

RESOURCE MAGAZINE

For the Professional Photo Productionist

Spring 2008



One Night

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ROUND TABLE OF TRUTH: Color Printers

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A word to the wise: film is not a dying medium.

Despite Kodak and Fuji's massive attempts to render the art form obsolete, these four color-printing professionals are here to tell us otherwise. Their final prognosis: look out for the resurgence and re-appreciation of film. From editorial to lifestyle, and fashion to fine art, more photographers are opting for tradition over technology. Recent art school grads, skilled in the art of digital retouching, better beware. These color printers aren't going anywhere any time soon. They're clocking in countless hours of working in complete darkness, while chemical fumes waft above them. But they won't have it any other way.

Gathered in a Brooklyn loft for a unique, inspired photo shoot, they're shining a light on the darkroom and revealing their profession's inner workings. Resource sat them down to talk color versus black and white, the importance of skin tone, the real cost of shooting digital, and the omnipresent Photoshop.

How many hours are you in the darkroom a week?

Gunn Roze from Primary Photographic: Forty, fifty hours, but it's in and out. You're not literally in there, checking in at nine and leaving at six without seeing the light. With color printing, you have your private darkroom time then you're out with co-workers or clients. This is why I chose color as opposed to black and white. I could not be in that red room for eight hours: it just doesn't suit my nature.

Matt Jones from Diapositive: And you're not as connected to the chemistry.

GR: Chemicals are still in the air. You just rely on a good ventilation system.

Are there side effects to inhaling those fumes all the time?

Beth Perkins from Beth Schiffer's Creative Darkroom: I was recently putting in a lot of hours in the lab, and I found it affected me. You kind of feel like you have a hangover a little bit sometimes, or puffy eyes. If you're not

used to it, it's taxing on your body. You're standing for a long time and doing a lot of repetitive motion and are exposed to fumes. You just need to take breaks. You can also get into a groove where you're really enjoying what you're printing. There's a meditative quality to printing.

What's the interaction with your clients like?

Peter Goldman from Aporia: It can be a little complex because you are working with a photographer, who in turn is working for an art director or a photo director, and it's a balance between trying to please everybody and deferring to your main contact point- the photographer.

GR: And then of course you please whoever's paying you! And you're lucky if you get paid in ninety days. Freelance is different. I set my own terms and I'm not on a payroll, so when the job is complete, the payment is usually due. That's the great thing about freelance and why I prefer it to working for magazines or a lab.

BP: The advantage of working for a lab is that I'm not putting out any money for the paper or renting the darkroom space. All I'm doing is putting in my time.



Have you had any difficult clients that didn't want to pay?

PG: Most people generally come through in the end. A lot of young and up-and-coming photographers have to put in a lot of money themselves, and you try to help them out. Some jobs are complex, time-consuming and labor intensive while others are super easy, but the rate is the same. And I think it's great that it's an hourly rate. No matter how much time you put into it, it's always going to be this set amount.

GR: I have two payment arrangements with clients. One is by the hour so if they keep changing their mind or want to try many things, I'm fine. The other way is to charge by the print. If the negative is a good negative, and the photographer's done his job professionally, you can knock that image out within an hour. But if someone wants you to manipulate a log in the darkroom as opposed to digitally, that could drag on for hours and the fee would remain the same.

MJ: Some clients think that you are Adobe Photoshop and are looking for something that's really not even possible to do in the darkroom.

GR: We're limited in what we can do in the darkroom. A good digital operator, with programs and knowledge, can get it there a lot quicker, and make it look like it was not manipulated.

What are some of the perks of your jobs?

GR: Working with a great co-printer, feeding from one another. Sometimes when you're printing and printing, your sense of color and what you can see vary. You can walk away from the print, come back and go, 'Oh my gosh, what was I thinking?' Working with a co-printer really helps my process speed up.

MJ: For me it is being involved in the industry, but being sort of removed at the same time. You're kind of on your own; it's really sort of a solo environment. You have your co-workers but you don't have a clash of art directors, makeup artists and stylists.

PG: I enjoy the teamwork and rapport you have with your co-workers. I also really enjoy working with clients and photographers, and having that one-on-one relationship. You're involved in the photographer's vision, and it's rewarding.

GR: It's a real collaboration, a creative process. The talents are fused. A printer's real job is to get a sense of what the photographers want just through their descriptions.

PG: You develop relationships with photographers over time to the point where they completely trust what you do. You know how they like their work to look: every photographer has their own signature, and you know how to print for different people.

GR: Except for the photographers who copy other photographers.

There's a lot of that in this business. 'I want it to look just like Annie's last spread in Vanity Fair.' Seriously.

BP: I learned a lot from the photographers whom I printed for. It can be enlightening if they want to do something really creative with their printing. Realizing their vision and helping them with their style is a rewarding process. But then there are also photographers who come to you with an image that they just don't like, and they want you to fix it. Your image is what it is and if you already don't like it, I can try making it more interesting, but I can't change it all together.

MJ: That definitely is the hardest part when a photographer comes to you and you know they're not happy with their own work. They will not be happy with your printing either. You can't make it right for them, but they walk out unhappy and we're left feeling unhappy. It's not a good experience, but it doesn't happen that often.

PG: We have photographers who know the limitations and have a very good grasp of what it is that they're doing. Others are like moving targets, always changing, searching, and trying to change their style to appear different.

