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# Moving images

New Zealand-based photographer **Paul Alsop** has converted a 1970s caravan into a travelling darkroom to bring the wet-plate collodion process to the masses. He talks to **Jade Lord** about his journey

**N**ot everyone would admit that their photographic inspiration can be traced back to a triptych of a naked Kate Moss. But for New Zealand-based portrait photographer Paul Alsop it wasn't just the fact Ms Moss was naked that caught his eye, it was that the photograph itself was laid bare. The image, by Chuck Close, had a raw quality that exposed every detail

like nothing he'd seen before.

From that moment on, Paul decided he had to make portraits with the same intensity. Yet there was one flaw in his plan: the Chuck Close images were daguerreotypes, and mercury vapour is required to develop them.

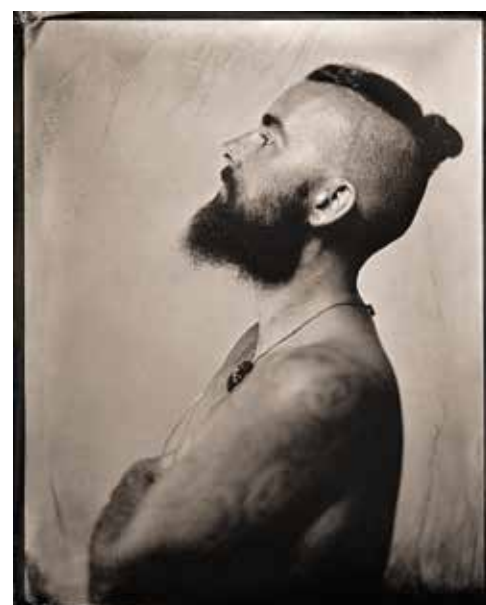
'Although I love photography very much, I was not willing to risk potential mercury poisoning,' explains Paul. 'So I decided to look

**Above: In this image, called 'Heath', the wet-plate process carries, as Paul says, a 'raw quality' that exposes every detail of the sitter**

further into the history of photography (something which I hadn't done before) and it was here that I stumbled upon the wet-plate collodion process, as invented by Frederick Scott Archer in 1851.

'This method seemed to be a perfect compromise, as the process is very interesting, involved and involving for the sitters. It was completely foreign to me, and I couldn't see the word "mercury" anywhere. I guess I just glossed over the words "explosive" and "potassium cyanide".'

Creating a wet-plate image involves a complex mix of chemistry and danger that would put most people off from the start (see panel on page 33), but not so



for Paul, whose background in lecturing biomedical sciences and laboratory techniques lends itself perfectly to this type of photography. Playing with silver nitrate, collodion and light, Paul is a modern-day alchemist who makes archival images on glass that are far removed from today's shoot-and-delete digital era.

'The process is one of the most archival photographic processes to date; wet-plate images from the American Civil War and portraits of Billy the Kid and Abraham Lincoln have lasted long beyond the faded albumen and silver gelatin prints,' explains Paul. 'One of the attractions of the process is knowing that my images will, hopefully, be around long after I have gone.'

Yet the romanticism of the wet-plate process is somewhat tainted by the practicalities surrounding the making of the

image. To create a wet-plate collodion image you need to be within running distance of a darkroom, otherwise the solution will dry out. Initially, Paul had a darkroom set up in his garage, which had the benefit of him being able to develop an image whenever he fancied it. Yet he was limited to making portraits within a five-minute radius, not to mention the fact that creating an image is messy.

'The silver stains pretty much everything and anything it comes into contact with,' says Paul. 'And since selling our house and moving into a rental property, I was worried that we would not get our deposit back if I did the same thing in the garage – so I had to get creative.'

#### The travelling darkroom

This is where Paul's style of photography becomes even more unique: he now has his darkroom

set up in a 1970s caravan.

'Since selling our house and losing the darkroom, I was getting very disconcerted that I might have to give up on the wet-plate process, which I had come to love so much,' reveals Paul. 'I looked at a whole bunch of options, from a shipping container to converting a mobile home, a truck and even an ambulance. Then, in March 2015, I saw a 1970s caravan on an online auction site. It had been refurbished on the outside, but the interior needed a lot of work. This was perfect, as it was structurally sound and a blank canvas for me to make a darkroom in, by ripping out the furniture and starting again.'

Converting the caravan into a wet-plate darkroom was a labour of love for Paul, who failed woodwork at school and had no knowledge of electrics. Yet he managed to install a 12V system inside the caravan, essential to run red safelights for processing and developing the plates. It also meant he could make images further afield, as he now takes the darkroom with him.

'The caravan is perfect, as I can hook it up to my towbar and go off to make images, or it can remain static for as long as I wish,' he says.

Shooting either with natural daylight or a studio light set-up (with the latter, Paul designs the set-up based on the sitter's face), he seeks to tell a story through the eyes of his subjects.

'A good portrait, regardless of where it is shot, should capture a viewer's attention for more than a few seconds and tell a story of its own,' explains Paul. 'Many of my portraits leave people asking questions, and any image that makes people think (good or bad) is a good image, in my opinion.'

#### Finding faces

Paul is always on the hunt for interesting faces to photograph, often using social media for certain



The darkroom interior of the caravan, as fitted out by Paul



projects. He'll also look for an interesting backstory, and if the two come together then he is one happy photographer. Recently, people have also been finding him and wanting to have their portrait taken, as the process is unlike anything they have seen.

'Not only have they not seen the process, but many have never seen the physical thing that is a photograph. All they have seen are digital images of themselves, and

often ones that have been retouched,' he explains.

There's no retouching involved in a wet-plate collodion image. In fact, it's quite the opposite, as every detail is revealed thanks to the orthochromatic process. This means it sees blue very well, but not red: people with blue irises make for striking portraits, whereas people with red freckles see them revealed in places they didn't even realise they had them.

## THE WET-PLATE COLLODION PROCESS

**1** The chemical collodion is poured over a polished glass plate before it is dropped into a silver bath for three minutes, where a chemical reaction takes place, turning the non-photosensitive silver nitrate into silver halide (film).

**2** Under the red lights, the plate is removed from the silver bath and placed into a plate holder. The plate holder is then taken to a large-format camera, which is focused on its subject.

**3** Once focus is reached, an exposure is made, whether by artificial light (such as strobe) or continuous light (such as daylight).

The latter requires a timed exposure of 5-30 seconds, in which time the subject has to stay perfectly still.

**4** After the exposure is made, the plate is taken back to the darkroom where it is developed with a mixture of iron sulphate, glacial acetic acid and 96% alcohol. A negative image appears and the image is no longer light sensitive.

**5** Finally, the image needs to be 'fixed' – the unexposed silver is washed away leaving behind a direct positive image. The image can then be varnished to protect it from oxidation and physical damage.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: 'Mick', a portrait taken in collaboration with photographer Luke White as part of the 'Auckland Project'; A portrait of Paul's daughter, Sophie; In the image titled 'Stephen', the fall-off of focus means our attention is firmly fixed on the face of the sitter; 'Steampunk' – the wet-plate method emphasises the unusual outfit of the sitter

Left: 'Elizabeth', part of Paul and Luke's 'Auckland Project'

There are, however, limitations to the process, but it is these that make Paul's venture all the more special.

As he explains, 'The limitations are numerous, otherwise everyone would be doing it. The initial cost is very high, probably comparable to purchasing a full-frame DSLR with a couple of decent prime lenses. And it is also time-consuming: my life literally revolves around it, and when I get a few spare minutes I can be found making chemicals, filtering chemicals and cleaning plates.' But all the time, money and effort spent keeping this process alive is not something that Paul would part with in a hurry.

'We live in a fast-paced social-media society, where many excellent images are overlooked within milliseconds and the flick of a finger,' says Paul. 'When I make a wet-plate image, the whole process slows me down, as I can only make one image every 20 minutes. It also satisfies me to see the sitter spend a lot of time with the end product, examining it, looking at it from different angles and in different lights. They get really involved and it's not unusual to hear a few swear words of astonishment when the final image develops. I've also made a few grown men cry with positive emotion. I'm yet to have anyone not interested in the final aesthetic.'

It might be a cliché, but in this case, good things really do come to those who wait.



Born and raised in Newcastle upon Tyne, Paul moved to the Coromandel Peninsula, New Zealand, in 2010 to work as a medical doctor, and now lives and works in the Bay of Plenty. About ten years ago he taught himself how to make images and has now found his niche in the wet-plate collodion process. As an experienced collodion photographer, he teaches the process and offers commissions. [www.paulalsop.com](http://www.paulalsop.com)



Paul reveals another masterwork in front of his 1970s caravan