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PROFILE:

Chuck Henningsen

"Master of Photographic Printing Processes"

by Paul Slaughter

It was early May. The Taos Mountains of the Sangre de Cristo range were topped with a late spring snow, resembling a white tiara ringing the northern part of Taos, New Mexico. In downtown Taos I turned my Toyota 4Runner right onto Kit Carson Road, drove barely two-tenths of a mile, then turned left onto Morada Lane. A polite driver coming toward me pulled over and waited for me to pass on the narrow lane. At the end of the lane is the historic estate once owned by heiress, pacifist and New York writer Mabel Dodge Luhan, and later by actor and director Dennis Hopper. In the large, quaint adobe surrounded by cottonwood trees, Mabel entertained numerous celebrated artists, including painter Georgia O'Keeffe, writer D.H. Lawrence, composer Leopold Stokowski and photographer Ansel Adams.

Just to the right of the Luhan estate, now a bed and breakfast, is the elegant, contemporary Chuck Henningsen Fine Art Gallery and Gardens. I had met Chuck a few years ago when he took me on a tour of his gallery and darkroom. Now, on this spring morning, we sat down in the comfortable gallery space and the gregarious and seem-



Above: "Out of the Chrysalis I," Taos, NM, 2004; digital archival print Right: "Into the Chrysalis III," Taos, NM, 2005; digital archival print



ingly ageless Chuck Henningsen talked about his life and the evolution of his nearly 30-year photographic career.

Chuck, now a renowned photographer and master printer, was born in Des Moines, Iowa, where he attended high school and graduated from Iowa State University with honors and a degree in industrial engineering. His first job in the 1950s was with the then-small firm Hewlett-Packard—when Silicon Valley had only a handful of high-tech companies. When Chuck left HP after four years, he and two partners formed a company that manufactured electronic raw materials.

Two Fortuitous Meetings

Chuck's interest in photography began in 1976 when he took a trip to Yosemite Valley, wandered into the Ansel Adams Gallery (part of Ansel's early home), and

friendly." Chuck was bitten by the photographer's bug. He bought a Hasselblad system, and later a 4x5 Sinar view camera, and began taking classes with Ansel at Yosemite. At his first class everyone had a portfolio to present except Chuck. He felt embarrassed but persevered; he never looked back. It was in these classes he learned the Zone System and the basic techniques of photography and printing. These classes were to be his only formal photographic training. On his three acres in Portola, California, he built his first darkroom in the guesthouse. In every free hour from his company, he was in the darkroom printing or creating photographs. From

purchased his first photograph, an Adams print, for \$200. Ansel, by this time was well known and living in Carmel, California. He happened to be visiting Yosemite, and Chuck was invited to dinner with Ansel, family and friends. Chuck recalls, "Ansel was open and

time to time he would visit Ansel and show him his latest photographs and receive printing advice.

In 1983, on one of his many trips to the Southwest, Chuck was photographing at a favorite location, Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. His Navajo guide told him about the well known Native American artist, R.C. Gorman, who grew up in Canyon de

Left: "Graffiti II," San Francisco, CA, 1993; Ilfochrome print Below: "Time Square Jazz II," New York City, 1995; Ilfochrome print



Chelly and now lives in Taos, so Chuck visited Taos and met the artist. Chuck was fascinated at how much some of his Southwest landscape photography mirrored Gorman's paintings. The meeting was fortuitous and would change Chuck's life. First, there would be a collaborative book venture featuring Gorman's art and Chuck's extremely creative black-and-white images of R.C., local Taos people, and church and pueblo architecture. They took a layout of the book to New York,

(Continued on page 110)



Above: "An Iowa Memory," Zehring, Iowa, 1999; platinum/gum print **Below:** "Esso Station," Wolfburg, Germany, 1996; platinum/gum print

where several publishers wanted it. They settled on Little Brown. The book was a big success, selling over 25,000 copies.

Secondly, Chuck fell in love with the artistic community in the sleepy little town of Taos. He sold the share of his company in California and purchased the Luhan guesthouse and moved to Taos. His engineering background was an asset when he bought an adjoining five acres and built his underground 2500-square-foot darkroom. It is complete with a high-tech, platinum light source, a 50-inch color processor, an E6 roller-transport processor, and a finishing area with a dry-mount press and laminator that can laminate up to 50x120-inch prints. Today, Chuck prints up to 30x40-inch platinum/gum prints, up to 50x120-inch Ilfochrome (Cibachrome) prints, and up to 44x65-inch digital prints. A year after completing the darkroom, he built a 4500-square-foot modern house on top of the darkroom. This is his living space, as well as his gallery. A skylight runs the length of the building, giving

natural light in the gallery.

