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# Master craftsman

**Robin Bell** is one of the world's finest black & white printers. **Jonathan Stead** asks him about his printing processes and gleans an insight into the magical world of the darkroom

**Robin Bell**  
working on a  
print in his studio

**WHEN** a person invents a word while they're talking about what they do for a living, you know they're passionate about their work. 'I always aim for a high "sumptuousness" factor,' says Robin Bell, who has been a professional black & white printer for 35 years. Claimed by many to be the finest black & white printer on the planet, Robin has printed some of the world's most famous photographs for photographers such as Terry O'Neill, Eve Arnold, Don McCullin, John Swannell, David Bailey, Terence Donovan, Norman Parkinson and Linda McCartney, to name just a few.

Indeed, Terence Donovan is reported to have said that Robin 'is the only man to trust your negatives to'. Robin's recent

work includes producing the prints for the recent Ida Kar exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, as well as the Everest Generation exhibition for the Royal Geographical Society to mark the 90th anniversary of the first British expedition to Mount Everest in 1921.

Robin's early photographic experiences in the 1970s and '80s were as an assistant to various London-based photographers who had their own studios and darkrooms. As an assistant, it was part of Robin's job to develop the films at the end of the day and sometimes make prints from the negatives.

'Most of the photographers I worked for used to do a wide range of work, from commercial commissions to the occasional

portrait,' says Robin, who now lives in Battle, East Sussex. 'Working for photographers who were not specialists in any particular area meant that I learned to print a range of different photographs.'

After years of assisting, Robin began to look specifically for printing jobs working in the darkroom. His first major break came when he began to work for the printer Gerry Dickens, whom Robin describes as the 'superstar printer of the day'. Gerry printed for photographers such as David Bailey, Clive Arrowsmith and Justin de Villeneuve, who discovered Twiggy. These were the people who were making a name for themselves in the industry at the time. 'I was a lowly darkroom assistant who kept a sharp eye on what was going on,' says Robin.

It was during this period that Robin developed and perfected his craft. Today he prints for art institutions, such as the National Portrait Gallery and the V&A, and individuals. In either case, his standards remain high, but his approach differs slightly. Often when printing from vintage negatives to complete archives and collections or for exhibitions, he has to interpret how a body of work might have been



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Westminster Bridge, London, by Sylvain Deleu

## 'You get into the heads of the photographer and the subjects in a way that no one else can'

strips. If for some reason this doesn't happen, I look carefully at the first print and adjust the amount of manipulation from there. It is very unusual that I will have to make a third print,' he says.

Huge projects that may span a photographer's life can mean Robin is working on a single body of work for more than a year. 'When I work on an exhibition or a book project, I become involved in the personality of the photographer, their images and the atmosphere of that period in time,' says Robin. 'I feel as though I'm experiencing the intimate closeness with the work that the photographer experienced.'

'I produced a book of photographs of Marilyn Monroe for Eve Arnold a while back now, but the experience has stayed with me all my life,' adds Robin. 'We made hundreds of prints. I was living with Marilyn for a few months on and off, and there was an extraordinary involvement. You get into the heads of the photographer and the subjects in a way that no one else can, but I'm sure other people experience those things whatever field of work they are in.'

'Society is moving so fast there is a

Tenzing Norgay on the summit of Chukhung Peak, 3 April 1953, by John Hunt



printed from existing vintage prints or press cuttings. 'For the recent Ida Kar exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, for example, only a few rough press prints are still in existence,' explains Robin. 'In cases like this you have to glean the style that would have been used at the time. But in the end it's the same as printing new negatives and new work,' he adds. 'The same issues apply, with negatives often being too thick, too thin, too contrasty, or being under or overexposed.'

These are not the only issues of the printing process, though, as sometimes Robin might print never-before-seen negatives that may not have been cared for. 'One of the main things that I encounter with old negatives is scratching,' he says. 'I've become quite an expert at retouching prints from old negatives.' Robin's approach is a traditional one. He makes use of very fine brushes, a steady hand and photo dyes to match the tones and texture of the print perfectly. 'I need to use that expertise more and more these days as a lot of the printing I'm doing is from old and damaged negatives,' he says. 'I get great pleasure from doing this, though – and it gets me out of the darkroom.'

One of the biggest benefits of shooting film is the amount of information contained in the negative that is waiting to be revealed. Robin's knowledge and experience mean he can skilfully extract the very best from a negative. 'I have thousands of spare prints in my drawers that I could use to illustrate the various printing options,' he says. 'There are so many options, but I wouldn't use them if it didn't enhance the image.'

