

Over the years, *B+W Photography* has prided itself on featuring not only photographers, but darkroom printers too. Or at least, we used to. These days they are thin on the ground – many have, for commercial reasons, turned their hand to the digital process, others have diversified in different ways – but one man has held his ground, Robin Bell, and today he is one of the most sought after printers in the world.

Tucked away in a mews in Fulham, his small studio and darkroom have seen some of the most revered photographers of our generation seeking him out to print their images. And these days Robin is the first port of call for institutions such as the National Portrait Gallery for printing work from their archives – he recently printed the 75 or so pictures for the Ida Kar exhibition held at the gallery earlier this year.

But it wasn't so long ago that Robin feared that his livelihood might slip away with the onslaught of the digital revolution that made the alchemy of the darkroom seem old fashioned and obsolete. In the days of instant communications and hi-speed everything, the specialist skills needed and the time taken in the darkroom seemed a luxury that no-one could afford. Fortunately, there has now been a sea change.

What Robin is doing in his darkroom is



SILVER FOOTPRINT

With the undeniable resurgence of film, fine art printer **Robin Bell** has found that his skills, once regarded as a dying art, are now much sought after. With this in mind photographer and filmmaker **Richard Dunkley** set out to document his work. The result is an intriguing and original film

recognised as a dying art, and perhaps it's that that has re-ignited interest from all around the photographic world. Award winning photographer and filmmaker Richard Dunkley, a long-time client of Robin's, realised how important Robin's work is, and decided that he would make a film about it.

When I meet up with Richard and Robin at Robin's studio, I am curious to know how the idea was conceived. In 2009 Robin published a book, entitled *Robin Bell's Silver Footprint*, featuring the work he has printed for clients over the years. A flick through the pages reveals pictures by Linda McCartney, Tom Stoddart, Norman Parkinson, Terry O'Neill, Don McCullin...the list could go on. Shortly after the publication of the book (in which his work was included), Richard was at a film festival and saw a film that started him thinking. 'It was about a rather grumpy old chap who had a studio stacked high with original copies of some of the most famous

Top Robin Bell and Richard Dunkley

Below Robin Bell working at the enlarger. Robin has printed for many of the most revered photographers of our time



Top Careful re-touching is all part of the printer's work
Right Robin's studio is littered with images and files that virtually trace the history of photography over the last century

'They used to be everywhere. It wasn't a question that they were dying off, they were just closing down. Only people like Robin who were doing really high end fine art printing seemed to have a purpose any more.'

Richard at this stage was taking advice from people in the film industry and was surprised to discover that they thought it could be a very popular festival film. 'I was told by one distributor that it had to be 30 minutes because it had high possibilities for television – arts TV, middle of the night TV, not prime time!' he laughs. 'One editor asked me: "How indispensable is this man and who is he indispensable to?"' he explains. 'That's when we started approaching the National Portrait Gallery and places like that where this seemingly fading art is still of use. That's what really changed the project.'

The inclusion in the film of Robin's clients, from the National Portrait to individual photographers such as Ken Griffiths and younger photographers Amanda Searle and Samuel Hicks, has broadened its remit considerably. But there was one essential aspect to it that had to be at the forefront of Richard's mind. 'Over a period of time we gathered together a vast amount of material, but there was one thing that the film

films and a group of students saw it as an incredible archive and history of film.' While driving home, he realised how it reminded him of Robin's studio with its walls covered with signed prints and its stacks of neg files from all the great names in photography. 'It's like there's a whole history of photography in this one small place,' he says, looking around. 'Bill Brandt, Ken Russell, Parkinson, Bailey – they're all up there.'

A few days later Richard, along with Charlie Jones, his cinematographer, visited Robin and put the proposal to him. Little knowing how big the project would eventually grow, he agreed.

Originally the film was conceived as a 15-minute piece and the original filming dwelt on Robin as a personality. 'It was lifestyle stuff

'I looked at these endless corridors of negatives that go back to the Raj and thought who is going to print all this stuff?'

– with his wife Lucy and daughter Lily walking with the dogs, that kind of thing,' Richard explains. It was only later that Richard began to realise that it needed to focus on Robin's work – the silver gelatin print. 'I had been living in America for some time and when I came back there were so few printers left,' Richard says.



All pictures Richard Dunkley



had to be and that was, entertaining,' he says. 'That was how we came to the decision to divide it into two parts – the main film about Robin and his work, which is 30 minutes long, and 30-40 minutes of extras that show specific techniques. We envisaged students and enthusiasts being very interested in these.'

Another important contributor to the film is

Stephen Brierley from Ilford Photo. 'Stephen came to the opening of the Silver Footprint exhibition and book launch,' says Robin. 'And I think it was then that the penny dropped for him that printers were in big trouble because they couldn't get the materials they needed. And he went away and produced a couple of really good papers to help us out.'

THE SILVER FOOTPRINT (THE FILM)

The Silver Footprint is a celebration of the work of Robin Bell, arguably the finest darkroom master printer working today. The film features aspects of Robin's printing methods and interviews with some of the finest photographers, as well as following the creation of a major National Portrait Gallery exhibition. Iconic images from the last half century are featured throughout the film and there are also 30 minutes of extras which demonstrate Robin's techniques.

- ▶ thesilverfootprint.com
- ▶ **YouTube trailer:** youtube.com/user/richarddunkley/TheSilverFootprint
- ▶ **For further information email:** richarddunkley@btconnect.com



The film shows an interview with Clare Freestone, associate curator at the National Portrait Gallery. 'She manages an archive of almost a quarter of a million negatives,' Richard explains. 'I looked at these endless corridors of negatives that go back to the Raj and thought who is going to print all this stuff? There have got to be new printers coming up.'

The relationship between photographer and printer is a collaborative one. Richard recalls how he and Robin began working together, many years ago: 'We used to look at great pictures and Robin would give my images a bit of, say, Kertész or Stieglitz or whatever.' 'Richard would come in with a neg and say, "It's Tuesday, it must be Stieglitz," Robin laughs. Eventually over a period of time, they developed a very personal style for Richard's work. 'It was great because then I could just send my films from location and he would know what I wanted.'

Robin's studio, while very charming, is also very small and I wondered how on earth a film crew could squeeze into such a space, let alone film in it. 'There was just me and Charlie, who is wonderful and to whom nothing is impossible,' says Richard. 'He uses state of the art cameras but uses old Nikon prime lenses – some 30 years old – because he feels they have a quality that nothing can equal. He was shooting in six square feet of darkroom and still got good shots.'

After 18 months of work the film is in its final stages. It has been a labour of love for Richard and its trailer is causing considerable interest in photography circles. I ask Robin how it feels to have such attention focused on him. 'I feel super proud,' he beams. In a world that has long feted photographers but largely ignored their printers, it feels that the imbalance is being, to some extent, addressed. As I walk back down the mews towards the tube station I think about how this film is an important landmark in photography at a time when film is making an unpredicted reappearance. The level of skill it portrays, and the traditional techniques it demonstrates, could well have been all but lost over the past decade if it were not for those, like Robin, who have held fast – 'super proud' is something he deserves to be.

The film will be screened at the Electric Palace Cinema in Hastings on 26 October and will be followed by a Q&A with Robin Bell and Richard Dunkley.

▶ robinbell.com

Left **Robin printed the pictures from the Ida Kar archive for the exhibition held earlier this year at the National Portrait Gallery**

Robin Bell's Silver Footprint: 35 Years of Darkroom Printing is published by Dewi Lewis Publishing at £25 ISBN 978 904587 82 8

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