Platinum Printing

Chuck met photographer, Tom Millea, (see *Rangefinder*, Jan. 2005 issue) the modern pioneer of platinum printing, who taught him the art of platinum printing. Chuck explains, "Because I feel that the

platinum emulsion offers greater depth and subtleties than any other photographic process, I have been handcrafting platinum prints for over 20 years. Six years ago, I added to the process by over-coating the gum dichromate emulsion mixed with watercolor. Both of these emulsions came on the scene in the late 1800s and were discontinued in the 1920s because they could only be contact printed. Today, I print platinum/gum prints with a 6000-watt high-intensity light source. Producing a long scale, 30x40-inch negative is a technical feat that has taken me years to master. The platinum emulsion is hand-coated on 100 percent mold-made rag paper, contact printed, and dried. The gum dichromate/watercolor emulsion is over-coated in single or multiple tones. The large negative is reregistered, the print re-exposed, and developed, thus allowing the colored emulsion to become an integral part of the finished platinum print."

Photographic Collages

For years, Chuck says, "I struggled with my love of modern art and the camera's somewhat opposing penchant for capturing imagery with detailed realism." The collage cutouts by the French Impression-



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ist painter Matisse gave Chuck an idea. He began cutting out shapes and arranging them in overlapping collages. Next, he cut each shape into a mask that could be affixed to the front of a view camera film holder. This would allow him to capture only the imagery within that particular shape. Then he could affix a different mask and photograph a different fragment on top of the first. The final sheet of film, with all its overlapping shapes, could contain as many as 30 exposures.

It would be slightly underdeveloped in



Left: "Flowers for Coco," Paris, France, 1999; platinum/gum print Right: "Ansel and the Range of Light," Yosemite, CA, 1976; platinum/gum print

an E6 processor to pull down the high values where the shapes overlap. The final, single transparency is then printed on the beautifully saturated Ilfochrome paper. Chuck calls this process abstract realism.

Solarization and Man Ray

Years back, Chuck met Man Ray's widow, Juliet, in Paris. After dinner one evening Juliet took Chuck to see the small apartment she and Man Ray had shared. It was jam-packed with Man Ray's creations. Man Ray's unique solarization work inspired Chuck to solarize black-and-white negatives, starting with nudes. He dis-

covered that solarizing the negatives of religious sites or spiritual icons seemed to release the energy built up over the ages of worship. Chuck comments, "Strange things seem to happen when these negatives are solarized, and, as a result, all of my religious work is processed this way. I'm anxious to resume touring the world's great religious venues and plan to take an extended trip in the near future to places like Angkor Wat in Cambodia."

Digital Photography

"Whether we like it or not, the digital age is upon us," Chuck says. "Kodak no longer makes the graphic arts films essential to platinum prints. The longevity of other wet photographic processes is in question. My early digital work comprised highly manipulated single nudes



called the 'Venus Collection.' But I longed for something much more complex, and my 4x5-inch colored collage transparencies provided the answer. By scanning the large, colored transparencies, I could manipulate them in Photoshop, thus creating abstract ribbons of color, which contained the texture and detail of their architecture or neon subject matter. My model was at the front end of what we call a mid-life crisis, and our work together became much more poignant and haunting. By weaving the ribbons of color, already scanned, into the computer and integrating the digital figure, I was able to create large digital prints with detail I had never imagined could be achieved in digital photography. I called that work: "The Chrysalis Series."

Today, Chuck makes digital prints as long as seven feet, with as many as 21 layers, with detail as fine as he achieved with optically produced color collages. He uses a Nikon D100 for digital capture, an Epson 3200 scanner and an Epson 9600 printer.

Chuck enjoys both antique and very modern photographic processes. He continues to photograph landscapes several times a year, using a Sinar or Linhof Super Technika view camera, and generates five or six complex colored collages annually. "The digital work is progressing in many different directions. I like to innovate digital imagery during studio down time, such as waiting for prints to be processed or to dry. I like to let my mind wander and allow my psyche to lead me where it wants. I go into most shoots knowing I have several techniques in my arsenal: straight platinum, solarized platinum, colored collages and digital. I work hard to never prejudge what's around the next bend. That allows the element of surprise to fire up my creative juices."

Henningsen Fine Art exhibits Chuck's creative, inventive and diverse prints as well as works by Strand, Weston, Karsh, Uelsmann, up-and-coming photographers, other artwork and modern sculpture. There is also a print of Adam's famous photograph "Moonrise Over Hernandez, New Mexico." Chuck selected this print from 25 Ansel presented to him to choose from at his Carmel home.

Chuck's first one-man show was in 1979. Since then, he has had almost 50, including one at the prestigious International Center of Photography in New York. Today, he markets his work through galleries around the nation.

Chuck shares his thoughts about his artistic mission: "Creativity is a beast often wild and unfettered, but many times also subtle and elusive. Give it its head, and listen carefully to its heart, and it will whisk you to thrilling places, hitherto unimagined."

To see more of Chuck's work visit his web site: www.henningsenfineart.com/.



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