



Left Scanned directly from a Polaroid Type 55 negative, the 'selenium tone' in this print is produced by (Image> Adjust) Colour balance. The inputs are tiny – only about 3R and 2Y in shadow, midtone and highlight

Developing passions

Danny Chau made a name as a traditional black & white printer, but now works almost solely in digital. His passion for the craft means his standards are high, as Jerry Lebens discovers

IT CAN'T HAVE BEEN pleasant for Danny Chau, as he greeted me at his Clerkenwell studio. It was a hellishly hot day and I'd spent the journey up from Brighton getting lightly poached and irritable in a heated(!) railway carriage. Fortunately, Danny found no problem in dealing with an interviewer who resembled a sweaty tomato and who proceeded to empty his water cooler.

Danny's company, Chaudigital, is probably the foremost British company specialising in the production of digital black & white

images, as well as being a demonstrator and reseller of high quality digital resources.

All the same, Danny has a background of traditional black & white printing, and it's the same skills and passion for craftsmanship and photography, that drove him as a photography student, 20 years ago in Newcastle, that still drive him today. 'I arrived at college having been fascinated by photography since I was 13. As a student I was always looking for work (commercial photography in the week and social photography at the weekends), and >



Above The original four frames that make up this panoramic image were taken with a long lens and stitched together in PhotoShop. This gives a unique perspective, quite unlike that of a wideangle lens

that carried on when I came down to London. Sadly though, commercial work was destroying my love of photography, so one day I decided to take another direction.'

Luckily, within a month Danny was offered work, printing for the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and this in turn brought in work from the BBC Hulton Picture Library (now the Hulton Archive). 'I'd already been given a good grounding at college, but this was where I learned my craft as a printer,' he recalls. 'The glass plates could be in an awful condition, and this added to all the problems associated with poor processing and storage. I learned to deal with any eventuality, and I guess the word got around.'

How did the transition from trad black & white to digital come about? 'I've always loved computers and I'd worked on and off with digital images, which was equally interesting. About six years ago, digital output became mainstream and accessible and I soon realised that my knowledge was ahead of the game. But it isn't purely the technology that interests me. Being a traditional or digital printmaker is

a constant challenge: I really enjoy working with people and the satisfaction of a job well done. Most important, now I have the freedom to develop my own photography, just for me.

'It's incredible how fast things have changed. I've still got a darkroom downstairs and I won't close it, but 95% of my business is digital now and I can't imagine going back. I'm convinced that I can achieve the same results that I used to, via wet processing, by digital – but it's my craftsmanship and grounding in traditional monochrome that allows me to say that with confidence.'

As we chatted we were being watched. A larger than life Samuel Beckett, as in Jane Bown's famous portrait, glared at us from an easel by the door. Danny followed my thoughts. 'I scanned it from an A3 print, now it's A2. The blacks are just as intense as the original, the deep shadow details across the shoulder are retained, every strand of hair, every wrinkle. But more than that, digital introduces a new freedom for photographers. They can now be seen as image makers in their own right, no longer tied to a limited range of traditional media.'

Right This image was scanned directly from a 6x9 negative, shot on Agfa APX 400



Surely he was referring to what was only achievable with the most expensive and esoteric technology? 'No. Of course I've got the best Flextight scanners for scanning 10x8in transparencies, but at the same time there's the Minolta Dimage 5400 (35mm) scanner over there – in my opinion a match for the Flextight. Then there are the printers. OK, mine are large format Epsoms (a Stylus Pro 7600 and a 9600) but the Epson Stylus 2100 is equivalent, and I use the same Ultrachrome inks in my big printers that operate in the 2100. Lastly, I use Hahnemuhle papers for most of my output, which isn't so expensive considering the quality.'

Ultrachrome inks for black & white images? Not hex channel black inksets? 'No, the Ultrachrome inks can reproduce a continuous tone mono image using the full colour inkset without problems. It's all a matter of good profile calibration. Again, I use high end Gretag Macbeth systems, which would probably be expensive for an amateur, but the Pantone Spyder system, for instance, should give similar accuracy.'

And to prove it, Danny led me to his workstation, where the two printers stood flanking a Mac G4 Cube with a 22in Apple LCD monitor. First he summoned up an astonishingly rich and detailed 100Mb (RGB) scan of a 35mm colour transparency from the Minolta scanner. Then, in Photoshop 7, he selected an arbitrary rectangle (Image> Adjustment), desaturated it and proceeded to give the selection appropriate contrast by working in (Image>Adjustment) Curves (using



CRAG EASTON

the individual RGB curves). Lastly, the whole colour image, with a monochrome section, was printed out on the 9600. Not a trace of a colour or strange artefact in the mono. Damn.

Anyone who can convince me that my two Epson A3 printers (one for colour, one for mono) are obsolete, along with my very expensive Heidelberg scanner – and to happily demonstrate this to me on the hottest day of the year while remaining utterly charming and fascinating throughout, must be – no, *is* – a very, very, nice man indeed. And, fortunately for me, Danny has everything I need in stock. Sometimes, I think, when life gives you lemons, you have to take out a contract on the lemon growers. ☺

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Above Scanned from a black & white print, the tone in this print was added using (Image> Adjustment) Variations (fine)

Danny's tips for good printing



● Whether making a traditional wet print, or using digital methods, printing technique

is important but feelings are more important – let your emotions guide you.

● When you are a beginner, and unsure about tone and contrast, make a series

of lighter and darker prints, leave them on the wall and take your time to decide which you prefer.

● Try printing for someone else who is experienced and can give you clear ideas of what they like – do it for the challenge of seeing things through the eyes of another person.

● Wet printers, especially, should stick to one paper type until they really know what to expect from it, to learn its characteristics. Jumping from one material to another is enticing, but makes it hard to consolidate skills.

● Always scan from a gloss print, as other finishes may create problems later.