WHAT PHOTOGRAPHERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT UV PRINTING

UV curable inkjet printers can make a print on just about anything and at incredibly large sizes. BY GREG SCOBLETE

PHOTOGRAPHS ARE often inextricably bound to the media they’re produced on. A filter applied to a digital image might recreate the tone and shadings of a tintype, but the result is nothing like the experience of seeing the real thing.

Therein lies the appeal of UV curable inkjet printing. These printers can put an image on virtually anything: Dibond, aluminum, rubber, copper, latex, gessoed linen, canvas, rag paper, glass, acrylic, wood—any material that can be slid safely under the print head. “We had an artist bring in ten sheets of salvaged scrap metal to print on,” says Joseph Hill, president of ProLab Digital Imaging.

For photographers such as Andrew Moore and Steven Crawford, this media versatility is a prime reason they’re excited by UV technology.

“That’s the real beauty,” Moore says.

“The photograph becomes more of an object.” Moore has had his work printed on Dibond and on Gorilla Glass, the same used to make the iPhone screen.

Crawford says UV printing “changes the nature of what you can do” as a photographic artist. If you print an image on glass, “it changes the image—the image becomes more alive, glowing and bright and ethereal in the day and slowly dimming by evening,” he says.

Once the domain of commercial screen printers and signmakers, UV curable inkjet printers have slowly seeped into the fine-art photographic market as printmakers such as New York-based Laumont Photographics and California’s ProLab Digital Imaging have embraced the technology. “We researched for several years potential systems that would produce, not larger or outdoor-worthy works, but true fine-art quality,” says Philippe Laumont. He found one in the SwissQprint Impala, which he installed in his shop two years ago. Since then, Laumont has used the Impala to print a host of photographic work, including images for Moore and Crawford, on a variety of surfaces.

In broad strokes, UV printing is similar to any inkjet process in that its inks are laid down on a surface. But rather than dry instantly, these inks, which contain none of the water or solvents found in most inkjet inks, need to be cured using ultraviolet radiation from UV LEDs or mercury vapor lamps attached to the print head. An analogous process occurs at a dentist’s office, where UV light is used to solidify cavity fillings. This curing can bind the ink directly to the surface, though in some cases materials are given a pre-coat to make the inks adhere better, Hill says.

As the technology has matured, it has also proliferated. There are now more than 60 brands of UV-curable printers on the market today, says Henry Wilhelm, print permanence expert and founder of Wilhelm Imaging Research. But the majority of those models are four-ink, CMYK or CMYK plus white ink models, not always suitable for the resolution and color fidelity requirements of photographic fine art. “For the high-quality fine-art printing, light cyan, light magenta, and gray inks along with full concentration cyan, magenta, yellow, and black inks plus one or even two white inks are best,” Wilhelm says.

Only two printer vendors are currently able to deliver those specs: EFI and the aforementioned SwissQprint, he says.

The printers themselves have another major benefit that’s enticed photographers: They’re enormous. The SwissQprint Impala used by Laumont, for instance, has a print bed that’s 2.5 x 2 meters in size. That means they can produce very large, continuous prints without seams.

“What got me interested is that I can go so big,” Moore tells us. “The short dimension is 100 inches, which is phenomenal.” While he’s yet to produce his work at that size, he relishes the thought of having his 8x10s produced in those staggering dimensions.

One lingering question that surrounds UV output, particularly for photographers looking to sell their work, is just how long it will last. “If you sell work to someone, you want to have the confidence to say that this will be around for 50 or 100 years,” Crawford says. Having work produced on an archival medium “is good for the artists and for collectors and institutions,” Moore says. “Color is such a fugitive medium.” Hill says that with his Ore Arizona UV printer, the warranty on inks is just one year, even though he has seen UV prints that have resisted fading for far longer.

“With so many printer/ink/printing substrates available, it is not yet possible to give specific guidance as to how long a particular combination will last,” Wilhelm tells us. That said, preliminary data “suggests that in terms of fading of the ink colorants themselves, the substrate itself may have relatively little influence on fading rates, unlike [with] traditional water-base pigment inks, where the printing material can have significant influence on fading rates.”

Wilhelm is currently testing UV prints from SwissQprint printers, paying particular attention to UV inks on acrylic and glass that are illuminated by high-powered LEDs, which he sees as a “very exciting new display mode for large-format fine-art photography.” EFI and other UV printer models will also be tested in the future.

If, as Ansel Adams once remarked, the “print is the performance,” then UV appears to have opened photography up to a number of new stages to play on. All that’s left to determine is just how long the run will be. pdn
CONTENTS

COVER STORIES

BEYOND TRADITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS
PAGE 36

HOW ART CONSULTANTS FIND PHOTOGRAPHERS
PAGE 28

SELLING YOUR OWN PRINTS
PAGE 32

IS UV THE FUTURE OF PRINTING?
PAGE 42

KATY GRANNAN'S FIRST FEATURE FILM
PAGE 76

TOP TRIPODS, RIGS & GIMBALS
PAGE 80

THE CURATOR WINNERS' GALLERY
PAGE 45

PDNEWS

12 Picture Story: Appalachian Odyssey
Photographer Stacy Krantz tiptoes around stereotypes to produce a five-part series about how Appalachians are confronting chronic social, economic and environmental problems. BY DAVID WALKER

