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CHARLES CAITO IN BLACK AND WHITE

BY ELLEN FISCHER



Stormy Day on the Loch near Porthmadog, Wales, silver print. “It was a windy day,” says Charles Caito. “I had to stand between the tripod and the wind to keep the camera from blowing over.”

“It’s a race against time,” Charles Caito says. “You struggle to find film – they keep threatening to discontinue silver film and they’ve discontinued my favorite paper. Nothing’s going to be available anymore.” Charles is a photographer who still makes pictures using silver-based film and papers, commodities that are becoming increasingly rare in this digital age.

His lament can be heard echoing ever so faintly throughout the land. His fellow-mourners are a shrinking group of artists who still practice the arcane craft of wet process

photography. Not all of them rely exclusively on commercially produced film and paper; some use methods dating from the mid-1800s to produce daguerreotypes, ambrotypes and ferrotypes (tintypes); others print on paper that they sensitize and develop in their own darkrooms.

Charles still relies on commercially produced film for his negatives. He has, however, mastered the technique of sensitizing rag paper with a solution of platinum salts and ferric oxalate to make platinum prints – black and white photographs distinguished by their matte surfaces



The 301 from Corfe Castle to Swanage, silver print. Charles set up his camera on a rickety railroad overpass to get this shot. His reward for taking chances? "When I get it right, I get it right," he says.

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Photographer Charles Caito. "There was a lot of sitting and waiting in fields," he recalls, "with no place to sit down."

Charles adjusts the lens on his Gandolfi.



and wide tonal range.

Charles' early interest in photography was brief. It flowered in 1971, when he was a senior in high school, and withered when he entered college as a student of industrial design. He gave away his camera to a high school sweetheart and became involved in the project of his own life.

A couple of dozen years later, the past telephoned. It was his old girlfriend, who invited Charles to a holiday get-together with her family. At the party she presented him with a box and warned him not to open it until he got home. Inside was his old Minolta SRT-201. As the aroma of leatherette and glue wafted from the open box, "The light bulb went off in my head to go into photography," Charles says, adding that he had already become interested in the works and methods of 19th and early 20th century photographers.

At the time Charles and his wife Susan were preparing to move to England for Susan's job with BP. Unable to obtain a work visa, Charles soon found himself in England with time to spare. Naturally, he did what anyone in that situation would do. He decided to buy a view (large-format) camera.

"Large-format" refers to the size of the sheet of film that can be exposed in the camera. Before the use of photographic enlargers became practical, printing involved laying a negative against a sheet of sensitized paper in a printing frame and exposing it to the sun. The printed image, therefore, was always exactly the same size as the negative image. If an image was to be 8 inches tall and 10 inches wide, an 8 by 10 inch negative was required.

A large-format camera is essentially a big box screwed to a tripod. Made of wood or metal, it consists of an accordion bellows stretched



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Torosay Castle on the Isle of Mull, *silver print*. Charles' camera limned every stone and lichen on the 150-year-old castle.



Trigon Barns, *platinum print*. The rural countryside in Dorset is celebrated for its picturesque villages and historic estates.

between two standards that rise from a sturdy base. The front standard, which holds the camera's lens, is geared to a track that allows it to move forward and back on the base. This mobility allows the photographer to compose and focus the image, which is projected through the lens onto a window of ground glass set into the fixed back standard. To better see this image, the photographer huddles under a dark cloth that he drapes over the back of the camera. To take a picture, a film holder is slid under the ground glass frame, the holder's dark slide is drawn and the film is exposed.

Charles "stumbled across" his first view camera in a London shop. The camera's polished mahogany construction and brass hardware were irresistible to him. "It was made in 1957 by the Gandolfi Brothers of London," he explains. "They made a lot of military cameras, so a lot of times you will see this camera painted completely black." One marvels that anyone would paint over such a beautiful instrument. Charles had two backs made for his camera, one that would accommodate 4 x 5 inch sheet film, and one for 5 x 7 inch film. Later he purchased cameras to take 8 x 10 and 11 x 14 inch film, as well. "I have 5 or 6 view cameras now," he says with pride.

He also owns lenses, tack-sharp modern ones as well as antique models whose hand-ground optics and engraved brass barrels were high tech in their day. "I'm experimenting with some of these old brass lenses," Charles says, as he surveys a selection of them on his dining-room table. "There's a whole philosophy of using the old glass. They were all hand-made, and each one is different."

A photographer needs a darkroom, of course. "We lived in England and Scotland for 10 years and moved five times. So I'm an expert at building darkrooms," he

says. When he and Susan were planning their new house in Vero Beach, Charles designed his darkroom from the ground up, equipping it with every convenience. The spacious room is very quiet – a rubber floor is good for that. Dozens of glass bottles line the counters near an industrial-sized stainless steel sink. Over it, a powerful ventilation system stands ready to whisk noxious chemical fumes out of the house.

