



THE VISION COLLECTIVE. WEEK TWENTY TWO.

Print Your Work

The way photographers work has changed dramatically since digital became the dominant process by which we make photographs. While change has brought a lot of good, it can also be argued to be a step backward for the craft. One of those backward steps has been the loss of the print as the primary way we enjoy photographs themselves, and I want to argue that if you want to be a serious craftsman (regardless of gender), you must either learn to print or have your work printed.



Printing makes you a better photographer. It makes you pay attention to details on a new level, pushing you beyond the point where you believe your work is fine if as long as it looks OK on an iPad or an Instagram account. Printing an image to 17x22 (as an example) will show you flaws in your work, and because there is a cost involved, will encourage you to be more diligent. It will also show you where you're getting lazy with focus or exposure. When I returned to printing after a several-year hiatus that I now regret, I realized how sloppy my exposures had become; almost all of them were underexposed by about one to two stops, which then had to be fixed by pulling details out of shadows that weren't always there and introducing new issues with noise. Compositions show their strengths and weaknesses in a large print—small distractions on an iPhone screen become hard to turn a blind eye to when they're printed.

Printing also forces us to live with our work and the more we live with that work, the more we come to know ourselves, see new possibilities, and consider new directions. That's just how creativity works. But many of us now move so quickly from capture to display (Instagram, Facebook, or blog within hours of making the image) that we don't ever get the opportunity to consider getting beyond the emotional context of the making and into a place of greater honesty and clarity about our work. Printing gives you that.

Here's my process: when I return from photographing (which for me, is always when I travel), I constrain myself to a number of prints, whether 12, 24, or 100. It depends on what the work is and how productive, or long, my work was. And I print them all at least in 8x10, but more often 11x17 or 17x22 / A2 size. I put a great

deal of care into those images, and the constraint of “only 12” or “only 24” forces me to choose my best and not polish my turds. It costs something to do this, so if it’s not print worthy, it’s not good enough to be shown. That has been a tremendous help to me. And for images I’m unsure about (or maybe a little too in love with), I hang them and live with them. Sometimes I mark them up with a red Sharpie when I see flaws or things that I didn’t notice at first and then reprint them. Eventually, they go into boxes and I store them. Some get printed again to sell to clients, and some are given away.

After returning from any trip, I import, run backups (with extreme paranoia), process, and start printing my images. Below are a few images of my studio to show you how I live with my work. The dolphin prints are from an ongoing series. I’m always photographing, always printing. The large metal chest of drawers is one way I store the prints I make.





Printing makes me a better photographer. Period. If I were running a photography school I would require my students to consistently print their work, to pore over the prints, to discuss them with others, and to be willing to consider reprinting until they get it right. I would also require them to live with it for a while before they shared it with the world, to take a more considered approach to what they select as their best work.

Those are the pragmatic details, but it's more than that. There's something deeply satisfying about having an end point and knowing it's done; the pleasure of holding the work in your hands, of having truly made something you're proud of. I enjoy photography much more when I print. There are other arguments for printing, not the least of which is leaving a legacy instead of hard drives, but I'll leave that to you to wrestle with.

Creative Exercise

If you take your photography seriously, I encourage you to get a decent entry-level printer (or better) and begin printing your work. I use an Epson P800 and it makes some of the best digital prints I've ever created; the black and whites are particularly gorgeous. Yes, this costs you something. But so does a new lens. So do all the camera bags and the widgets and the pieces of gear we use once and realize they aren't as magical as we'd hoped.

If you truly can't justify the expense, consider buying one with a friend or two and splitting the expenses. If that isn't doable, print your work with a pro to benefit from the tangibility of holding and living with your prints. Send a few images a month to a service like [mPix](#) or [White House Custom Colour](#). If books are your thing, consider making a book through any of the on-demand services like [Artifact Uprising](#) or [Blurb](#).

Your exercise is to do it, regardless of the direction you choose. Order a printer, or dust off your old one. Open your browser and do what it takes to order prints of the 12 best images you made last year. Make a book from that recent project. Remember the project I asked you to do at the very beginning of this course? Get the most from it by printing it.

I beg you to trust me on this one. Print your work. Get it off your hard drives. Hold it. Consider it. Study it. Learn from it. Repeat.



Study the Masters

W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) was an American photojournalist with an uncanny sense of timing and humanity. Often credited as the father of the photo essay, Smith began his career making photographs for papers in Wichita, Kansas, before moving on to *Newsweek* and then *Life* (which he eventually left over an argument about how they used his images of Albert Schweitzer), after which he joined Magnum. Smith had a reputation for being uncompromising in his principles and work, which no doubt made him tough to work with, but adds to the reasons he remains so celebrated for his work.

Smith is probably most well known for his WWII work, but his photographs from home are no less captivating. There's a darkness to his photography that I find especially compelling and human. Among my favourites are the dressing room candid of Charlie Chaplin, below, and the image above of *Tomoko Uemura in her Bath*, Minamata, Japan.



Further Study

If you have an interest in visual storytelling, you couldn't do much better than spending some time with W. Eugene Smith's photographs. [*Let Truth be the Prejudice*](#), [*The Jazz Loft Project*](#), or [*W. Eugene Smith, Master of the Photographic Essay*](#) are excellent introductions to his work.

Final Comments

As always, if you're looking for me, you can find me on [my blog](#), on [Facebook](#), and on [Instagram](#). If you missed any issues of The Vision Collective, [you can get them here in the archive](#). See you next week.

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin

