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The magic of photo printing as told by Guillaume Geneste

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by Michaël Naulin

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One of the last ambassadors of traditional printing in Paris, Guillaume Geneste opened the doors of his photo lab to us on the occasion of the release of his book *Le Tirage à mains nues* [Printing with Bare Hands]. It is a love letter to the profession of printing and to

photography.



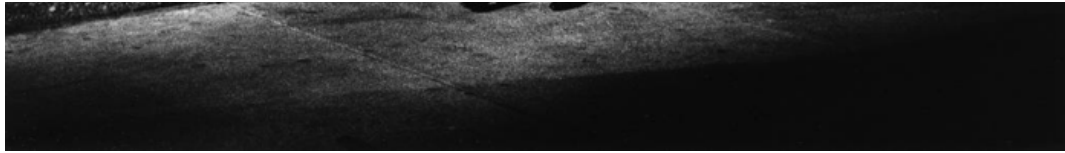
Photo taken by Guillaume Geneste just before focusing, from a negative by Bernard Dufour, 2019. © Michaël Naulin

An unmarked door in an 11th Arrondissement street opens onto a narrow hallway leading to a small workshop: formerly a metallurgical company, now it's a photo lab. It is here that Guillaume Geneste has plied his trade for a quarter of a century. Now in his sixties, glasses firmly planted on his nose, wearing short sleeves, the founder of La Chambre Noire is one of the last traditional photo printers in France.

It's Monday morning and the developing tanks are empty. The clock in the lab shows 10:29. But the lull is only apparent: since the Covid lockdown ended, orders have been pouring in. The composer and photography enthusiast Pascal Dusapin just stopped by to pick up his prints, and a couple of collectors are scheduled later this morning. "It never ends!" rejoices Guillaume Geneste. The last of the Mohicans of traditional printing, he has seen some of the

greats pass under his enlarger: Jacques Henri Lartigue, Gilbert Garcin, Denis Roche, Sabine Weiss, Bernard Plossu, Anne-Lise Broyer, among many others. This fall, he publishes *Le Tirage à mains nues* [Photography with Bare Hands], a book summing up his vision of the profession, peppered with anecdotes and encounters. It's like rewinding film in the camera.





New York City, 1976 © Sid Kaplan

A natural born printer

Working in this atelier since 1995, Guillaume Geneste had begun his career in the 1980s. As he is fond of saying, “I never wanted to be a photographer, I always wanted to be a printer!” Aged nineteen, he failed his high school exams, but was already fascinated by the magic of the darkroom.

Already at sixteen, he had set up a laboratory in the basement of his family home. “I wanted to understand how a print was made. I wanted to understand how a photo could fit on paper,” he recalls. After attending a Parisian photography school, EFET (L’École française d’enseignement technique), Guillaume Geneste began his career in industrial printing, running a KIS mini-lab, with the slogan “one-hour photo development and printing.” Not quite the dream.

Then he met Marc Bruhat and began working in a real, professional black-and-white laboratory, called Sillages. “I was fascinated by old nineteenth-century processes. They are much like cooking or tinkering. But Marc quickly made me understand that I had to choose between being a printer and a cook,” he jokes. The printer followed his path, moving along from one encounter to the next. These helped to forge his vision of the profession and opened new doors, as did, for instance, his acquaintance with the writer and poet Denis Roche and the photographer Bernard Plossu, with whom he

took part in the adventure of the Contrejour lab in rue Daguerre in the early 1990s, before starting his own company.



Colette, « Dans la chambre noire », Laboratoire Contrejour, Paris, 1993 © Guillaume Geneste

“My friend, your prints are super chic”

Printing is a philosophy. There is poetry to it, too: in gestures, sensibility, the art of observation, attentiveness... This is a mysterious universe that demands a subtle play of hands. In a choreographed dance, the printer plays with light, brightens the areas of shadow, lends the image density. “My neighbor, who is a banker, still doesn’t understand what I do,” says Guillaume Geneste jokingly. “One day I’ll have to bring her to the lab, put her hand on a photogram, and she’ll understand. It’s hard to talk about it without seeing it.”