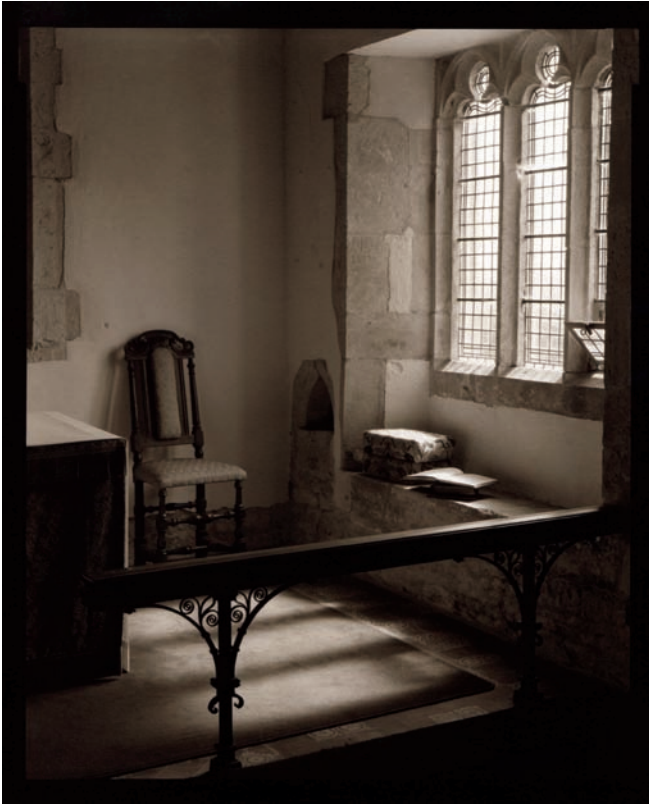
"The process for platinum is very, very simple," Charles says. He begins to speak of contrast agents, developers and how many drops of this or that chemical go into his paper-sensitizing solution. When he announces, "This is the platinum," one's attention is immediately riveted to the tiny brown bottle of liquid in his hand. "This is an expensive little fellow," Charles says. "It costs close to \$300 for 25 milliliters."

Like Don Quixote's dreams of chivalry, the aesthetic sensibility that exacts the extraordinary materials, time and labor that Charles lavishes upon it was first nourished by books. Charles' photographic heroes include Frenchman Gustave LeGray (1820-1884), American Clarence White (1871-1925) and, in particular, Czech Josef Sudek (1896-1976). "Everyone knows that he's the one I look to for inspiration," Charles confides.

Sudek is remembered for photographing humble objects in his studio and views of Prague, his home city, with the same intensity of feeling. Charles found himself wanting to make images that look as though they were crafted in 1910 rather than snapped in 2011. To replicate the enduring quality of those old images, he seldom includes human beings in his work. "I don't want somebody wearing a pair of Nike shoes" in an otherwise timeless scene, he says.

Charles found ideal subject matter in England's countryside and small towns. Selecting a matted print from a portfolio he remarks, "This one is from the time we lived in Steeple, on the southern coast. This church is St. Peter's Church of Church Knowle." The picture shows a corner of the sanctuary lit from the right by three leaded glass windows. On its way to the floor the light brushes a ledge where a couple of cushions and an open book lie, illuminating the objects with a revelatory brilliance. To the left, a lone chair stands stolidly against the wall, untouched by the radiance but possessed by grace nevertheless. A communion rail in the foreground, dark against the bright floor, underlines the silent drama of the scene.

Charles remembers the day he shot the picture. "It was the middle of winter and these churches are ice cold. There's no heat. I had to wear gloves, it was so cold." So



St. Peter's Church of Church Knowle, *platinum print*. It was winter when Charles snapped the shutter on this scene, and the church was "ice cold."

much, one thinks, for the camera's inability to lie. Soft and warm-toned, the platinum print invites the eye to bask in its temperate atmosphere. The print's mood is so far removed from the hustle and anxiety of the present era that it is hard to believe one is looking at a modern photograph. Charles understands the feeling. "That's what happens to me when I'm behind that camera," he says. With the dark cloth over his head, "I completely find myself back in time... I'm totally oblivious to what's going on around me."

In England, Charles' favorite hunting grounds for the perfect shot were in and around his home in Dorset County. The rural countryside is celebrated for its picturesque villages and historic estates. Minterne, which has been in the Churchill and Digby families for nearly four centuries, is one such estate. Its extensive gardens, which were laid out in the 18th century, are open to the public. A graceful old bridge on the property fascinated Charles. He positioned his camera on its tripod below the bridge at water's edge, composed his picture and waited. He notes that the English landscape has a narrow range of tonal values, due to the mist and overcast



Elizabeth's Bridge, Minterne, *platinum print*. The photographer had to wait two hours for a reluctant sun to illuminate this tranquil scene.

skies particular to that climate. And in black-and-white photography, tones that are close in value, without very light or very dark tones nearby to set them off, are the visual equivalent of cold, gray oatmeal in the finished print. So Charles waited for the sun to come out. He knew that when it did, the gnarled tree branch hanging over the river would frame the dark bridge in a shower of bright leaves.

"I waited two hours for the sun to come," Charles recalls. But England's climate, and the old fashioned equipment that he uses, instilled patience in him. On numerous occasions "there was a lot of sitting and waiting in fields with no place to sit down. Or I'd be sitting in my car waiting for the rain to stop. If you're not a photographer you are bored to death."

And then there is the cumbersome weight of the equipment. "The 11 x 14 camera weighs 21 pounds empty," Charles says. Nowadays, he admits, he has a hard time carrying it. But during his English sojourn, "I used to walk for six miles with that camera in the rucksack, carry the tripod, and have 10 pounds of film holders with me, through the English countryside." His effort was not without danger. Charles has set up his camera on rickety railroad overpasses and ventured onto thin ice in Scotland. "I've fallen down banks – I even fell down a slope in North Carolina last summer with the Gandolfi...I was in shorts and I was completely scraped to shreds. We had to run into town to get first aid."

The question is, is it worth it? The bulky equipment, the expense, the time, the cuts and bruises? "You have to have a lot of dedication to keep plugging away," Charles admits. "There are a lot of mistakes, a lot of hiccups, a lot of cursing, a lot of things that don't go right – but when I get it right, I get it right, and that is a joy." ❀