Alternative Photography: Reviving the Bromoil Process

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The Bromoil Process: Past and Present

With the advent of digital imaging, photography has undergone a drastic change in recent years. Not only has taking pictures become more affordable and accessible to the average person, film photography has become somewhat of an endangered species. Little by little photo manufacturers have been ceasing production of films and papers, leaving art photographers concerned about what the future will hold. In the interest of preserving the “old ways” of photography, many have turned to archaic, alternative processes in order to create one of a kind works of art. One such process is bromoil.

The bromoil process was invented in 1907; the theory was put down on paper by E.J. Wall, and set into practice by C. Welborne Piper. The intention was to create a method of producing an inked image from an enlarged negative as an improvement of the oil transfer process, which required a negative the same size as the desired print. The dreamy, painterly appearance of bromoil prints was very popular with the Pictorialist movement, and supplies were readily available for some time. However, after World War
II mainstream interest turned towards straight photography, which disdained image manipulation. As a result, bromoil and many other alternative processes fell into obscurity, and have only recently been revived in the interest of seeking new outlets of creativity.

The process itself is based on the principle that oil and water repel one another, and is used to create a photographic image made from ink. The process begins with an ordinary silver gelatin print, which is a photographic image printed on special paper containing a light-sensitive emulsion of silver crystals and gelatin. The finished print is soaked in a bleaching solution of potassium dichromate and other chemicals. This washes the silver crystals from the photographic paper and tans the gelatin so that a faint trace of the image can still be seen. This bleached print is called a “matrix.” After drying, the print is soaked in water before an oil-based ink is applied to the surface. The ink is absorbed by the water-swollen gelatin in direct proportion to the amount of silver in the original image; therefore, the water-swollen highlights repel the ink while the bleach-hardened shadows absorb it. Using any variety of techniques, including brushwork, use of a brayer or roller, and even more unconventional tools such as cosmetic sponges a unique image can be created. Because of the need to ink the image by hand, every print is one of a kind.

**Artist’s Statement**

I began my research more or less blind. I had only heard of bromoil two months before starting and had very little information as to materials or methods except for a number of very beautiful images of bromoil prints I found on the internet. As I read more about the process, I learned that it relied heavily on the artist’s application of the ink, which could be done in any number of ways, making it a very flexible and personal method of creating
prints. I was interested in how I could use the process to suit my imagery, and as I put the process into practice I realized how limitless it is. The use of ink to recreate the image allows for the artist to manually manipulate it in any way he or she desires; the print can be gloomy or bright; rendered loosely or photographically; with brushes, rollers, or even wet paper towels.

The process of inking my images became a personal exploration that I hadn’t anticipated. I was, of course, technically interested in using every method possible and observing the way the ink interacted with the matrix, but it evolved into more than just experimentation. As I became more comfortable with the process, I found myself giving the images the mood I experienced while shooting the photographs. My personal favorites are not necessarily the most well executed prints, but the ones that resonate with my emotions. That being said, I don’t feel that I’m very adept at explaining my artwork or my motivations for making the aesthetic decisions that I do. I go with my gut instincts about what I like, what looks good, and what feels right. Like any other artist, I want to create images that are interesting to look at, and most of the time this leads me to imparting a certain feeling or mood with an image. The prints I have created this summer are exactly that – expressions of emotion. Learning the bromoil process was a cathartic endeavor, as cliché as it may sound; it gave me the freedom to find out for myself what I want to say with my artwork. That freedom is not only an advantage of the bromoil process, but the whole point of being an artist – finding the way to best express what you see and feel as truth.
This was my very first successful bromoil print and my second overall. It happens to be one of those "happy accidents"; the ink I applied happened to be just thin enough for me to distribute it evenly and easily with a foam roller. It was an early success that raised my expectations and gave me high hopes for the rest of the summer. Little did I know how difficult things would be!
This was a very problematic print that I considered giving up on more than once. I had applied far too much stiff ink initially and clogged the shadows with thin ink, a mistake I made many times before realizing that I was applying ink of the wrong consistency for the swelling of the gelatin. However, it’s also the print that elicited the discovery that a wet paper towel scraped across the surface of a print could create a dynamic pattern that actually improved the image. I removed the excess ink (quite forcefully!) and ended up liking the end result.
As well as continuing the use of the wet paper towel technique in order to clear the highlights, I thinned the ink for this image with amber colored medium to make a warmer black and thus a warmer looking print. I wanted to make this a more photographic rendering so the detail of the kimono in the background could be seen.
This is probably my favorite of all the prints. I used another wet paper towel to create the diagonal textured lines and a kneaded rubber eraser to accentuate the delicate light coming through the blinds of the window. I was unable to re-create the water-like effect around the bottom of this print, but I believe it resulted from the image bobbing above the water during a re-soak.

Credits


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