

WHEN THE PAST SPEAKS

For eight years **Mark Luscombe-Whyte** refined the wet plate collodion process by taking images of his neighbours in rural France. The results go beyond a simple translation of a technique to a set of portraits full of narrative. Anna Bonita Evans reports.

All images © Mark Luscombe-Whyte



that he's befriended over the years.

These pictures show Mark's interpretation of a historical photographic printing process that has recently become hugely popular – attracting hundreds of photographers back into the darkroom. But Mark's interpretation and skill is different to the majority. Photographing out of the studio in ambient light and incorporating close by elements into each frame, these pictures are full of narrative and personality because of Mark's talent as a photographer rather than the process he uses.

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The collection's strength is testament to Mark's passion for this 165-year-old process which began after seeing a tintype picture by Joni Sternbach from her *Surfland* series. 'It was a really odd feeling but I fell in love with this image – I had a serious crush on it. I then became obsessed with the process and read everything I could find.' He goes on: 'The look you get through wet plate isn't particularly flattering, it can make a subject look 10 years older than they are – or as if they've spent a lot of time under a sunbed – but I still couldn't get it out of my mind.'

After completing an introductory course in Manchester, Mark decided to take wet plate seriously: 'I thought if I'm going to do this I'm going to do it properly, so after six months of gathering specialist equipment I enrolled in a course with George Eastman House's head of photographic processes Mark Osterman and his wife Frances Scully Osterman.' Although based in America, Mark and Frances were teaching a course at Lacock Abbey – once home to William Henry Fox Talbot.

'Mark and Frances are two of the most knowledgeable people on the subject of historical photographic processes and I think they're largely responsible for this collodion revival we're experiencing.' >



Above **Jaz** Opposite **Ruby and Miv** Overleaf Left **Joy** Right **Samantha**

It was an afternoon in early autumn that Mark Luscombe-Whyte and I first spoke about his wet plate collodion portraits. Mark is based in Cévennes, an idyllic mountainous region in the south of France known for its stunning scenery, vibrant light and delicious honey. As we connected over Skype I find he's in the middle of sorting and cleaning his collodion plates in preparation for a show in Saint-Tropez.

With the last of the summer sun shining into his sitting room and the culmination of eight years' work around him, the scene was set for an interesting chat. The plates – or as Mark refers to them 'his 19th century Polaroids' – have a beauty and majesty that can only be created by a true master of the craft. Also impressive in volume (there are hundreds), the portraits are from his personal series of expatriates and their children and grandchildren who live locally







Previous pages Left **Freddy** Right **Denise** Above **Elodie**
Opposite **Naomi Watts and Jeanann Williams and children.**

After a further course at George Eastman House in New York, Mark continued to experiment for another two years. 'Despite a lot of people liking the imperfections in wet plates, I figured you've got to learn how to do something perfectly to then start experimenting.' With his high standards the learning curve was a long and challenging one before Mark felt confident to pursue his first series – the results of which you see here.

Showing me the signature thumbprint he leaves at the drip point on each plate, Mark also refers to the curious scratches and blemishes that can unintentionally appear. He comments how the labour-intensive technique has hardly changed since its inception. Formulated in 1846, collodion was first used (and still is) in medicine to close small wounds or keep surgical dressings in place. It was in 1851 that

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Englishman Frederick Scott Archer found that the highly flammable, syrupy solution could also hold light-sensitive chemicals on glass, making its tough but flexible coating the perfect compound for photographic plates.

From preparing and shooting to developing and then fixing a plate, Mark explains how each stage of the process is highly complex (and potentially dangerous) and can go wrong at any time: 'Around half of the plates I shoot are duff and there is no rhyme or reason why they don't work. Anything can contribute to a plate not working: light leaks, temperature, dust particles, a wrong ratio of chemicals.

If there's an imbalance you soon know as when you're developing the plate the image just washes away – it just melts before your eyes – it's awful!

'I often think about what potters say: when throwing a pot it's the first 1,000 that are the hardest. It's the same with collodion. There have been times when I've shot two plates within five minutes of each other and they've come out completely differently. But you have to take your time to understand what's going wrong.' Rather than finding the process's unpredictability frustrating, it excites Mark.

Asking if learning a technique from the past has given him a creative reawakening, he reflects for a moment then says: 'For the last 25 years I've worked as a successful commercial photographer. Before I pursued collodion, I wasn't enjoying photography as much as I used to. Digital had pretty much completely replaced analogue and everyone's images were starting to look the same – I'm not saying they weren't good pictures but there wasn't that variety. I've always loved photography but it was starting to feel a bit stale. When I started exploring alternative printing processes I had to almost forget everything I'd spent years refining, which was liberating.

'Seeing that tintype by Joni Sternbach rejuvenated me and since I've shot with collodion my skills and eye have improved vastly – it's brought back the passion I was missing for a while. I think other people have felt this way too: when I first started experimenting I'd say there were around 500 people in the world interested in it and only four or five people frequently shooting wet plate. Now you see it everywhere – if you look on Facebook some dedicated groups have over 4,000 members. As a direct result of digital homogenising photography a lot more people are reverting to analogue.'

As our conversation comes to an end, I thought how I had caught Mark at an interesting point in his photographic career: after the success of his first wet plate collodion series, his natural curiosity and dedication has opened new doors for him to enter and explore. Mark tells me the demand for wet plate photographs is becoming higher in the commercial world and he completed his first private commission last year, with the second in the planning stages.

For now, however, he's done with portraits in his personal work and, with a large format camera by his side, wishes to head in a new direction – perhaps a landscape or still life series with a stronger sense of narrative. His ultimate goal – or as Mark puts it, his Holy Grail – is wet plate collodion negatives with platinum palladium prints: 'I think I'm about two to three years off that,' Mark says. We as the receivers are sure to relish in the results.

