

# DAVID PUNTEL



**T**he modern world as a subject doesn't appeal to me," says David Puntel by way of explaining his beautifully-rendered still lifes and botanical studies made with the truly unique and rare ambrotype process.

"Knowing the ambrotype process itself, there is no greater detail in any other photographic media," adds Puntel, who made his most recent images in and around the old Maine farmhouse he moved to and restored in 2003.

"There's no grain and the depth of detail and tonality of the plate is amazing. There's something about it, the fragility and uniqueness of each piece being on glass."

In creating each image, Puntel follows a rigorous set of procedures in preparing each light-sensitive plate. He first mixes the collodion with bromide and iodides to create the base material. Once the collodion has been left to sit for up to a week to clear, the mixture is poured by hand onto a pre-cut dark glass plate. Before the plate dries, it is immersed in a silver nitrate bath, and after a num-

ber of minutes the now light sensitive plate is placed into a light-tight holder. The "wet-plate" is then immediately exposed in the camera and then processed with an iron developer that is poured over the plate and developed by inspection for 8 to 10 seconds. The plate is then washed with water, fixed in potassium cyanide, which yields cream-colored highlights in the final image, dried over an alcohol lamp and then varnished and dried again. Because of the black glass backing, the negative appears as a positive image.

"Being on glass, the ambrotype shows every step I make and the way I pour each plate, which comes out different every time," explains Puntel, who photographs with a 1940s-era bellows camera made by Kodak and a lens from the 1870s that has a single aperture opening.

In addition to his ambrotype images, which are at times made as a series of three, Puntel also makes contact cyanotype and salt prints from the ambrotype negative.

Puntel first studied black and

white photography while pursuing a sociology degree from the University of Delaware. He eventually moved to San Francisco in 1989, where he went to work as an assistant and studio manager for a table-top photographer.

"Although I learned a great many things, I realized I didn't want to make a living from that kind of photography," recalls Puntel, who went on to work instead as a social worker while pursuing his own documentary projects that included photographing a wild horse roundup in Nevada, covering the life of a rodeo clown for a year and a half, and photographing in boxing clubs in the San Francisco Bay area.

"The ambrotype came to me as a convergence of ideas, issues and circumstances," says Puntel. "I had little worlds in my head I wanted to capture, so I started photographing with medium and large format cameras but it wasn't working for me because I was never into darkroom work. At the same time the digital world was exploding in San Francisco, but I always had a negative reaction to the mass-producible aspect of photography that was exaggerated with digital. I wanted get into a much more creative thing working directly with the medium when a co-worker suggested the wet-plate collodion process."

In 1999, Puntel went on to take a workshop in the wet-plate collodion at the Photographer's Formulary based in Montana.

"Every step was an issue and challenge, but when I finally learned the process it all came together for me," says Puntel.

In 2001, Puntel exhibited his first ambrotypes at San Francisco Camerawork and at a George Eastman House group show. In 2002, he showed at the Debra Heimerdinger Gallery in San Francisco, and in 2008 with Vox Photographs in Portland, Maine. Both galleries represent Puntel's work. His most recent show was a few months ago as part of an exhibition on old photographic processes held at the Denver Public Library.

While continuing to work with the ambrotype to create an extensive portfolio of botanicals, Puntel plans to work with another old process, the physautotype which creates light-sensitive plates out of lavender oil.

"It seems like I'm turning into a Luddite," says Puntel. "I feel like I'm out of touch with the modern world of photography and working further back in time."—Richard Pitnick

#### ■ PRINT INFORMATION

All are wet-plate collodion positive (ambrotype) glass plates, made by the artist. Editions are limited to 3–6 units, depending on image. Sizes and prices: 1/6 plate (2 3/4 x 3 1/4 inches) are \$750; 1/2 plate (4 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches) are \$1,150.

#### ■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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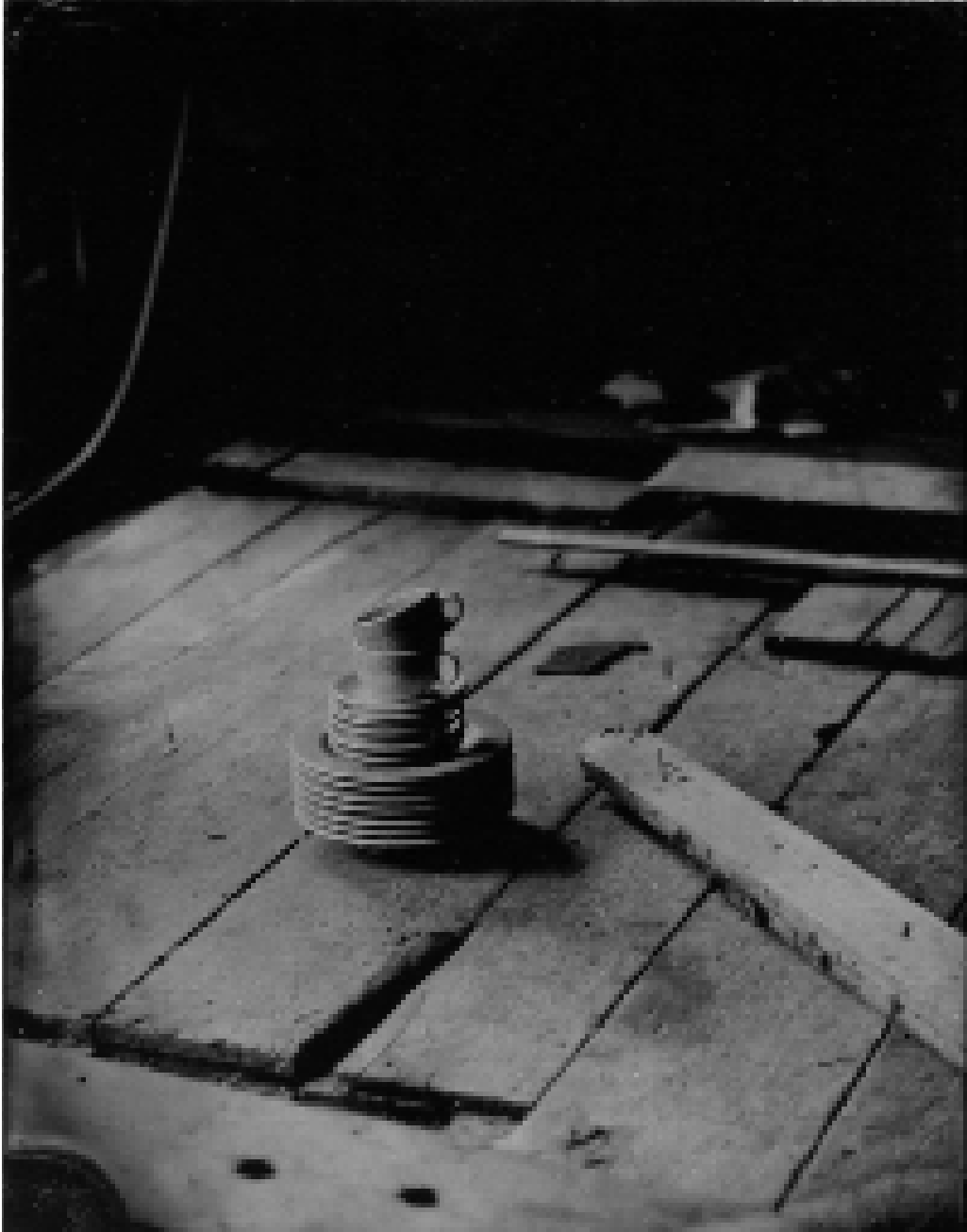
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