

"A platinum cocktail, a whiskey shot glass, and a little bit of heaven..."

Platinum Printmaking made simple

by Gary Auerbach

As a serious amateur photographer for more than 20 years, it was only in 1989 after suffering a disabling wrist injury in my chiropractic practice, that I turned my full attention to photography. Looking over my earlier work, I was disillusioned that much of it was already showing signs of deterioration. Despite using fiber-based papers, selenium toning, and proper storage, I realized that no matter how good my photographs might be, I was working in a medium destined to self-destruct. I had read numerous articles on alternative methods of photographic printmaking, searching for ways to make photographic images more archival. One of the greatest collections of photography exists at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson. There I found platinum and palladium images of early Steichen and Weston, and newer images by Dick Arentz. I was hooked. Not only were these photographs magnificent, with a very special soft, but sharp look, but they would stand the test of time.

I could appreciate that there was a new depth of image possible with the platinotype, with the added benefits of true archival permanence. My readings also led me to believe that the process seemed complicated and difficult. Yet I have found that by adhering to several steps, platinum printmaking can be relatively simple and very rewarding. The three basic components of platinum printmaking are a shot glass, a platinum cocktail mixture, and "a little help from heaven" - the sun..

Getting Started

I wanted to work in a full continuous tone black and white process, so I chose the platinum/palladium method. Bostick & Sullivan offers a starter kit* of chemistry which includes palladium chloride, and potassium chloroplatinite. To clear the print, I use EDTA (a chelating agent to clear ferrous oxalate from the print).

Platinotypes are an iron process that uses ferric oxalate in combination with the metal salts of platinum and palladium to create the image. So far so good. No need for any acids to clear prints as in the old days, no more hypo, in fact, no more darkrooms! This process can be done under a tungsten light. Since you work on watercolor paper, no more photographic paper. I initially tried and still like the Cranes platinotype and ecru paper available through B & S.

After the chemistry kit and paper, you will need a contact frame large enough to hold your negative and paper in contact. The easiest light source to begin with is the sun. If you live in the Southwest as I do, this is a fairly dependable source. If you live in London or Seattle, an old GE sun lamp or facsimile will work just fine for small format images.

The Negative

Platinotypes are a contact print process, meaning that your image is as large as your negative. They also can print in a much wider density range than silver.

Search your negative drawers to find ones that look very dense. Almost bulletproof. These are going to be the negatives that will print the best. I began with a lot of 2 1/4" negatives for experimentation. You will be amazed how many 2 1/4" platinum/palladium prints you can make with the starter chemistry set.

Contrast

The platinotype has a great control over contrast. But you must have a negative that is not too thin. Many silver negatives that print on # 2 paper are too thin. Two separate solutions of ferric oxalate will be mixed - the one that has chlorate added to it will affect contrast.

There are essentially 13 different grades of contrast that can be used. Working from negatives developed for silver printing, a number # 7 emulsion is a good starting point.

EMULSION CONTRAST CHART

Solution No.	Solution A	Solution B	Solution C
#1	12	0	12
#2	11	1	12
#3	10	2	12
#4	9	3	12
#5	8	4	12
#6	7	5	12
#7	6	6	12
#8	5	7	12
#9	4	8	12
#10	3	9	12
#11	2	10	12
#12	1	11	12
#13	0	12	12

$A + B = C$

Solution A = Ferric Oxalate

Solution B = Ferric Oxalate with Chlorate

Solution C = Platinum & Palladium

The Coating Process

These instructions are for right handed folks. Lefty's will have to transpose the actions. Though all of this might sound complex, it is really quite simple. For a 8 x 10 print the complete coating process is usually under 10 seconds

Place your emulsion in a small vessel. I use small plastic taco sause cups that I get at restaurant supply stores.

Pour it along the length of the rod on the left side as shown by the dark streak in Figure 2.

Holding the rod in your right hand jiggle the rod in the direction of the arrows. The motion should be about a half-inch in each direction. This is to flow the solution evenly along the length of the rod. The rod will provide some capillary action and sort of sucks the solution along its length. The holes in the ends are of no consequence, the rod could just as well be solid. This will take about 1 to 2 seconds.

Now with very gentle pressure pull the rod to the left edge of the area to be coated. When you get to the edge, quickly pull it back to the right. Then again to the left but this time pull it a little further and then lift it up. You are finished coating. By Dick Sullivan

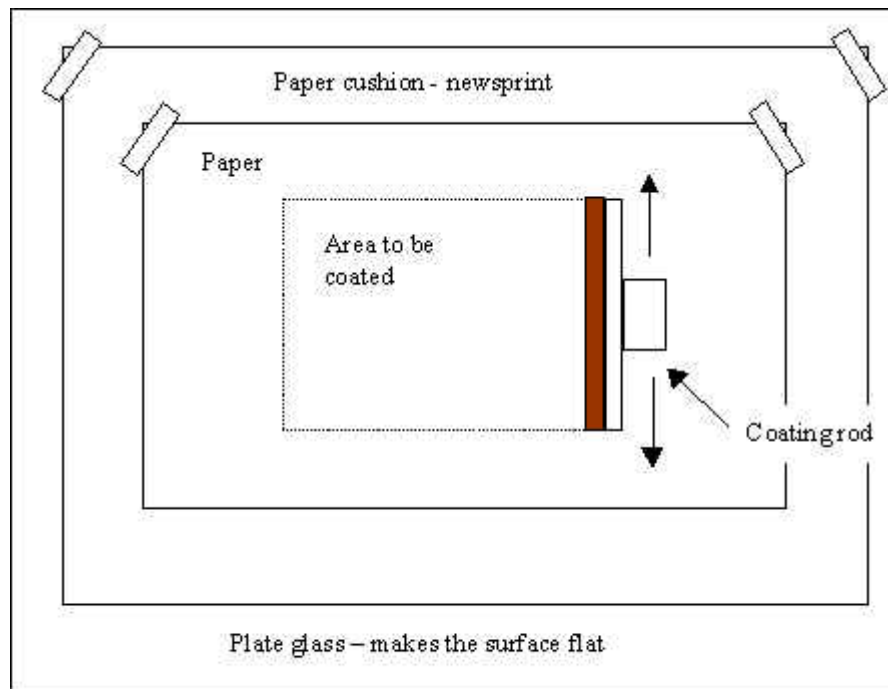


Figure 2..