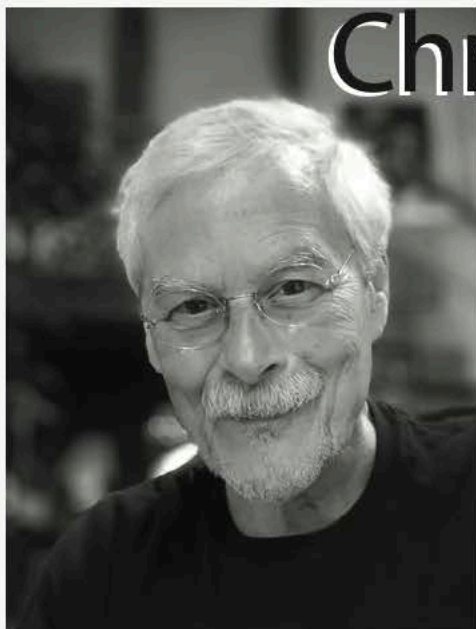


Christopher James



Christopher James is an internationally recognized artist and photographer whose alternative processes and paintings have been exhibited around the world. Also widely known for his book, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes* (Delmar Cengage - Albany, NY), which has been recognized by artists, curators, and historians as the definitive book on the genre of alternative processes in photography. Christopher graciously took some time out of his busy schedule to talk with The HAND.

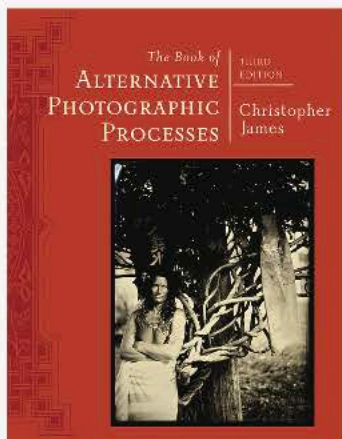
James: Can you tell us how you got started in photography and what inspired you?

CJ: Everyone has a story about that moment, the one often experienced alone even when in the company of others, the instant when one of your life-strands is forever changed. This is mine:

*In the late 60's, a perfect and dangerous time to be 21, a group of invisible patrons, inspired by the seductive idealism of that era, and perhaps little bit by the romantic notions of Robert Rimmer's book, *The Harrad Experiment*, spent the better part of a year interviewing art students around the country. Their intention... putting fourteen of them together with an equal number of free-spirited mentors, life and supplies on-the-house, with the single objective that we begin to work in a medium that was unfamiliar to us... presumably to determine how darkness was illuminated. I was tagged and became part of that tribe. I sold my BSA 500 Goldstar motorcycle to buy a very old VW with painted white angel wings, refrigerator tubing for brake lines and clothespins for throttle adjustments, and moved into a barn in an arts-centric commune in western Massachusetts called The Cummington Community.*

*We listened to Dylan's, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, did improvisational theater, built salt kilns, used barns as canvases, and I constructed what I imagined to be a darkroom with my only reference being David Hemming's English-loft workspace in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film, *Blow-Up*.*

Unlike the loft, my selected space was an unused and crooked donkey shed walled with opaque black silage plastic from a local farm supply to eliminate the light. My plumbing was a green hose, that had seen better days, hooked up to the main barn where we all lived on a single open floor. My mom had given me an ancient Russian enlarger she had purchased for 50 cents at a local church flea market... unique in that it would set a negative on fire for any exposure lasting more than 9 seconds. My safelight was a caver's headlamp with red cellophane... saved from a caramel apple wrapping.





Sidewalk Supper, NYC, 1968 Silver gelatin print

On a runaway to New York, with fellow barn-mates, Martha and Tony, I had made exposures with my very first used camera, the exact same model, both precious and cheap, that Hemmings had photographed Veruschka on purple seamless in Blow Up. I was eager to see if it worked. I also had a manual, Enlarging Is Thrilling – Or the Joy of Making Big Ones Out of Little Ones, by Don Herald; a book printed in 1945 to serve as a manual for the Federal Model #269 enlarger in a suitcase for \$39.50.

After processing my first roll of film in a tall Galliano bottle that I found behind the barn, I set up the donkey shed for printing. Selecting a frame, I placed the negative in the Russian enlarger's negative carrier and exposed one of my 10 precious pieces of Agfa Portriga 111 paper, held flat to a board with masking tape, until I smelled the smoke. A deep breath in the darkness, I immersed my first paper exposure in a baking tray that held the Dektol developer. Nothing... and a lifetime of seconds later... my first photograph, of a carefully dressed man, eating alone in a Hayes-Bickford, at the intersection of 8th and 34th in Times Square, emerged. In that very moment, in the midst of my satori, I knew without hesitation where the rest of my life would be centered.

James: Was that a conscious moment of thinking you were hooked?

CJ: No! I thought I'd failed! Because nothing had happened. You had to have a really fast exposure. I didn't know any of this! You had to expose accordingly, no burning or dodging or anything, it was just going to be... whatever!

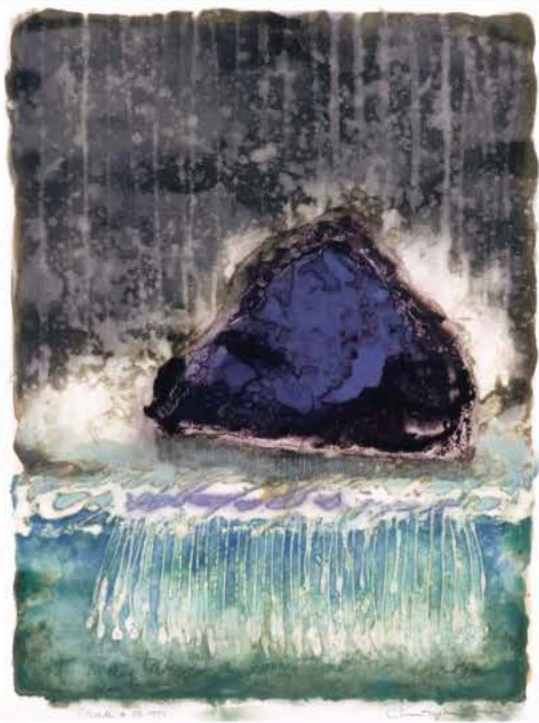
Adam: Were you looking at specific artists?

There weren't any! There were three books that might have been available: Robert Franks', *The Americans*, Danny Lyons', *The Bike Riders*, and *Family of Man...* the Steichen show. There was a South African guy named Sam Haskins doing soft core, scantily clad women with cowboy hats on and calling it art photography! But other than that, art photography didn't exist. The reason it came into being is because the anti-war movement needed photographers to take pictures of the demonstrations in order to put them in broadsides and newsletters. But no one knew how to make photographs. So, they demanded as part of their sit-ins that photography become practiced in college curriculums. All of a sudden, photography entered its golden era. Not like today where it's just... "doesn't matter pictures". This was, you had a camera, and you had a purpose.

Adam: So, what inspired you to make, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes*? That goes back to the 19th century when there was artistic photography, right?

I was having a visiting artist advisor meeting with Robert Frank and he hated my work. Just hated it. It was nothing like his. I was doing printmaking, painting on the surface of the prints. I was doing everything I could to the photographs because I was a painter. I was a printmaker. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to incorporate or integrate photography and printmaking and painting so that it suited my aesthetic. So, Robert Frank, as you might expect, detested it. Because he was an icon – this is in 1970-71. I was devastated. But being young and full of piss and vinegar, you couldn't tell me anything. I decided I was going to finish my grad degree without using a camera. In order to do that I started researching alternative ways of making pictures. As soon as I got into... this is an example of how a really rotten critique can change your life for the better... I started getting involved in what is alternative photography, or old photography made new. It established my philosophy of photography not as a single art form but as a universal art form integrated into everything. It took me until I got to design the grad program to actually institute that philosophy into a curriculum. Since I graduated from RISD, I've been basically a director of a

