

ART SCHOOL

Gelatin Silver: Justin Kestenbaum

In 1976 I moved to East Lansing, Michigan from New Jersey to be with my wife to be. I had graduated college and held a B.A. in English but I was developing an increasing interest in photography. Carrying a briefcase with unpublished poems in one hand and a Canon F1 in the other, I joined Diane in East Lansing. It was here that I met a man named Justin Kestenbaum who became a dear friend and photographic mentor. Justin was a Professor of History at Michigan State University; though in a former life he was a professional darkroom technician working for several large photo labs in Chicago.

At our first meeting in 1976 I told Justin that I had taken two photo courses in New Jersey. He asked to see some of my work and I showed him a small portfolio of 8x10 prints. He quickly glanced through the pile of prints (I thought a little *too* quickly) and handed them back. He then made an odd request: "May I see the negatives?" Puzzled, I produced same. After a brief examination and with a heavy sigh he remarked: "Not only are your negatives severely overexposed, they are also grossly over-developed. That is why there is no shadow detail in your prints and your highlights are burned out." (What?) "You wouldn't have these problems if you had shot Tri-X at 200, learned how to meter, and developed for 6.5 minutes in D-76 built from scratch." (From what?) "I'll make a deal with you," Justin said. "I'll teach you all I know about photography on one condition." "What's that?" I asked. "That you forget everything anyone ever taught you about photography."

What followed was a 20 year friendship. Over the years I learned to meter, develop film and print black and white photographs under his tutelage. I also cut Justin's grass, and shoveled snow; we ran errands and had lunch together once a week. Simply put, it was a Master-Apprentice relationship employing the "wax-on, wax-off" pedagogy.

Remembrances:

- I would be working on a print and Justin would enter the darkroom. Looking at one of my finished prints floating in the holding tray he would casually ask, "With your permission ... may I make a print using your negative?" Standing in front of the enlarger he would switch the enlarger lamp on and off in rapid succession. Using this technique he was able to visualize the negative image projected onto the easel as a *positive*. Satisfied with what he saw, Justin would close down the lens a stop or two then set the audible timer to produce one second "beeps". Activating the enlarger lamp with a foot switch he would instantly begin "dodging" the image with his hands, when he felt enough time had transpired for the overall exposure he would cup his hands and begin "burning" selected areas of the print. "Might have needed a second or two more," he might remark, as he casually tossed the print into the developer tray. When *his* print finished coming up in the fixer it was night and day. Justin's print of

my negative, the one I had been working on for two hours, was ten times better than mine and took him 30 seconds to produce. “Not too bad”, he would quip, rocking the print back and forth in the fixer tray. “Well, I’m off.” he’d say. “Keep at it.”

- One thing Justin and I never talked about was the subject matter of my photographs – it was always about making the best possible *print* from the negative that had been produced. Looking back, this was both an asset and detriment. It was an asset because it rescued me from Art School jargon and touchy-feely criticism. I remember a friend of mine who was taking an MFA in photography at the University of Michigan. Against his better judgment he attended an informal “get-together” of his fellow graduate students. When the work of one of the participants was discussed the consensus of the group was that the images were weak because this woman hadn’t divorced her husband. I rest my case. On the other hand, a detriment because had I had more input the travels down dead end roads might have been avoided, or at least shortened. It’s water under the bridge. Looking back I wouldn’t have changed a thing.

- I was reading a lot of Ansel Adams at the time and unofficially enrolled myself in the “f.64” school of photography. (Although I thought Adams was a brilliant scientist I felt Edward Weston was a brilliant poet.) I remarked one day that “Those Adams’ negatives must really be something!” Justin responded: “You have to remember, Robert, we saw negatives that good every day in Chicago.” For some reason this was a revelation to me. It punctured the balloon of “artistic work” versus “commercial work” as if the two were somehow mutually exclusive. Photography, I learned, was a *trade* like plumbing, and should be practiced and respected as such. So much for artistic infatuation.

- Justin walked me through the growing pains of moving up in format from 35mm to medium format. Although I found the leap in class to be difficult I soon discovered that what I really wanted was a bigger negative - before digital, all photographers wanted bigger negatives.

- Justin died January 30, 1995 and I miss him. I made the jump from medium format to large format after his death only because of what he had taught me. I made all the mistakes any first time large format shooter makes but I was able to figure things out. Justin was a teacher and he had prepared me -that’s what teachers do.

Wet-Plate: John Coffey

In the summer of 2002 I got lucky. I was enrolled in the first workshop of my life located in Peter’s Valley, New Jersey. I had signed up to learn the wet-plate collodion photographic process, but a week before the class was scheduled to begin I received word that the class had

been canceled.

A day later I was on the phone with Mike Jacobson who operates Artcraft Chemical ordering more chemistry for my silver printing and told him about the cancelation in NJ. Mike told me he was attending John Coffey's wet-plate Jamboree in upstate NY that week and asked if I wanted to join him. John who?

I joined Mike at the Jamboree held on John's 49 acre farm outside Dundee, NY. I remember making a pest of myself, following Nate Gibbons around and bugging him with questions as he made beautiful, large format plates – one after the other. I watched John flow a 20x24 inch piece of glass with something called "collodion." I didn't know a soul at the Jamboree, but everyone I spoke with couldn't have been friendlier. The following day I summoned the courage to approach this Coffey Guy and ask him if I could enroll in one of his tutorials. John is what? 6'4"? Wearing a full beard, the biggest hat I'd ever seen, and a rather severe countenance; this was not an easy request to make. We didn't speak much, but we did arrange for me to take a tutorial later that same year.

I returned in September with photographer Daniel Levine – there were only the two of us in the class. The weather was cool, the ground was mud and I stepped into a world I wish I had entered 10 years earlier. From the first, I realized John Coffey was another teacher. John's approach to teaching the wet-plate collodion process is organic: spilling collodion on your hand as you try to flow a plate is organic, the silver nitrate stains on your fingers is organic, and wrapping your body in the black cloth of the dark-box just when the wind kicks up is organic. Hell, the damn ankle-deep mud is organic! In the chilly evenings we ate hotdogs and corn on-the-cob around John's campfire and John talked wet-plate. The wet-plate collodion photographic process was born in 1850 and surpassed by the dry-plate process by 1871. When you study with John Coffey you are transported back in time, perhaps immersed in time, would be a better way to say it. I cannot imagine a better way to learn the rudiments of this process.

I returned to Michigan with John's 10 pound *Wet-Plate Collodion Photography in the Field Workshop Manual or The Doer's Guide to Wet-Plate Photography* and began to answer the question: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? I built a dark-box that got a little out-of-hand and holds the name: "Robert's Folly". ("out-of-hand" meaning I needed to secure a zoning variance from The City of East Lansing in order to pour the concrete base upon which "Robert's Folly" is built.) I set about ordering wet-plate chemicals from Mike Jacobson, building a silver bath, and having an 8x10 wet-plate back built by The Star Camera Company; I was off and running. In the following years I had a Whole Plate and an 11x14 Camera built by Star Camera and acquired several 19th century lenses and moved up in plate size from 3x4 inches to 11x14 inches.

Robert Turney 2011
April 16, 2011