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# Ride On

**Danny Chau on b&w  
and digital printing**



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# Living in harmony

Danny Chau has embraced digital printing alongside traditional b&w: Jon Tarrant reports on the peaceful co-existence of two different technologies

At the age of 16, Danny Chau faced an unusual choice: should he pursue photography, or devote his life to martial arts? 'To get on as a martial arts master you have to enter competitions,' he explains, 'and there are a lot of people who get broken arms and broken legs.' Despite this hazard, Chau's father was not keen on him becoming a photographer for the simple reason that he did not consider it a 'proper job'. Fortunately for the world of printing, Chau junior felt otherwise, and has devoted his life since to pictures.

He studied photography at Newcastle College of Art and Technology, and when he left his father helped him to set-up a studio in Sunderland. Work came from commercial assignments during the week, and weddings at the weekends. 'I used to do a lot of buildings for the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors,' he recalls, 'and one day as I was pushing a trolley loaded with cameras I suddenly wondered what I would be doing in ten years' time. I knew I wanted to be working in photography, but I didn't want still to be pushing a trolley.' As luck would have it, he was offered and took a job working for the BBC printing pictures from the Hulton Getty Library.

'When you go from being a professional photographer to being a printer, there is a transitional period: the thing I had going for me was

that all the photographers whose work I was printing were dead, so I didn't have to deal with all the egos. And the variety of negatives I had to work with has given me an edge and a style of printing, which is basically to print so it looks like the picture hasn't been 'printed' at all. I know some printers with a definite, visible style, but that isn't me.'

Chau moved to London to escape the recession of the Seventies, which hit the North very badly indeed. In 1985 he moved into his current premises in Roseberry Avenue, and just six months later he was joined by Stuart Keegan, who Chau has known since his college days.

'We do b&w processing and printing on resin and fibre, and copy negs, but we also do scanning and retouching and digital prints,' admits Chau, who has printed on Ilford Multigrade paper for the last 15 years. 'I knew when I first tried it that it was the end for graded paper: I used to store shelves of sizes and grades of Record Rapid until I moved to Multigrade – but then, I'm an explorer.' This last comment explains his adoption of digital, but before we come to that there is the traditional side of things to consider.

## DESIGN HOUSES

'A lot of our b&w is for corporate photographers, design houses, some exhibitions, and a lot of personal work. We used to do a lot for

■ All pics this spread © Danny Chau, digitally printed onto artists' watercolour paper.



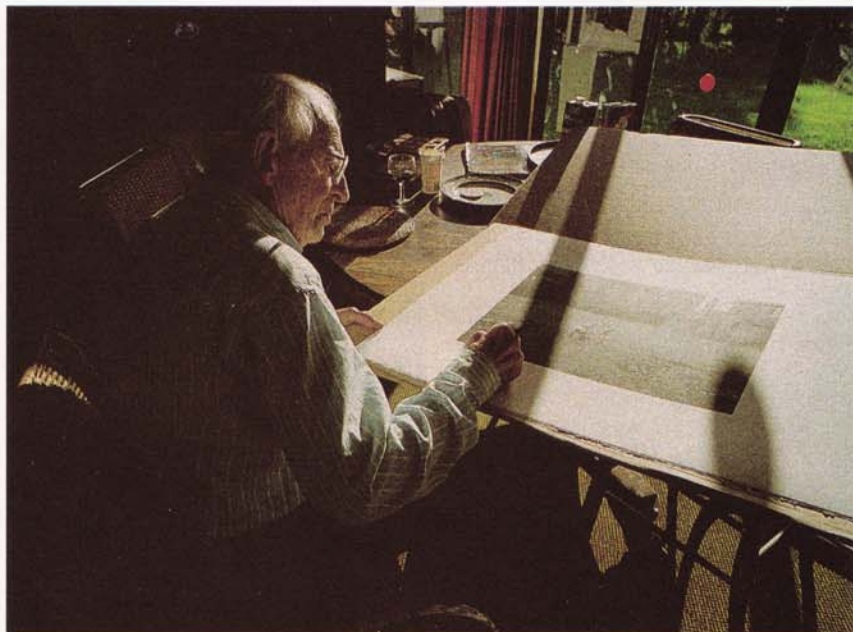
portfolios, but I would say that has dropped by 50%.' Being philosophically modest, Chau reckons that people do not come to him because he is any better than any other printer, but rather because they get on well on a personal level. 'People come to us and say that they've been to somebody else and they weren't happy, but everybody is a good printer if you can work with them. It's like a marriage: a printer inter-





prets the photographer's images, so they've got to be able to work together. If you don't get on, you'll never get the best image.

'A photographer once came to us from Brazil, and we've had a couple of Americans who couldn't find good printers elsewhere. In America, they're moving so much to digital that they're neglecting traditional printing. I think there will be a big hole there in 10-15



*'The only problem is that those people sometimes look for printers who have won awards, and I don't believe in just winning awards and getting your clientele that way'*

years time. I think that is sad.

