



Follow the link to our website where you see this symbol
www.antiquestradegazette.com/news

back page

EXHIBITIONS



Above: Henry Moore's hand and maquette by Snowdon – a 20 x 24in (51 x 61cm) Robin Bell print which is priced at £1700 at the Silver Footprint exhibition. Most prints are for sale, priced from £3500 down to the low hundreds.

Robin Bell's Silver Footprint

ROBIN Bell produced his first photographic print for his first client at Nucleus Studios in 1976. Then he was one of hundreds, today he finds himself all but alone as a practitioner of his dark and mysterious art. His contribution to British photography is recognised in a retrospective exhibition, **Silver Footprint**, which continues at the Independent Photographers Gallery (3 Old Brewery Yard, High Street, Battle, East Sussex TN33 0AF. Tel. 01424 775650) until June 20.

"Nowadays the work I'm given is almost all of the highest quality," Robin explains. "If anything, my clients are even more discerning than ever and more appreciative of the thing that I have always strived to achieve: the ultimate representation of their images.

"This collection of photographs is an attempt to reflect the period and reflect the incredible variety that each day provides. At any moment one of the many photographers on the planet could walk through my door and have an entirely different requirement for their work – anything from reportage, portraiture, fashion, advertising, documentary or fine art."

And a great many have emerged from Robin Bell's developing tray during those 33 years. Some, like Snowdon, Lichfield or Parkinson, are household names. Others, such as Bryan Adams, Pattie Boyd or Linda McCartney bring the added glamour of celebrity, while the likes of Lee Miller, Bill Brandt, Terry O'Neill or Terence Donovan contribute classic images.

In all, the work of nearly 90 photographers is presented – unframed, and hung on bulldog clips as though they have just come from the darkroom. Together they present a body of work that is evocative in a way that only black and white can be.

"There is a very special quality about silver gelatin which embodies a rich, tactile, atmospheric and sumptuous feeling, only otherwise attainable on platinum," says Robin. "It's these innate characteristics that the collectors and galleries love and trust. Long may that remain the case."

www.ipgbattle.com

PERSONAL VIEW

A rare talent emerges from the darkroom

■ DAVID LITCHFIELD celebrates the special relationship that exists between a photographer and his printer

PHOTOGRAPHERS used to develop their own film and make their own prints. There are still those who believe that until you have watched the ghostlike image appear on the paper through the swirling developer, you haven't really experienced the full alchemic magic of photography.

But when colour arrived, the cost and complexity of the processing equipment gave photographers little choice but to use professional labs to process their colour film.

Having become accustomed to the convenience of the service, it wasn't long before photographers were also having their black and white film developed and printed by the same laboratories. Gradually photographers, or more often their grateful assistants, were liberated from all those hours spent amidst the acrid chemicals in the amber-light gloom of a claustrophobic darkroom.

Most of the commercial labs were fairly faceless service providers but then so were the results. In London it was only in the sixties, when the use of high contrast black and white film gave rise to a more aggressive style of print, that photographers, and their work, became fully accepted as part of the creative contribution to modern culture. It also became obvious that a new breed of equally talented printers was going to be needed.

While some labs continued to churn out high gloss, flush trimmed, mid-toned grey prints for the commercial market, the stars of advertising, portrait and fashion photography and even the odd, war-torn reportage photographer were demanding a different kind of print. A print whose style owed more to exhibition and the walls of art galleries than the pages of newspapers and magazines.

It was a black and white thing. Colour printing was far too complicated to control. Particularly the print process. Anyway, very few photographers ever managed to create a personal style in colour. Perhaps Sarah Moon with her plum-coloured grain, Tony Snowdon with his pastel coloured Agfa or Guy Bourdin with his David Lynch style magic mushroom effect.

The number of photographers capable of creating a unique style in colour may have also been affected by the generally accepted fact that black and white images possess a unique visual authority and attitude which seems impossible to capture in colour. But maybe like the classic white-walled art gallery, it's all a matter of style and fashion. Or maybe just what we became used to.

With the proliferation of colour in press and advertising, black and white became increasingly confined to books and exhibitions. This has resulted in monotone assuming a more personal and creatively indulgent role which demanded a more creative relationship between the photographer and his printer.

Originated by photographers such as Minor White, Edward Weston, Irving Penn and particularly Richard Avedon's use of the negative edge as a key line, the exhibition-style print was eventually adopted by the good and the great in British photography for whom only a high contrast image surrounded by a black key-line with plenty of white space between the image and the edge of the twenty-sixteen heavy weight archival paper, dried flat between blotting paper to avoid any hint of glazing – was soon to become acceptable.

But there were very few printers with sufficient skill to create what each photographer wanted or, in the case of the aesthetically challenged, could be persuaded to accept, and the necessary 'fortitude' to survive, let alone develop such an egotistically fuelled, aesthetic relationship.

Robin Bell was and is such a printer.

Having gained his experience and skills in some of London's best darkrooms, Robin set up his own business on Chelsea Wharf in September 1983 and soon had a client list that included most of the top photographers.

He also gained a degree of celebrity status, doubtless enhanced by his enthusiastic participation in the sex and drugs fuelled London social scene which had seemingly become an accepted, if not expected part of every photographer's lifestyle.

But his social and recreational indulgences were strictly limited by his ever-increasing workload and the cricket season. During this time he was often conspicuous by his absence, due to the demand for his services elsewhere, as a passionate and extremely useful 'all-rounder' in competitive club cricket.

Meanwhile, Robin's close professional relationships continued to grow while his reputation as a master craftsman developed to the point where, although many photographers may have been reluctant to admit it, the presence of the simple Robin Bell label on the outside of the plain white envelope in which the prints were delivered could have an enhancing effect on the perception of many a photographer's work.

As digital photography becomes generally accepted for commercial image making, black and white chemical photography has assumed an increasingly unique position in art, craft and culture. Like metal type setting, hand engraving and other processes once accepted as an integral part of mass communication, we only really seem to fully appreciate them, and their operatives, once they have been superseded.

Fortunately as demand for the unique, often difficult to define, qualities of the black and white silver gelatin exhibition print continues to grow in both value and creative authority, Robin Bell has every right to celebrate his unassailable position as the country's leading printer, master of the silver gelatin process and a man to whom so many photographers owe so much.