

# Joining forces

Master printer **Roy Snell** and photographer **Janie Rayne** discuss how the marriage between film and digital methods holds the key to photography's future. They talk to **Oliver Atwell**

**WHAT** is it that causes us to look back at bygone methods with such nostalgia? Photography is full of individuals who, while not being entirely resistant to digital technology, will always be caught up in the mystery of making images with film. Film and hands-on printing techniques are never going to disappear, as shown by the popularity of the monthly features in AP by Tony Kemplen and Andrew Sanderson. However, that's not to say that film and digital techniques must live on separate islands. In fact, according to master printer Roy Snell, the future promises a beautiful and harmonious marriage between the two camps.

Roy has established a name for himself as a dedicated and prolific printer. His years behind an enlarger have found him printing photographs for such people as Lord Snowdon, David Hockney and Herb

Ritts from the comfort of his own home. Around 30 years ago, Roy bought a house in Earlsfield in south-west London, and it's in this atmospheric Victorian house that the largest part of Roy's career has developed. To step into the basement is to enter a world of pure photography.

'I built myself a darkroom in the basement of the house,' explains Roy. 'That's where I've spent the best part of three decades. I was doing all sorts, including working with record companies and printing for a lot of significant artists. Over the years, a lot of big names, such as Eve Arnold and David Hockney, have gone down those steps into that ocean of red light. Printing for Hockney was as good as it gets because the man's a technician at heart. I got to print the photographic version of *Mr and Mrs Ossie Clark [and Percy]*. That print would go on to be the template for the final painting. The

house was a hive of creative energy and that darkroom was rocking back in the day.'

Roy has always encouraged a communal atmosphere within his home and his darkroom. He describes his process as 'printing with' rather than 'printing for' a photographer, as some of the photographers have spent a week living in Roy's home. It must have been surreal for Roy's two children to share a kitchen with people like Eve Arnold.

## DIGITAL AND FILM

The foundations of Roy's career were built on traditional film techniques. While he's keen that these hands-on methods remain relevant, Roy also recognises that digital techniques have just as much right to a stake in photography's future. Sitting in his sun-drenched garden, Roy and his partner, photographer Janie Rayne, consider the ways in which digital and film can come together.

'We've heard much about the "death of the darkroom";' says Roy. 'It's been a struggle professionally, particularly for manufacturers of film and paper. But what's extraordinary is that we're now seeing analogue methods being given a new lease of life. I read an article recently about the fact that more and more people are using film. Then there's the fact that Kodak is continuing to produce film and photographic paper. So people are going back to that way of thinking. But also, at the same time, the

Left: 'Snow White', by Valeriya Vygodnaya, 2011

Below: From Sasha Gusov's book *Locusts*, 2008





© JANIE RAYNE

darkroom is moving to the computer room. I'm excited by the potential of this age.

'Actually, darkroom is a multi-faceted term now,' he adds. 'We have digital darkrooms where the central method of producing a print is through an inkjet printer. For example, I use an Epson Stylus Pro 7600 pigment printer that has a matt black and Epson Ultrachrome ink set and I generally print on Hahnemühle Cotton Rag paper. Because of the matt ink and cotton rag media, the results from this digital set-up look beautiful on gallery walls, but they don't feel like silver gelatin and I celebrate the difference. By the way, if you're ever at an air fair or a gallery and you hear someone referring to a giclée print, then what they really mean to say is inkjet print. The art world has all sorts of fancy terms for printing: it can be a little confusing keeping up with the terminology.'

According to Roy, it's the simple act of getting your hands dirty that makes working with film and wet darkroom processes so appealing.

'It's the do-it-yourself spirit and the fact that you have to spend time looking at a print,' says Roy. 'You have to study it and meditate on it. Whenever I'm with a client and we print out an image, we'll stick it on the wall and look over every inch of

**Above: 'Lake with Children', by Janie Rayne, 2010**

it. Then we'll look at it some more and consider where else we can go. I think that's something that has become a little lost these days. We're surrounded by images and they're moving past our eyes at lightning speed. We're flicking through websites and magazines faster than our brains can process the information.'

However, that's not to say that digital media should be ignored. In fact, it's an area that should be embraced.

'Digital technology gives people access to visual imagery,' says Roy. 'You could argue that it's perhaps a little out of control now, but the point remains. If you've created an image and you want to show it to people, then I think everybody has the right to view it. Digital technology allows that.'

Janie uses the Russian photographer Sasha Gusov as an example. 'He [Gusov] puts all his images up on Facebook and that means his work is seen all over the world as soon as they're uploaded,' she says. 'He's had five books published, but it's always difficult to know who's seen these books and exactly how many have been sold. When these images go on Facebook, though, he gets continuous feedback within minutes. Social media gives him a direct interaction with his audience.'

Interestingly, Gusov's next book will contain images shot on Kodak Tri-X film – an issue

that presents further questions regarding how film and digital can work together.

'The question is whether to do the negatives from the prints and then give them over to the printer or whether he [Gusov] scans them digitally and then prints them,' says Janie. 'There's that technical consideration. So now we have those options. It may not sound much, but these are little things that the introduction of digital technology has given us. Analogue and digital are intertwined now. It's something that a lot of people fail to understand. They see the two mediums as two clear and distinct camps, but they're not.'

