryer that is not too hot, then apply a second coat of sensitizer using the remaining amount.

The sensitized paper should be used immediately. Make sure that it is completely dry to prevent it from sticking to the negative during exposure, which would ruin it irremediably.

The negative
Once sensitised, the gelatin-coated paper sheet only reacts to UV light. A contact print with a negative of the same size as the final print and having a dynamic range (Dmax-Dmin) of approximately 1.3 is therefore required.

Exposure
A faint brown image forms during exposure. This is sufficient to assess the exposure, which will be correct when the midtones begin to become detailed.

Rinse
Exposure is followed by a water rinse, preferably prolonged until the yellow of the dichromate disappears. After about half an hour, you can keep the sheet immersed in the bottom of the tray with weights, face up, even overnight. Once removed from the water, it can be used immediately or dried for further processing.

Alternatively, after about 15 minutes of washing, it can be immersed in a 5% sodium bisulphite solution until the yellow colour disappears. It can then be washed again in water for another 10 minutes.

Preparing the paper for inking
The paper is placed on a perfectly flat and rigid surface (glass, plastic) and the surface water is removed by gently dabbing the gelatin with a clean, lint-free cotton cloth or chamois leather until the droplets disappear completely.

A characteristic swelling of the gelatine is noticeable, with a relief of the lights versus the shadows. The outer edges of the image can be masked with adhesive tape.

The ink
Greasy, oil-based – never acid-based – inks are needed, like the ones used in lithography, engraving or typography . They should be free of solvents as they would dry too quickly. They can be bought in cans and tubes.

Inking
Inking can be done with a roller or a brush. A good lithography roller is quite expensive and gives very good results, similar to an original photograph.

Brush inking, which gives a slightly more grainy image with a more pictorial effect, is much cheaper and allows to intervene by locally strengthening or weakening parts of the image. Instead of a brush, a sponge roller can also be used.

Start by spreading a little ink ("the size of a pea" as we often say today) on a glass or ceramic surface with a soft spatula. Then, with a wide brush, take a little ink on the tips of the bristles and dab it on the tile next to the puddle, spreading it out to avoid overloading the brush.

Then apply the brush to the surface of the matrix, continuing until the entire surface is covered. To do this, press the brush down without exaggerating and pull it over a short distance without lifting it.

In this first phase, the image appears only minimally, the ink being distributed over the entire surface, which will be greyish and grainy.

In a second phase, the surface is tapped in a rapid movement with the same brush in order to redistribute the ink which will move towards the areas which were more exposed to light and therefore hardened by the dichromate. Continuing in this way, the lights will also be cleaned.

Once the image has fully appeared, one can :
- add ink to the areas to be darkened, taking it on the the tips of a brush from the plate where it was deposited;
- remove the ink from the areas to be brightened, by means of rapid brush movements. If the brush is clean and/or slightly damp, the lightening is more important.

The ink takes a few days to harden. When the ink is dry, an eraser or scraper can be used to refine the areas to be lightened.

**So you like to experiment.
To what extent?**

After photography, I studied computer engineering. I began quite early to experiment with digital photography, 3D modelling, digital printing and animations. I became familiar with digital printing on fine art paper and I have made my own personalised inks. I have created profiles for printers, etc. Digital printing offers many interesting possibilities. It's very permanent if you use the right paper and the right choice of inks.

But I realised that a soul is missing from these works, a soul that is increasingly missing from the works on display in galleries and museums.

The images are often good, but they have often been digitally printed by a laboratory and lack "personality", a "soul" of their own. When I visit a photo exhibition, I even find it difficult to find unique and original prints.

Time is money and everything must be done as quickly and as cheaply as possible. I think a good photographer should also be a good printer. Or work with a good printer to give personality and soul to his work.

I don't think artistic photography can express its potential on a screen. That is not to say that digital photography has no quality and potential: I am thinking of weddings, advertising, travel, documentation...

I remember you, a few years ago on Facebook, asking for information and clarification on oil printing. I saw your early work and progress. What made you switch from the classical silver gelatin printing to a much slower and more difficult process?

Five years ago I took a course in carbon printing in the Netherlands and discovered beautiful oil prints there. So I decided to try to make some. I hoped to get good results in six months, but after three years of hard work, it still sometimes remains a challenge.

