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DISCOVERING PIEZOGRAPHY

March, 2003: *The version of Piezography reviewed here is the end of an era. At the PMA show this month Cone Editions has announced a new version that does not use proprietary drivers. Instead it is based on custom monochrome profiles for a wide range of current Epson and Canon printers. This review is therefore published here for those still interested in the prior version. — Michael*

Progress Comes From Many Different Corners, Mine Came From The Laundry Room

Photographs & Text by: **Vladimir Kabelik**



With a heavy dose of nostalgia I remember the good old days spent in my black and white darkroom. The music was playing softly and the red light was casting subtle shadows on the opposite wall as I was framing the images under my enlarger. The mood and timing were always significant parts of the magic.

Well, times change, empires collapse, people get married, buy houses and have children. Then, suddenly they realize there is no more room for the magic. In my case, it was not that our marriage was threatened by the darkroom techniques. The reason was more pragmatic - we bought a house that was much too small!

In the beginning, my wife and I reached a reasonable compromise. The darkroom would be built in the laundry room, with all the tubing, cabling and ventilation being suspended from the ceiling so that it would not interfere with the main purpose of this space.

Fine, done, worked well - for a while before our daughter was born. It is difficult to argue aesthetics when the kid needs a clean set of pants. I started seeing the writing on the wall – and the code was digital!



Computers have never attracted me much until I started sniffing around the venerable Amiga after it was introduced to the market what now truly feels like a full century ago. Still, word processing and chess were all I really needed. Then, years later, I bought a Macintosh based Avid editing system for my film work - and it turned my mind around!

Things started moving quickly and photography rapidly came next. I tried the Adobe Photoshop program, and was again impressed. But every coin has two sides. The bad news was that the majority of available scanners were of a pretty average quality and good drum scans were way too costly. Also, the printers did not impress me (yet), and the paper was clearly disappointing. Of course, there were days when my old fashioned mind started missing the purity of the silver based process again.

As many have already discovered years before me, the truth is that once one enters the digital dimension, there is no way of stopping. In the mid of this manic race, my Sheridan colleague Howard Simkins introduced me to Edward Burtynsky of Toronto Image Works. Ed ran some giclee samples for me, and because the vast majority of my work requires a rich scale of black and gray tones, he directed me to Jon Cone of Cone Editions Press in East Topsham, Vt. This is where I have heard the word PIEZOGRAPHY for the first time.

According to Jon, "Piezography is the only automated QuadBlack interface in the world".

In my view, Piezography is also an ideal photo processing method that connects the best of traditional photography (the negative) and the digital domain (file transfer) with the aesthetics and longevity attributed only to hand made printing (archival inks and papers).



In the PiezographyBW process, once the digital file is obtained and adjusted, the inkjet printer colour cartridges are replaced by four (or six) cartridges with various tones of black pigment inks (serious photographers usually opt for two separate printers, one for colour the other for PiezoBW only). The pigment particles are then injected into the paper surface (quad tone printing), giving the final product a rich scale of tones, ranging from deep blacks to light grays. The white levels, like in the conventional darkroom, are set by the type of paper used for printing. The right combination of papers and inks is crucial since it delivers the desired look and feel. Yes, when touched, some piezo surfaces feel somehow expensive (and they actually are compared to typical commercial photolab pricing).

The life expectancy of a piezo image printed on 100% acid free paper is supposed to exceed the silver based process. If proven true, it would be a respectable achievement. I can only say from my own experience that lately even the gallery curators are willing to accept this claim.

Only a few days ago, one of my colleagues entertained me with a little story about a well-known photographer who came to visit a recent exhibition I was also participating in. During his stay he dismissed virtually all digitally altered works, then he paused in front of my photographs proclaiming: "You see, there is nothing like a good black and white print!" His jaw dropped visibly when he was told that even these enlargements were produced digitally by using the piezo technique.

So, what are my ten commandments for future Piezography converts?

1: No longer do you have to think about colour versus black & white film. Shoot colour!

There are many ways to reach the BW scale without losing quality. (I use Fuji stock: Provia 100 and 400 slide films)

2: Use the best possible scanner. Today, drum scanners are not the only answer.

(My favourite scanner is Imacon made in Denmark: www.imacon.dk)

3: Scan in 16 bit mode, print in 16 bit mode!

4: Don't be afraid of bigger digital files. You can always work with smaller copies later but you cannot go the other way around.

5: Get the [PiezographyBW](#) software from Cone Editions Press. It works with many paper profiles and it greatly controls the ink distribution through their surfaces.

6: See your image manipulation software (Photoshop) only as your digital darkroom, nothing else. Retouch, adjust contrast, brightness, etc. but don't be seduced by it, since you are still only a photographer not God the Creator.

7: Once you settle on the ink, choose your papers carefully. Mould-made art papers or Inkjet ready archival papers with a low acid level are really the only choice. (I like the Hahnemuhle collection a lot).

8: Money goes fast, be careful! Do not use your pricey art paper for all your proofing. Epson Photo Quality Inkjet Paper offers itself as an inexpensive alternative that works well with pigment inks, matching closely the main characteristics of the future exhibition print.

9: Acid free storage and matting is a must. Otherwise, please do not talk about collectible values!

10: Join some key Internet groups (www.groups.yahoo.com). They are an invaluable source of information. Interesting sub-groups deal with Piezography, Inkjet Printing, Digital Darkroom techniques, Scanning and Digital Black and White Print just to name a few. Don't be afraid to ask questions - but before you do that (please, please, please) search the group archives!



In closing, let me say that I do not consider myself to be a Piezography expert, I am still learning. Maybe, I am just a few weeks ahead of others, especially those who could keep their key to the wet darkroom a little bit longer. I am sure that people like Alvin Comiter or Wolf Kutnahorsky, both very fine Canadian photographers, have gone through more testing during their digital transformation and would have much more to offer than I.

Even though I am still nostalgic about those good old days, my enlarger is now fully embalmed in sealed garbage bags and protected as a valuable trophy of the past. And my wife is happy because she can do the laundry whenever she pleases thus proving my point that progress could come even from the laundry room.

VLADIMIR KABELIK

- Graduate of FAMU (Academy of Film and Television Arts) in Prague, Czechoslovakia
 - Produced documentaries for Czechoslovak film and television (many of them dealing with photographic subjects)
- Aside from his two individual exhibitions he has published and participated in numerous photographic activities
 - Awarded the Silver Pin by the Guild of Czech Photographers
 - As a political refugee he arrived in Canada in 1982
 - In Toronto, Vladimir continued producing documentaries, mainly for CBC and Vision TV
 - His Canadian photo exhibits include: Niches (Limelight Dinner Theatre), Black & White Blues (Eight Elm Gallery) and Memories (Cannington House Gallery)
- Currently a professor with Sheridan College and principle owner of Artcore Productions Ltd.

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My own review of Piezography can be found [here](#). — Michael

"Issue #6 is wonderful. The inspiration I get from these DVDs is enough to make me want to quit my day job and do art for the rest of my life!"

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