Robin discusses paper choices and finishes, such as matt, semi-matt, glossy,

warmtone (chlorobromide) or coldtone (bromide), with clients, and discusses cropping and the use of keyline borders. There is also the option of printing using the lith process, as well as various toners to bring a unique look and feel to the work.

'Achieving the absolute highest quality in black & white printing is my raison d'être,' he says. 'I never let myself fall short of that gold standard I set for myself.'

'Printing is a very elusive thing,' he adds. 'People are possibly less discerning about what makes a good print these days. A great print must sparkle, and have a life and soul that lives in front of your eyes.'

Robin has used one enlarger for many years and prefers Ilford Multigrade FB Warmtone Glossy paper for the majority of his prints. 'When you work with the same equipment under the same conditions for most of the time, the issues that may confound some printers don't affect you,' he says. 'I know what grade to go with, what filtration to use and the correct exposure. I "read" the negative, so I know which areas to burn in and which to hold back. Balancing all the tones and bringing out what can't be done in-camera is the main job of a printer.'

'When printing the image of English artist Sir Terry Frost, for example [see page 37], I was confronted with the same issues as I would with any other negative,' adds Robin. 'My job was to find a balance between the detail in the shadow areas and the detail in the highlight areas. It was a case of bringing out both ends of the scale – the detail in the room, which was in shadow and the detail outside the window, which is the very thing Sir Terry is looking at. My aim is to get it right first print – I don't do test



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tendency to forget that often the best things take a bit of time,' he continues. 'There is a magic that occurs in the darkroom – an alchemy that people enjoy. You never hear anyone come out of a six-hour session in front of a computer screen saying, "I really enjoyed that." The process of printing is still magical. Photography is around 170 years old and we still have examples of prints from that period. Anyone who prints in a darkroom has a human connection with the printing process, the atmosphere and the personality of the work. It's a really hands-on experience. I'll print until I die.' **AP**

**Sir Terence (Terry) Frost, 1961, by Ida Kar**



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## ROBIN'S PROCESS

After printing photographs for more than three decades, Robin has a very specific way of working and knows precisely what is needed to get the best from a negative.

'I use a colour head on my enlarger and I begin by projecting the negative onto the baseboard,' he explains. 'I can then read the negative and see which areas will need holding back (shadows, which can be lightened by exposing them for proportionately less time) or burning in (bringing detail back into the highlights). I use the colour head to "dial in" contrast and look at the baseboard to see what contrast has been injected – it's all a visual process. As a professional printer you want to standardise as much of this as you can.'

Using a tried-and-tested process honed over many years means Robin can work freely, falling back on his experience. 'I use Dektol developer 1:4 at 68°, Acetic acid for the stop bath and for the fix, Tetenal Superfix at 1:4. In terms of the paper, I always turn to Ilford Multigrade Warmtone Glossy as it produces rich, forgiving blacks with a full tonal range. There is none of that "blocking up" that mostly happens with bromide papers. A slower chlorobromide paper helps to control these things.'

Warmtone or chlorobromide papers are

more silver rich than bromide papers and have two main characteristics – they are slower to expose under the enlarger, which means there is more time for dodging and burning, and they have a slightly warmer appearance. Detail is retained far more readily in the shadow areas of the print, meaning that shadows don't 'block up' or become featureless areas of black.

Robin's advice for budding printers is to look at as many silver gelatin prints as possible, either in galleries or museums. He also advises having a clear vision in your head of what you want the print to look like, rather than settling on the end result without thinking about it beforehand. 'One of the best ways to learn how to become a good printer is to be surrounded by good prints,' says Robin. 'It is very hard to teach yourself how to print without a vision.'

Darkroom printing can be a very rewarding pastime and complete set-ups can be bought from suppliers such as Ag Photographic ([www.ag-photographic.co.uk](http://www.ag-photographic.co.uk)) or via eBay. There is a wealth of information available on websites such as [www.apug.org](http://www.apug.org) and [www.film-and-darkroom-user.org.uk](http://www.film-and-darkroom-user.org.uk), and it's worth looking into courses on all aspects of analogue photography, including darkroom printing and film developing.

To see more of Robin's work, visit [www.robinbell.com](http://www.robinbell.com). **The Silver Footprint**, a DVD produced by Richard Dunkley (£19.50 plus £2.50 p&p) that explores Robin's career and working methods, is available from [www.thesilverfootprint.com](http://www.thesilverfootprint.com)