This relationship between digital and film extends into more than just social media and negative scanning. It can even be found infiltrating some of our most archaic printing methods.

'Let's take platinum printing, for example,' says Roy. 'I would never disagree that platinum is one of the finest black & white printing processes we have – just take a wander through an Ansel Adams show and see some of the platinum prints there, such as "Old Faithful Geyser". Adams understood just how good the platinum process was. Not only that, but he knew that photography was so much more than taking a picture. There's a quote from him that says, "The negative is the score, the print is the performance."



© XENIA MCBELL

**'Nude Horse', by Xenia McBell**

**'I used my painting skills when I hand-coloured some of my prints. I suppose that's an early example of marrying technologies'**

Ansel Adams is as good as it gets if you want to explore greyscales.'

Take a look at our interview with Colin Holmes, who is a palladium printer (a version of platinum), in AP 18 February and you'll see that the platinum process has now moved into the digital realm. It's a clear example of the marriage between analogue and film techniques.

'Platinum as a process was all about getting the right negative,' says Roy. 'There had to be a lot of control with regards to achieving the right contrast and greyscales. But these days you can't buy the necessary film to do platinum prints in the way they used to. Now people produce their negatives on the computer. They can load their image into Photoshop, turn it into a negative and print it out to the size that they want. Then the process moves back to its original state and they create a contact print in the way they would have all those years ago. It's pretty interesting.'

**'Purple Ball Warhol', by Roy Snell, 2006**



© ROY SNELL

**IN THE BEGINNING**

Roy's first exposure to photography came when he was a young boy living with his parents and, interestingly, through an enlarger rather than a camera.

'When I was young, my father borrowed an enlarger from a man at work,' says Roy. 'My father was actually a photographer. I walked into the kitchen one day and there was this big alien object. I was instantly intrigued, so my father gave me a few of his old negatives so I could try my hand at printing.'

'I had been into painting before that, but I had always had trouble getting the tones exactly as I wanted them. Once I began printing, though, I found that everything looked right. I seemed to have a knack for getting the tones and contrasts exactly as they needed to be. After that, I ran with it. I'd go out and take pictures, come home and print them up. I also used my painting skills when I hand-coloured some of my prints. I suppose that's an early example of marrying technologies.'

However, those early experiments in photography didn't lead to a career in image printing, or at least not right away. Years later, Roy was working as an engineering apprentice for the telephone section of the Post Office, known at the time as the GPO.

'I was still printing in my spare time, but I hadn't pursued it on a professional level,' says Roy. 'However, I soon realised that the GPO had a photographic unit. I wrote a letter to the head office asking to be transferred to that department. From then on, I spent my time at the photographic unit helping out on day shoots and then helping to



© JANIE RAYNE

## 'They had filing cabinets full of negatives that we would print up for the company magazine'

print in the evenings. They also had filing cabinets full of negatives that we would print up for things like the internal company magazine, so I'd be working with these old negatives and printing from them. It was a fantastic learning experience.'

Eventually, Roy left the post office when he realised that he could make more money as a freelance printer. He met Julian Byser, a photographer who worked in a rented studio, and decided that the space would be perfect for him.

'Soon after I met Julian, the person who actually owned the studio he rented died,' says Roy. 'Julian was then able to buy the premises. After that, I was able to really go ahead and establish myself as a printer. I was in a great position where I was able to offer my printing services to people. After a while, people also started paying me to develop their film. Then I was making more money than I ever had before. That's when

**Above: 'Black Bird', by Janie Rayne, 2008**

**Top right: 'Riders of the Apocalypse', by Paulina Otylie Surys**

**Above right: 'Roy's Darkroom', by Richard Nicholson, 2006**



© PAULINA OTYLIE SURYS



© RICHARD NICHOLSON

I was able to afford my house in Earlsfield and set up my own darkroom. It all started from there.'

### THE DARKROOM

When Roy talks about his darkroom, he's not necessarily just talking about the room underneath his house. He could as easily be referring to the numerous Macs that sit within the romantic gloaming light of his living room. But there's no getting away from that nostalgic spectre of the red light.

In 2006, photographer and printer Richard Nicholson produced his fascinating series of images entitled 'Last One Out'. The images captured London's last-remaining darkrooms and were a fitting tribute to the seemingly dying art of wet printing. Among the images was Roy's own personal space,

a busy and typically eccentric collection of equipment and oddities (see above).

'I remember when my daughter Zoe came home from school she'd tell me that the porch would smell of fixer,' says Roy. 'Those odd little memories permeate this space. It's not something that you can be sad about because things move on. I'm still working down there. Recently, I've been working a lot with a young photographer called Paulina Surys. Her work has become very popular. She creates incredible scenes from scratch that are very elaborate and detailed. Paulina hand-colours her work. Again, she's someone who has found her fame through the internet. So we have hand-printed, hand-coloured images finding fame through digital media. It's a pretty little picture of the future.' **AP**

To see more of **Roy Snell's** work and to learn more about his thoughts on the future of printing, visit [www.roysnell.com](http://www.roysnell.com)