program. I've never been not the director, or not the chair. When I finished grad school, I wrote proposals to all the colleges without any photography and I said, "Do you want a program? I'd be happy to start one." They all said yes! I chose Greenfield, a community college, because I had no idea how to teach. None! I knew how to communicate, but I had no idea how to teach! Because I didn't know much about anything, what I ended up doing is spending seven years learning how to teach in Greenfield, MA. Then I went to Harvard and started teaching there. By this time, I really had a clear idea of how I wanted to integrate photography and alternative processes. The kids at Harvard were super quick to pick it up. I've had a lot of people go through the program in 13 years. People like Dan Estabrook, Debra Copaken, Lauren Greenfield the film maker. Those kids are all destined for greatness no matter what. But if you gave them the right impetus, they would take off with it. They loved making prints with their hands. Your students today are immune to the photograph because its ubiquitous on the phone. You show them how to make a print with their hands and they fall in love – and hard!



Ocean #23, 1997 Watercolor



Kristen, Thailand, #2, 1985 Watercolor



Gabrielle d'Estrees and One of Her Sisters at the Gellert Baths, 1985 Watercolor

Adam: When did the book first come out and how long did it take to put it all together.

Every question has a story! Because I'd always been the chair, I'd always give myself Fridays off so I could have a long weekend in the studio. My career was going gangbusters. I was with Lee Witkin (gallery in New York), I was showing at the Modern, I showed at the Met, I had representatives in New York and Europe. I was making obscene amounts of money even selling for low prices. The volume was great. I was busy all the time in the studio. To the point where I was neglecting family. I was neglecting everything important. I just had to be famous. One day, on a Friday, I decided, "what the hell, I gotta go to school". At this point I was at the Art Institute of Boston running their MFA program. While I was sitting in my office a guy in a suit pokes his head in and says, "Are you Christopher James?", and I said, "yeah". He said, "there's a rumor that you've got thousands of pages of notes on alternative photography." I'd always printed them out and given them to everyone in my workshops. He said, "Is it time? Can you

put together a book?" And I said, "Yeah, I think I can." That started a two or three-year process of all the things publishers make you go through. You have to find the competition. How are you different? Where is your market? How is your book going to be different? There weren't very many alternative process books. There was a rare opening. It took two or three years to write the thing. It came out and it took off. I made a deal with the publisher to give up royalties if I could have design control. When I handed them the manuscript it was pretty hefty. They said it's going to be a quarter this size, it's going to be in black and white... but I'd made the deal with them. I could do exactly what I needed to do. It sold so well that they immediately launched into a second edition, which took another two years to write. That took off and became international. Now they're doing four-color plates. I doubled the size of the book. Then they said let's do a third. It's 900 pages with 700 four color plates. There's not a publisher alive that would go to that expense if they're not making money. So, they're making money and I can sleep at night because I got a book that I want.



Dying Man, Mukti Bhavan, Benares, India, 1985 Platinum/ palladium print

Adam: This book is a great gift to the artistic community. I know so many artists who would say that your book started them with alternative process. So many people have gained from that book. I'm curious to know what you've gained from it.

It's a weird question but a good one. My family is the family of William James the philosopher and Henry James the writer. I wanted to accomplish something that was commensurate with the expectations of my family. Being a teacher wasn't it. Being an artist with good representation and a nice show record; being in a museums and shows wasn't it. I needed legacy. It's not that anybody said you need this. I just felt, this is a lot to live up to. So, the book gave me legitimacy. It certified that, when I'm gone, that book's not going anywhere. In my wildest aspirational dreams, that book will last as long as, *Keepers of Light*, or William Henry Fox Talbot. I'm looking at this book having life long after I'm gone.

