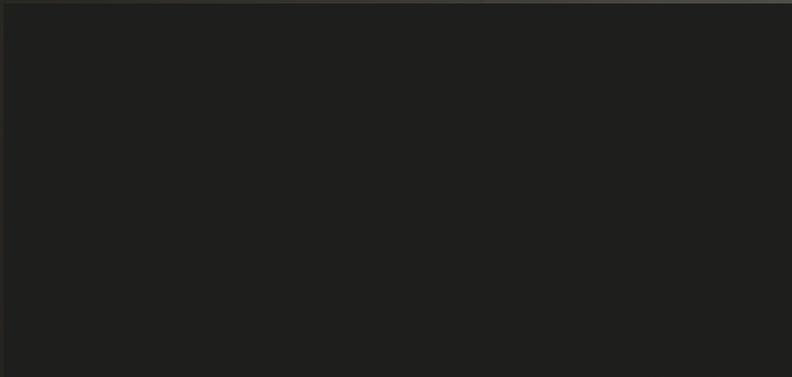
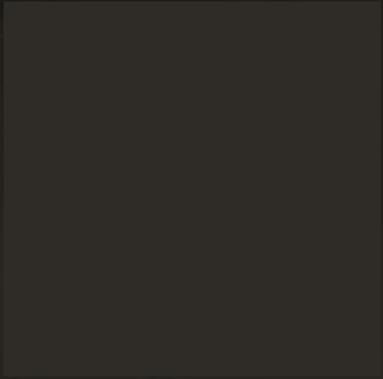


WET PLATE

Wet Plate is a section dedicated to an antique photographic process discovered in the mid 19th century, which was also a primary photographic method used until the 1880s. It refers to a process of pouring a solution collodion onto a plate of thin iron or glass, then placing the plate into a camera and exposing it to the light and, at the end, developing that plate while it is still wet, which is the reason of naming the process (and our section) "wet plate". The images resulting from this process can be ambrotypes, glass negatives or tintypes. Although quite a demanding, expensive and lengthy process, wet plate collodion technique is gaining back its popularity among many contemporary photographers.



WM **PLATE**

by Robert Gojević & Denisa Pleić

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Does the wet plate process have any sub-genres? Are there any secrets guarded by the masters? Is there still room for experimentation, some uncharted territory, or is the process already fully explored and described in books?

I think most people who master a process won't tell you absolutely everything. What makes them masters is the experience, and that's not a secret you can share. There will always be room for experimentation ... as long as I live! Among the developer recipes for wet plate, some people use sugar (to slow down the process)! Now imagine how many other things you could use to experiment with the formula! Every plate is an experiment.

I don't know about sub-genres. They are probably the same as in regular photography – portrait, still life, etc. – but I guess concerning wet plate, technically, some people use aluminum plate, and others use glass or plexiglass and different types of "recipes" for the chemicals.

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Today, in the age of digital photography, it is difficult to find a photo store with a selection of films, not to mention the servicing of film cameras. What is the situation with the wet plate process? Where do you buy everything you need? How much does it cost? How many final usable photos can you make? Are there any perishable or dangerous chemicals used?

I buy most of my stuff from my local pharmacy. I have a great relationship with the owner.

He's an old man, and he enjoys talking about the wet plate process. He's from another time, and he is obviously interested in chemicals, so we get along really well! He gets me everything I need fairly easily, but not cheap. The silver nitrate needed for the process is really expensive (since the price of silver went up recently), that's why I'm buying it abroad. The chemicals you have to buy to start the process are numerous and expensive, but once you have everything, you mainly have to buy the collodion and silver nitrate. They are certainly pricey, but you can make dozens of plates with one liter of collodion, and the same silver bath. The glass plates can be recycled forever when cleaned. I usually prepare a plate or two at the beginning of a session to check the exposure time. It changes a lot with different parameters (temperature, new chemicals, etc.). Then I can keep almost everything I do. And I have to say that I'm rarely unhappy with a plate. It's the magic of this process ...it creates beautiful accidents! Once you have all the chemicals and the camera, even if film disappears, you could still do plates forever. I like that.