16 Grant Opportunity: The Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize
Alexa Dilworth, the publishing and awards director at Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies, offers tips and advice about how to apply for the Lange-Taylor Prize. BY DAVID WALKER

19 Personal Work to Paying Assignments: Kate Parker Finds Empowerment in “Girl Power”
The Atlanta photographer has been busy photographing strong, confident girls and women for commercial clients ever since photographs of her athletic daughters and their friends went viral. BY DAVID WALKER

28 How Art Advisors Work with Artists
Art advisors work with private collectors and corporations to build collections that are both financially and esthetically valuable, helping to provide opportunities to artists at all stages of their careers. BY CONOR RISCH

32 Sell Yourself
Photographers working in every genre are selling fine-art prints directly to fans and collectors. We talked to photographers about how they handle promotion, customer service, shipping and filling orders from customers. BY HOLLY STUART HUGHES

36 Photography’s New Dimensions
By experimenting with photographic materials and pushing beyond the expected framed, editioned, two-dimensional print, photographers are finding new opportunities to present their work. PDN spoke with five artists about how they make, present and sell their photo-based work.

42 What Photographers Need to Know About UV Printing
UV curable inkjet printers can make a print on just about anything and at incredibly large sizes. BY GREG SCOBLETE

FROM THE ARCHIVE

44 How Brands Are Working With Photographers to Attract Consumers
Clients and ad agencies are looking to photographers to help them communicate what their brands stand for. PDN has interviewed creatives who have collaborated with photographers on native ads, branded content and other efforts.

BELOW: Kate Parker made a splash with her personal series “Strong is the New Pretty.” To read about how this success led to commercial assignments highlighting active girls and women, see “Personal Work to Paying Assignments,” page 19.
CONTENTS

CREATE

66 Tough as NAIL
The advertising agency NAIL in Providence, Rhode Island, founded in 1998, has been recognized for innovative branding work for both regional and national clients. Lizzi Weinberg, head of production, talked to PDN about what the branding firm needs from the photographers it hires.
BY HOLLY STUART HUGHES

GEAR & TECHNIQUES

70 How I Got That Shot: Strange Fascination
Clients often hire Sarah Wilmer based on her fantastical fine-art work. For Lea DeLaria’s latest album, she created an uncanny homage to an iconic portrait of David Bowie.
BY HOLLY STUART HUGHES

72 Product Reviews
Freezing time with Sony’s a6300, fiddling with Fujifilm’s X-Pro2 and putting Corel AfterShot Pro 3’s processing prowess to the test.
BY GREG SCOBLETE

76 Frames Per Second: Katy Grannan On Making Her First Feature Film, The Nine
A close friend’s downward spiral helped Katy Grannan find a new way to approach a story about a community of people struggling with addiction, prostitution and violence in California’s Central Valley.
BY CONOR RISCH

80 Tripods, Gimbals & Stabilizers
The latest crop of camera tripods and stabilizers ensure smooth sailing for your stills and video.
BY GREG SCOBLETE

EXPOSURES

88 Twilight Records
To create her ‘Teviot’ series of cyanotype photograms, Jennah Ward toned her images with bleach and tannic acid, coaxing surprising compositions from an historic process.
BY LARISSA ARCHER

90 Country Living
Miriam Romais’s long-term project explores the life of a woman who gave up a career in the city for life as a homesteader.
BY DZANA TSOMONDO

DEPARTMENTS

8 Letter from the Editor
10 Letter from the Publisher
22 Our Picks
94 Reader Comments/Advertiser Index
96 End Frame: Ryan Pfluger on Giving a Gift of Print

This Month on PDNONLINE.COM

SARAH WILMER: FROM FINE-ART TO COMMERCIAL ASSIGNMENTS
A slide show of the personal projects that attract clients’ attention.

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THE FINE-ART MARKET: A PRIMER
Understanding pricing, editioning, record-keeping and what galleries want.
This issue offers some interesting reflections on today's fine-art market. We profile some photographers whose art is not confined to the traditional, editioned print. They are making installations, three-dimensional displays and one-of-a-kind photographic objects. We look at how photographers are using UV printing technology to reproduce their photos on any material they like. We also gather some practical advice for photographers who may not have gallery representation but want to know what it takes to sell their prints themselves directly to interested buyers.

Also in this issue, we recognize emerging fine-art photographers through The Curator competition. It's an incredible opportunity for undiscovered photographers looking to break into the fine-art photography field.

In addition to their work showcased in this issue and promoted online, they'll exhibit at Foley Gallery in New York City with an opening reception, open to the public, on July 14. Last year's exhibition received lots of press, including coverage by W magazine and Observer. Please join us to celebrate these artists.

As a reminder, if you are a PHOTO+ member, you receive a 30-percent discount off fees on contest entries and a 50-percent discount off education at PhotoPlus Expo, plus a free pass onto the show floor. It is so important as freelancers to belong to a community, a trade association or membership program—it's invaluable for both your professional and personal network. Some of the PHOTO+ membership benefits include a one-year subscription to PDN and RangeFinder magazines; member discounts to PhotoPlus Expo, WPPI Conference & Expo, PhotoServe and PSPI; 30-percent discount on PDN and RangeFinder contests and exclusive access to WPPI members-only competitions; discounts with a wide range of our partners offering business services and photo gear; and access to WPPI's new educational certificate program, WPPI-C.

As always, call, write, e-mail, Lauren

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