GR: The difficult clients are insecure and don't know what they want. They take it out on you, wasting time, materials and energy. The printer can be the photographers' educator because you can suggest different papers, different processes so they get closer to their vision. Some papers have been discontinued lately, and that's making my job a little more difficult. Kodak and Fuji think that traditional printing is a dying breed. They want to shift everybody towards digital as quickly as possible because they've invested a lot of money in their equipment and products. But recently a lot of photographers are swinging back to shooting film because they've tried digital and it's not meeting their standards. There is a huge difference still. Until the digital part matches the quality of traditional photography, a lot of people are going to resist it.

BP: It's like oils and acrylics. Neither one is better than the other; it's just a different form of expression. I also think that clients initially thought that digital would be faster and cheaper, but both are a big myth. Clients are realizing that to shoot professionally you're shooting raw, and it takes time to process the files. Photographers should charge for their time, otherwise they are going to be working for free a lot in front of a computer. And those programs are expensive and changing so quickly. Some photographers just dove in and immediately bought all this equipment, but they can't afford to upgrade it constantly, and they are not getting the look or the feel that they had with their old standard cameras. I think there are a lot of great opportunities with digital, and people just need to understand their pros and cons. Digital is perfect for photo libraries when you are shooting a whole bunch of photos that someone needs to obtain very quickly whenever they want. But if you are shooting a beautiful travel spread for a magazine, film might be better if you want lush images and beautiful colors.

MJ: I'll always love film. I don't think it'll die completely, I think it'll keep living. It's dying in the consumer market. It's dying in Middle America

because the ease of digital is so good for your average mom-and-pop store, but the true professionals will continue to stick to film.

Do you feel like your job will be in jeopardy five or ten years from now?

GR: About ten years ago I was told I had maybe a year or two as a color printer, and I thought I would just ride it until that end presented itself, and it just kept on going. I often turn down work because I just need time off. You can only work seven, eight, or ten hour days for a certain stretch.

PG: I opened a traditional photo boutique lab just a couple of years ago and everybody thought I was just completely insane, but it's just been getting busier and busier and busier.

MJ: There are also less and less traditional color printers out there in the marketplace. So as that shrinks all the work is coming to us.

GR: There are a lot of graduate students from the International Center of Photography and SVA (School of Visual Arts) interested in printing. There's a cooperative darkroom setup, and they are loving film. There is a strong appeal with playing in the darkroom and creating images that way, instead of sitting in front of a computer.

Is there a reason why you guys chose color printing compared to black and white?

GR: My first lab job was at the age of twenty, in a color darkroom. The appreciation from photographers just kept me there.

MJ: I started out shooting and printing in black and white, then moved to color and was blown away. With b&w all you're dealing with is contrast...but it's very difficult making a decision about what the right contrast is. You always wonder, 'Is this too flat?'

BP: It's kind of what just makes sense to you. I took a photo class in college, and I enjoyed b&w then. People think that color is very commercial and poppy. Nan Goldin is not commercial, but her colors are something else. I fell in love with the thought that I could create that myself, and be able to control that with my own imagery.

PG: I first started to work a lot in fashion, and became obsessed with skin tone. You just learn so much being a printer; you learn about shooting, about film, and the wealth of experience you can pick up in the darkroom from other people's mistakes or success is really quite amazing.

BP: I remember my parents traveled a lot and always took color chromes, and I was in love with the colors that they would turn into, like these opposing blues and yellows and sort of flat tones. I have always wanted to copy this painterly feel, and it just became another facet or tool for image making, which I think is really exciting.

GR: There is no such thing as right or wrong color. Once I discovered that, it really pulled me in further into that world because it's a personal possibility or palette that you decide on for certain images. Through mistakes while testing, you often stumble upon something stunning. You remember that, and bring it out either for your own personal work or apply it for someone who's trying to come up with some twist on their work. That's the magic of color.

As you are all free-lancers or working in small boutique labs, what's your feeling about big labs?

BP: If someone new comes to me, I'm going to go online and see what their work looks like, because I want to get an idea of what their style is so I can match that. When you're a printer working in one of the bigger labs, and have hundreds of photographers, you mass-produce a certain amount of imagery and you can't really tailor. Smaller labs are custom, offering something that's a little bit more personalized, specific and creative, and for us it's more fun because we can be more creative.

PG: With a big lab, you will need to develop relationships with all the people who manage your work. Depending on how assertive you are as a client, you can get what you want out of a big lab.

If someone wanted to get into this business, what three characteristics would they need to have or what advice would you give them?

PG: Great communication skills. You've got to communicate with the photographers, and have an understanding as one. You have to have a really good eye for color, which I think is more of a talent. Some people just get it, some people don't, and I don't think you can really be taught. And you have to be efficient. Being able to multi-task is a huge thing for a color printer, especially when you're contacting and have some jobs where you have multiple different exposures all on one roll of film, and you have to problem solve all of that in one go.

BP: There's also a business side to it, negotiating with clients who never have any money. You're trying to get people to understand the value of what you're doing.

PG: And the time it takes. Everyone wants it just a day earlier than what is enough time to do the job, hence working very late hours trying to do stuff.

MJ: A forty-eight hours turn around would be enough time if the industry didn't work in waves. There are periods where there's nothing, and then a week later, everyone is shooting all at once and it's all coming in.

GR: You need flexibility and not to take things personally. I had to develop a thicker skin, and learn not to react emotionally because it is their work so just keep on working on it. It's only paper, it's only time. Ego has to go in the drawer.