A print is like facial makeup. But don’t tell a printer that he is an artist. Good heavens, no. Guillaume Geneste rejects the

idea. His profession is a modest act. There is no performance, only translation. “We are not creators. We only assist in creation. The heart of our trade is in the relationship with the other, in the connection with the photographers. We support them, we are there to convey their emotions,” he explains.





Salomé, 2015 © Gabrielle Duplantier

Everything starts with a dialogue. It's a three-way exchange between the photographer, his work, and the printer. This form of collaboration takes time and must be nourished like a relationship. It is necessary to find a shared color, a language. "It's crazy when you think about it. The photographer brings the negative, comes through the door, and wants to take away a sheet of paper which will make people feel exactly what he wanted to say," Geneste never ceases to be amazed. The discussion clarifies around the first prints. The words take on meaning.

The printer must translate this intimate, fusional relationship and grasp the desires of several photographers with different sensibilities. This clearly comes across in *Le Tirage à mains nues*. Over two years, Guillaume Geneste met with his idols. A childhood dream: Ralph Gibson, Duane Michals, Sid Kaplan, Arnaud Claass. There is also Gabrielle Duplantier, Valérie Belin, Jo Terrien... Each interview is a reflection on photography, the profession of printer, its very essence. The book sometimes takes the form of a philosophical essay, then slips back into a diary mode. We accompany Geneste on his meeting with Cartier-Bresson at age twenty-four, or with Agnès Varda who notes, "My friend, your prints are super chic." We get a sense of Geneste's twenty-five-year-long attachment to the oeuvre of Jacques Henri Lartigue: "His photographic vision fascinates me because it is free and clear; he takes snapshots. He reminds us that photography has more to do with life than with

death.”



Guillaume Fleureau, surrounded by giant Epson machines, is in charge of digital printing. © Michaël Naulin

The digital upheaval

In his book, Guillaume Geneste celebrates the golden age of traditional photography, but also talks about the future. Some of the photographers he met gave up film to save time. In his Parisian workshop, trays and enlargers now sit side by side digital equipment. “It was my incredible luck is to have turned forty in the 2000s. I can do both film and digital. The printers of tomorrow won’t train in a traditional lab as I did, printing thousands and thousands of negatives,” says Guillaume Geneste. His namesake, Guillaume Flureau, works with him in the workshop and takes care of the digital jobs. “He’s just as much a printer as I am. We just don’t use the same tools,” explains the representative of gelatin silver printing.

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Is the digital technology killing traditional photography? While Guillaume Geneste recognizes the infinite potential of software, nothing can replace the quality and high precision obtained in the darkroom. “I can’t compete with what retouchers do on Photoshop, but they don’t know how to print. They approach photography as a set of pixels. I see it as balancing volumes. When I retouch an image in the enlarger and come across a section that is too light, I use my hands to shade it,” he says moving his arms to mimic the work gestures.



“No prints this morning!” © Michaël Naulin

“In digital photography, the gray scale is much less rich. There isn’t as much finesse, so you lose part of the purpose of the photo,” explains the printer. But let’s face it, the era of the pixel has changed everything – including how we view the printer’s profession: “We are now seen more as technicians, even though our work hasn’t changed,” adds Guillaume Geneste with a note of regret.

No matter. Faithful to black and white, Geneste will carry on. His approach is that of a man who has photographed his wife and children to the rhythm of their daily life. His book contains black-and-white self-portraits, published in the form of family albums: “My relationship to photography is solely one of love. I keep a record of the moments I live with those close to me. I want to keep alive the belief that we can hold on to scraps of time.” Guillaume Geneste hopes to produce a sequel to this album in fifteen or twenty years, when the time comes to celebrate weddings, become a grandfather... He wants to play with time a while longer, to prolong the loving act of sharing emotion.





The courtyard still shows traces of its metallurgical past. © Michaël Naulin



Villa Giulia, Rome, 1980 © Bernard Plossu





This photo pasted onto a wooden silhouette recalls the dreamy montages of the late Gilbert Garcin for whom Guillaume Geneste used to work. © Michaël Naulin



East to East, Lettonie, 2002 © Klavdij Sluban



Flowers by the photographer Valérie Belin. © Michaël Naulin



Guillaume Geneste, following the visit of the composer Pascal Dusapin who came to pick up his prints.
© Michaël Naulin

By Michaël Naulin

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