

The Dye Transfer Weekend: A Wake—or an Awakening?

By Leslie Limon

It was a "Who's Who in Dye Transfer" as over 30 color printing and photography professionals spent an October weekend at Luke Powell's home in Middlebury, Vermont. The reason? To consider the past, present and future of dye transfer printing. Powell, a fine-art photographer and dye printer, had listened to "dye people" talking about getting together for years, and finally decided to do something about it.

What is dye transfer? The process, which takes years to master, begins with a transparency or, in rare cases, a negative. The dye printer creates red, blue, and green color separation negatives of the image, which are then exposed onto sheets of a unique type of gelatin-coated matrix film. The gelatin hardens proportionally relative to the amount of exposure it receives, forming a kind of relief map called a matrix. When these matrices are soaked in complementary cyan, yellow and magenta dye baths, the gelatin "hills" absorb more dye than the "valleys." The printer then rolls each matrix onto a specially-prepared paper receiver sheet, with each image registered one on top of the other. The acidic dye transfers to the non-acidic paper, and this creates the final print.

What is it about this expensive, labor-intensive process that brought this small, fervent group together from all over North America—and from as far away as Germany and Australia? Dye transfer gives the color printer unparalleled control over density and color. And it yields a print of spectacular richness—because each dye is pure, the

colors (especially yellow, long a weakness of C-print technology) can be very bright and vivid. Dye transfers also offer very long life, being among the most archival of all traditional processes. Photographer Jim Wallace loves the process: "I love laying the dyes down. It's one of the greatest experiences I've ever had—lifting that last mat up and seeing the dye print appear." Dye printer Guy Stricherz loves the result: "Its intrinsic beauty and luminosity is immeasurable. Its range of colors and tones can never be surpassed; there is no blacker black. It's not layered, it's all commingled. No other process does that." There is no question that dye transfer is among the most breathtakingly beautiful of all historic photographic processes; one might say it is to color what platinum is to black-and-white.

Many in the group had consulted each other over the phone for years. As they met each other face-to-face for the first time, they wondered whether it would also be the last time. When Kodak discontinued manufacture of dye transfer materials in 1993, they were among the few hundred practitioners who expected the process to die once their stockpiles ran out. But the weekend brought some hope of resurrection. "I thought I was coming here to attend a wake," remarked Gerry Storey, a Sacramento, California, dye transfer printer and photographer. "Actually, today I'm probably more hopeful than ever."

Four dye transfer veterans who have been instrumental in keeping the process alive for the past 50 years began by setting the historical context. Frank McLaughlin [see "Letters," PT, Sep/Oct 1996, p. 18],

Kodak's in-house expert until he retired in 1986, described what happened when Kodak told him to "bury dye transfer" after he took over in 1977 for his mentor, dye pioneer Bob Speck. "I asked them what I could do to keep running it. They said, 'How about doubling sales in a year?' I said okay, got on the phone—and tripled sales in a year." Noted portrait photographer David La Claire recalled his father's early dye transfer experiments and noted that, just as he joined his photographer father in 1950, his daughter Hester has now joined him. Len Zoref, owner of Zoref Color Lab in New York and head of K&L Lab for many years, showed off a vintage one-shot camera as well as some antique dye transfer



Dye veterans David La Claire, Len Zoref, and Ed Van Baerle flank Frank McLaughlin (seated).



Standing, left to right: Steve Arnold, David La Claire, John Da Silva, Barbara Slaiby, Gerry Storey, Jay Paterson, Charlie Cramer, David Doubley, Len Zoref, Rob Littlefield, Ed Van Baerle, Guy Stricherz, Robin Logan, Jim Wallace, Emma Powell, Kirsten Powell, Paul Jordan, Luke Powell, Harold Boechenstein Jr., Nino Mondhe, Chuck Harrison, Greg Wendholt, Jim Browning, Neil Fox, Jeff Francis, John Wawrzonek, Richard Jackson.

Kneeling/seated, left to right: Hester La Claire Hendricks, Frank McLaughlin, Mike Conrad, Ctein, Eddie Soloway, Andy Cross.

prints. Ed Van Baerle described the tremendous success of his Chicago dye house when he hired dye printers who catered to individual photographers, despite warnings that he'd "never make money working with people who print for photographers because photographers fuss too much."

Jay Paterson of Houston [see also "A New Day for Dye Transfer" by John Lebet, PT, *May/June 1996*, p. 57], a psychologist and dye transfer photography aficionado, turned the discussion to the present and future. Shortly after hearing a 1993 National Public Radio report on the demise of dye transfer, he linked up with chemist John DaSilva of Kilborn Photo Products, Inc., in Iowa, to develop matrix film and receiver sheets. Jay passed out sample boxes of film and paper, both now commercially available, and said he expected to release dyes for testing in early November. He is also working on two projects designed to keep dye transfer viable for a larger population: marrying dye transfer with digital imagery, and producing less costly proofing paper.

Jim Browning, a Lebanon, NH, photographic printer, shared the details of his emulsion, developer and dye formulations. In 1993, Browning became determined to find a

way to continue the process on his own and still compete with less expensive alternatives. He's determined to "...to dye transfer at or below the cost of Iris prints. I wouldn't even consider trying to do this commercially if I couldn't." Jim also described the small-scale sheet coater he's invented.

The third show-and-tell came from EverColor Fine Art of Worcester, Massachusetts. Using samples of his own photography and work he's now doing for La Claire, EverColor president John Wawrzonek detailed three print processes EverColor uses today, all involving digital technology. The first is a pigment transfer process. The second, "Luminage," produces a less labor-intensive yet high-quality result "second only to pigment transfer." The third yields what Wawrzonek calls the "EverColor dye print" that uses four-color separation negatives.

Participants spent the rest of their time swapping stories and tips. Photographer Andy Cross, perhaps the only Australian doing dye transfer today, felt his travel expense was "immaterial compared to what I've learned this weekend. I've learned more in the past day and a half than I probably could have done in ten years over the phone." They also spent hours viewing each other's portfolios: a stunning array of landscapes, still lifes, portraits, abstracts and even 1950s family snapshots. Printer Richard Jackson of Flagstaff, Arizona, declared himself to be "in fine-art print overload." Not surprisingly, these dye printers have mastered other media as well. Jackson's own portfolio was a revelation—simply by opening up his case, he showed the power of Ilfochrome done right—and won more than a few converts.

After Sunday brunch, half the group engaged in an impromptu two-and-a-half-hour session to discuss conclusions and future options. All agreed the weekend had been an exceptional, historic, and surprisingly optimistic event. "I thought I was coming to a memorial service," remarked

Len Zoref. "But maybe it was a revival meeting."

Despite the positive mood there were still questions about the profitability and viability of dye transfer over the long haul. Its cost in materials and labor remains an important issue. Most participants seemed to feel that a link between Paterson's and Wawrzonek's efforts would help its survival. They also conceded that the future of high-quality fine-art photography is not wedded to the future of dye transfer. Charlie Cramer [PT's cover artist, *Sep/Oct 1997*], who has been selling his landscapes for 20 years, reflected on his experience. "In the last several years more and more people have said, 'I never thought I would have bought a photograph.' They didn't care about the process; they just liked the piece."

But how readily can dye people divorce process from product? Participants laughingly acknowledged their "geek" image, but grew serious as they discussed the need for a less technically-oriented approach to marketing. California dye transfer photographer Ctein [PT's cover artist, *Sep/Oct 1996*] commented that photographers need to change both their mindset and their language. "Developing personal relationships is what succeeds. This means getting away from talking about the hardware. Art buyers care about the artists."

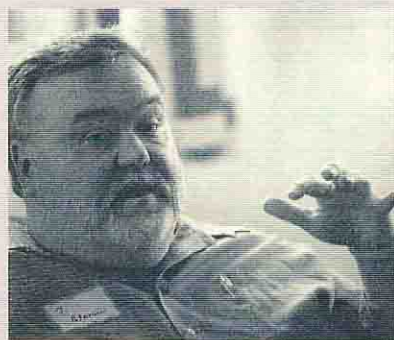
Storey, who has already begun plans for a dye transfer website with links to other sites, wondered aloud at the feasibility of a group show "focused on the same very high-quality, high-end art produced by people who fervently believe in the craft and the vision." Later that day he and several others sat around the Powells' kitchen table to lay the groundwork for a traveling exhibit and catalog.

So does dye transfer have a long-term future? Among those who gathered in Vermont, a core of ardent believers say yes. Many feel it's likely to live on—but in a marriage with convenient digital technology. Cross saw the weekend as a step forward in keeping it alive. "Others in Australia will probably get into it based on my report. If we get others interested enough to buy materials, learn the facts and continue to spread the word, the process may even pick up momentum." If it doesn't, however, he's philosophical about it. "I'd already accepted it when Kodak pulled the plug. If, in the long term, it disappears forever, I'll be able to accept it again."

Dave Doubly, dye transfer teacher and author of *The Dye Transfer Process*, took a historical perspective:

"Photography is technology. It changes because technology changes. The demise of various forms is to be expected—it makes progress to the next step possible. I'm optimistic that processes are getting better, that photography will always be there, and that change is good."

—Leslie Limon



Jay Paterson of Houston describes his dye transfer research to the attentive group.



During a break, participants gather for informal shoptalk.