I luckily have a good knowledge of digital photography: it helps me to make digital negatives; especially those for large oil prints (50x70 cm), which are a real challenge for me now.

I have often thought of giving up on oil printing, given the difficulties and limitations it entails. But it is a wonderful process and the results do satisfy me. The atmosphere and soul of these works are unique.

Moreover, the process leaves no metal nor chemical residues that could damage the paper, as is the case with silver-gelatine printing, so that the work has a very good shelf life over time.

As I became more and more familiar with the technique, I discovered that its limitations also open up great possibilities.

My work became more graphic, intense and unique. Of all the alternative processes, I prefer oil printing because the last step of the process is a bit like painting, it is like "photoshoping" without a computer!

I have a logbook in which I note all the conditions for each print: temperature and humidity of the environment, inks used, method of inking, exposure time and many other observations and variables.

The advantage of this technique is that it is impossible to make two identical prints : each print is unique.
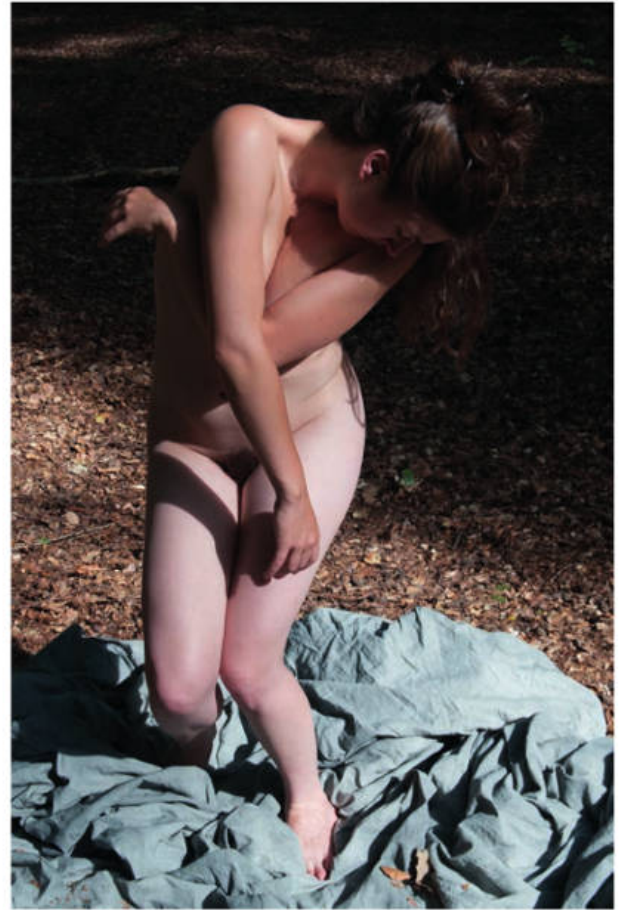
It is possible to adjust and change the final print in several ways during inking. But this is also the time when everything can go seriously wrong. I admit, even after years of practice, I still have 30% of failures. But when I started, I had 80%.

Through these failures, I happened to discover new possibilities, which is very interesting; it makes me grow and leads me to new ideas and approaches. All this makes this process very attractive.

"Alternative photography", "old techniques", there are many definitions for this type of photography. What is yours?

I see all these processes as a different language / technique in photography, and I don't consider them "old". Like any language, each technique has its own characteristics. After all these years spent exploring the possibilities of photography (silver gelatin, charcoal, gum, and digital printing), I have discovered the language that allows me to create my own, recognisable style in my work.

Nowadays, the world is flooded with cheap, easy to make and ephemeral images and prints. I believe that only works with a soul, an identity, a style can last, if they are of quality and processed to guarantee sufficient permanence.

I am not interested in making romantic oil prints, like in the "good old days".

I am interested in oil printing because it gives me the possibility to use a unique language to expand my skills acquired in digital photography, to create something unique and different, with my own style. I don't want to copy the old masters, nor do I consider oil printing as a normal printing technique.

The "painting part" of the process makes it unique, and it is impossible to recreate several identical prints. This is also the reason why I make only one print of each image, to which I do not give a title, identifying it only by the year and a serial number. The image must speak for itself.

Alberto Novo