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Do you use an original, antique camera, or something of a more recent vintage?

I use an Underwood 5x7 camera from 1886, in its original state. I bought it from a shop where they used it for decoration! I use two lenses: a Petzval lens from the beginning of the 20th century and a Dallmeyer pentac lens from around 1920. I recently bought a beautiful 8x10 Deardorff camera from around 1940, and I can't wait to use it.

How about the space where you work with the process? Is your darkroom drastically different from those used for working with traditional film?

At first, it looked like a regular darkroom. Now it's all brown! The silver nitrate is coloring everything – the equipment, my clothes, my hands – it's hopeless.

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What in the wet plate process do you find particularly interesting? What attracts you to it?

First of all, I like the handcraft aspect of the process. We are not talking computers here; it's all handmade. I like the magic of the picture appearing, not knowing what the process will give you every time. The game is to master it.

What attracts me the most is the temporality of the process. Everything is about time: Preparing one plate at a time takes a few minutes, and then you have to shoot before the chemicals dry (around 15 minutes). The exposure time for my portraits is usually from 3 to 15 seconds. I think it gives my subject amazing expression – some kind of deepness – probably because they are trying not to move for so long. The development has to be done right away. That's why it's difficult to make more than four pictures an hour. It cannot be compared to the film process, and it's miles away from digital. It is very unique.

I'm quite a anxious person and this process forces me into a kind of therapy; it forces me to take the time needed.

Finally, I think the result is timeless. For some pictures it's really difficult to guess the time period when it was taken.

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How long have you been doing wet plate? How did you learn the process?

I first heard of wet plate collodion through the work of Sally Mann. I had been talking about doing this for a long time with my partner, Chris Mettraux. For weeks, we searched the Internet for all the information we could find about the process. We've been using the process for almost two years now. Wet plate can be a lifetime experiment.

Do you use other photographic techniques? Perhaps they can't be compared with wet plate?

I do a lot of film photography, Polaroid, and a bit of digital too – mainly for street photography. I love old film cameras in different formats. I use direct positive paper developed in caffenol, which has similarities to wet plate as the required exposure times are really long.

Is there a photographer whom you admire? Who has inspired or influenced your work?

As I said earlier, Sally Mann helped me discover the wet plate process and is a reference for me. I have great admiration for Giacomelli, Paolo Roversi (for his portraits), and many others. There are many artists I admire who influence me. Sometimes they are not photographers.

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Please tell us what is the value of such a photo on glass, since it's one of a kind, unique, and irreplaceable. I suppose it is impossible to make an exact copy, except as a paper print?

There is only one original plate and that's what I love about it! I think that in an era of digital copies, wet plate is a very, very old image process, and, ironically, still irreplaceable. You can probably do something similar in Photoshop, but there is still only one original plate, and it's fantastically valuable for me. Polaroid instant photography has a similar feel in this sense.

Are there any old photos using this technique on the art market?

I don't know about the value of old or new wet plates in the art market today. My only real concern is to take pictures.

How do you store and keep the originals? Photographers live in constant fear of data loss. This is true for digital photographers nowadays. How do you secure the glass originals?

First I make high-resolution scans of them. I varnish the plates and keep them in a drawer. You can find wet plates that are 150 years old, so I'm not too worried about that.

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What are your plans for the future – long term, short term? Do you have any shows on the horizon?

I'll keep doing portraits in the studio and probably build a portable darkroom with my friend Chris to make pictures outdoors next summer. I bought a very large camera recently that can make 30x40 cm plates, and I will use it for portraits and, hopefully, expose my work on those large plates later this year.

And finally, do you have anything to say to our readers, potential new practitioners of the wet plate process?

The Internet is full of the information needed to start doing wet plate. There are great forums, pdf instructions, videos, etc., but be prepared to spend a lot of time experimenting. It is worth every minute.