'I believe in fate: that's why I don't worry about competition. We couldn't possibly do all the work in London. Everybody can make a living. I think this philosophy should be more widespread, then people wouldn't suffer so much. If anybody wants anything bigger than 20x24in, we always send them to Downtown Darkrooms – Mike Spry is probably the last of the real large format printers.'

#### BIG SPENDERS

'The future for b&w lies in personal and private work. There are people who don't work in photography who are very happy to spend a lot of money on their hobby. As long as they are around, traditional printing will survive. The only problem is that those people sometimes look for printers who have won awards, and I don't believe in just winning awards and getting your clientele that way. Awards can make a printer, but they can break them too because everybody comes to you and you can't cope. I don't want to do that. When people come to us and ask what big name photographers we print for, we say we don't print for any – because we view everybody the same. The assistants of today are the big name photographers of tomorrow. If I make it, I make it; if I don't, I don't. But whatever happens it is because of what I do, not the people I work for.'

It is questionable whether or not this purity of spirit is still as strong in those starting out in photography today. At Vision2000, Chau was one of the portfolio commentators, and was disappointed by some of the attitudes of those attending. 'One person wanted me to say which direction he should go in, but I said it depends how dedicated you want to be. There are so many different areas of photography. Another

guy said he was going to give photography three years, and I said he might as well just give up now. You have to be dedicated: photography has to be your life. If you're only going to give it three years, you might as well not bother.'

The other quality of younger photographers is an apparently less critical approach to matters of quality. 'They don't have the precision of older photographers,' observes Chau. 'If they can't get the picture out on the film, they get it out in the print. They accept less quality, but that doesn't mean we're going to let our guard down.' This determination is particularly relevant in the context of colour negative film, which more and more photographers, especially younger ones, are now shooting for its superior latitude compared to transparencies. Indeed, so buoyant is this sector that Chau and Keegan are thinking about installing their own C-41 line.

#### DIGITAL RETOUCHING

That move makes particular sense in the context of digital retouching, which Chau has already embraced in a big way. 'Computers started out as a hobby for me. I had an Acorn BBC computer, then an XT, then an AT (286). At that time, a Mac was way, way beyond my means. I had an early HP printer that did 180dpi – I was amazed at that quality then.' This last comment is accompanied by an appropriate chuckle that reflects how far things have moved since, a fact also reflected by the website that now exists for Danny Chau Photolabs ([www.dcphtolab.com](http://www.dcphtolab.com)).

'Five years ago, I spent a lot of money to put in high-end equipment. I wouldn't offer a service until I was comfortable with it. I'd been playing with Photoshop all that time, but only started to offer it as a service 18 months ago.



■ Near left: Nude on chair © Frank Herholdt. Far left top: Portrait of little girl © Vibeke Dahl. Far left bottom: Teenager with hands behind head © Moni Howarth. All prints by Danny Chau.

People come to me because of what I can do, but I want to build up slowly so I can cope with the workload. Printing is just like photography: two photographers can have the same cameras and one takes really fabulous pictures, and the other one doesn't.

'As a lab, we know that it is all going digital. Most of the photographers we know have an Epson 1200 and a Mac. Many people also have enlargers, but it doesn't mean they can produce a good print. We're bringing the same skills to digital that we bring to b&w prints. A lot of people can retouch colour, but they can't hack b&w. They don't know what is good contrast, and there is no 'signature' in the print. There is a lot of competition in digital, but we're going to keep up our standards so we can stay at the top of the market.'

#### **POLLUTED ENVIRONMENT**

'People talk about longevity, but if the print is good enough to put on the wall, that's good enough. You can't guarantee longevity on a traditional print now because of our polluted environment. Better longevity for digital prints is only a matter of time, but people will always want quality images. When people see what we can do with digital, they don't want to go back to traditional.'

'But we will always offer traditional b&w for as long as there is the work. There's no way you can get a neutral black digitally unless you want to end up with something that just looks like a resin print. The world is changing much quicker than most of us would like. No amount of pre-planning will save the day – only our actions and reactions to what happens around us.'

That said, Chau has no desire to move to the cleaner air of the country by taking advantage of the 'remote working' possibilities offered by digital media. 'In America,' he reports, 'they have found that in remote working there are a lot of victims because people don't get enough personal contact. For me, there is a moment of excitement when you show somebody a print, whether it is traditional or digital. Those are interactions that I wouldn't want to lose.'

'The world is divided into three types of people; labourers, academics and creatives. Without labourers we wouldn't have houses or chairs; without academics we wouldn't have any learning or systems; without creatives the world would just be a very dull place. As printers, we accepted a long time ago that we would be the back-room boys and let photographers take all the glory. Photographers ask how we can stay in the dark when there is sunshine outside? People don't realise the printer's mentality: whether it is sun or rain outside, you are cocooned in the darkroom. We accept wholeheartedly that we are printers, whether it is traditional or digital, and what we bring to photography.'

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