Copy editor: Michael McAllister

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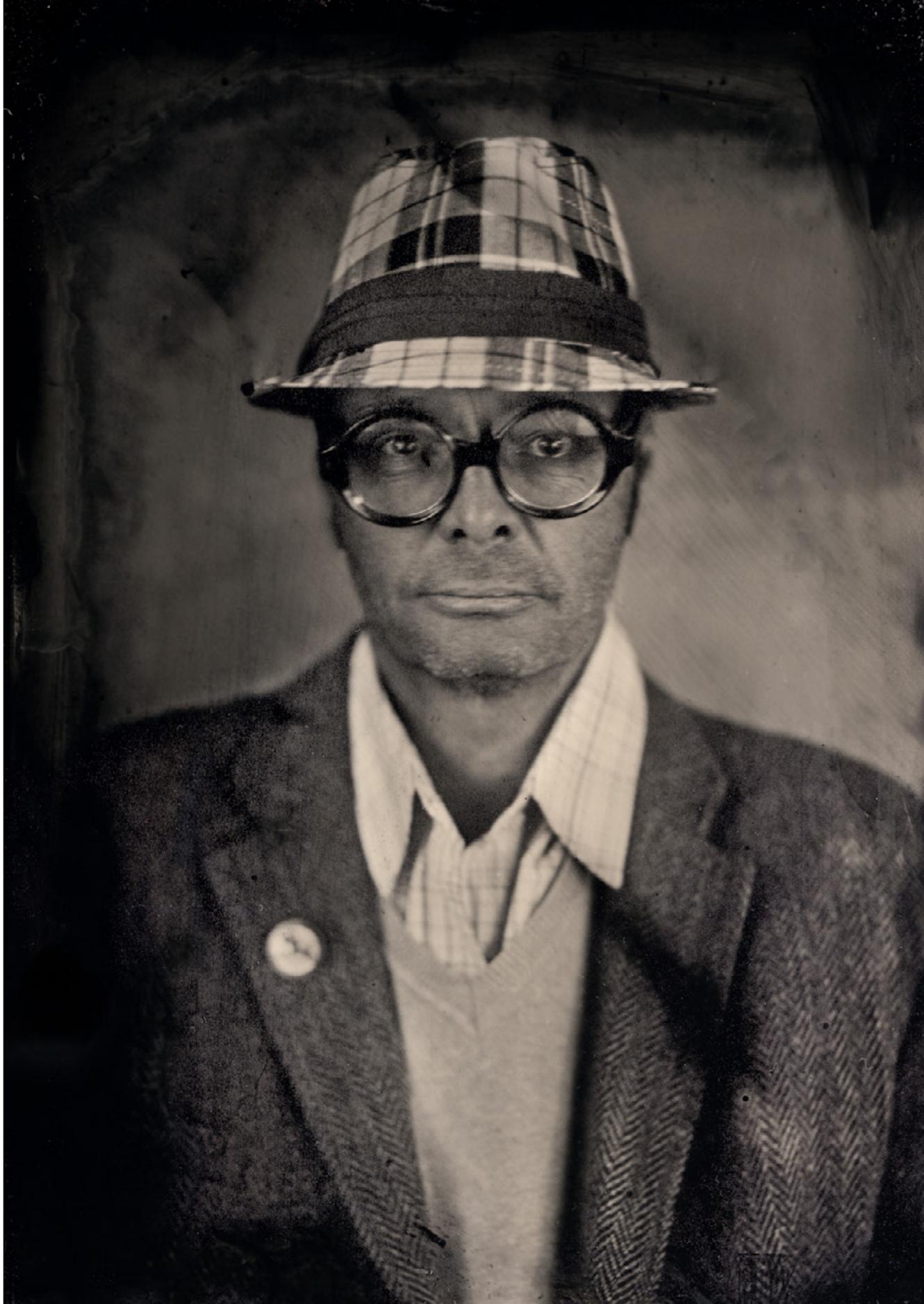


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