Adam: I want to pivot a bit and talk about your own work. How do you find time to make your own images? What keeps you interested in making images?

Well, this should serve as a warning to you. As a graduate program director, I don't have time. There's just no time. I work at this job seven days a week. My studio time is awful. I get to work when I'm doing a workshop. I get to play when you play. I had two separate art careers. I had an audience with photography and an audience with painting. They didn't merge until Lee Witkin would allow me to merge...



Panchganga Ghat, Benares, 1984 Platinum/ palladium print

There were very few galleries specializing in photography. When I decided I needed a gallery, I tried to take my work to Lee Witkin because there was no other place to be. I would take a bus to New York every six months and leave a portfolio on the desk. Because Lee was so busy, I could never get to see him. I did this for years, just leave work. After several years, the receptionist finally said, "Lee wants to see you." I went back... it's the first time I'd ever met him. He was a legend. And he said, "I want to try you out. We'll put you in a summer show and see what transpires." And then he started giving me a stipend and I became part of his stable along with people like George Tice and Doug Prince. It was the beginning of photography as a certifiably reliable art form for collectors. He gave me a show every two years. He'd fly up to New Hampshire and select work for the show. Once when he came up, I didn't have any photography. So, I showed him some paintings. To show you what kind of a dealer he was, he said, "Let's show the paintings." It was an incredible moment because Lee Witkin was a photo gallery – premier level – and all of a sudden, he was going to take a risk with his reputation and let me show paintings. So, there were two separate paths. And in between there was another art form I fell in love with, and that was SCUBA. There was a time I just stopped making art and got a SCUBA license with a dive master rating.



Ferris Wheel & Corpse, India, July Salted paper print

Adam: Wow! Talk about that!

Diving is an art form – to do it well. The first time I saw a diving artist dive, their comfort, their ease, their lack of trying to do it right, led me to think about Eugene Harrigel's, *Zen and The Art of Archery*. Don't try to hit the bull's eye. Let go of your aspirations to be good at this. Just let it flow. Let it be natural. And when you see an artist diver at work, it's effortless. It's so beautiful to watch. The aspiration was to get so good at it that you never had to move your legs or arms – you simply breathed. I eventually got to that point. I think of it as an absolute complete beautiful art form. It's body and nature together. It's an incredible feeling to do it well.

Adam: Where do you dive? Off the east coast?!

Nah. I trained there. In very cold water wearing 33mm wetsuits with 30 pounds of weight to keep you down. I swore when I got my license, I would never dive in New England again! Ha ha! I went south. Off of Cuba, the Cayman Islands, Belize. Anywhere I had 200-foot visibility and could wear two pounds of weights with a dive skin.

James: I've never SCUBA dived. I've done some snorkeling.

Ah! They call those people, bait! Ha ha!

James: As soon as you submerge, it's such a mind-blowing experience. There's this whole other world happening below the surface.

Yeah. And the beautiful thing about diving is that if you find a place you can stay all day, you switch over to Nitrox, an exotic gas, and you can stay there for hours. There's a place called, The Strip, off of Bimini, in really shallow water. It's got everything. You can just get in one position, breath shallow, never move up or down, and just look all day. It's a beautiful thing. The most incredible things I've ever seen in my life have been under the water. We know nothing about what's under the ocean. Nothing.



Gellert Baths, Budapest, 1983 Argyrotype

Adam: You and I have talked a lot about the idea of play. What kinds of things are you interested in playing with in terms of photography. Is it writing, is it processes? And what would you like to see more of in current or future conversations about photography?

Well, first of all, I know that little bears get to be successful big bears by playing. I don't think there's any other way to become a successful bear. It's always been in my best interests to play. I embrace the accident, as do my student. Embrace the accident as a way to find a unique way to express your creativity. For the last several years, I've been judging international competitions. What I would call, "integrated work". (See list of contests below). This is serious artmaking on an integrated alternative photography basis. So, what I get to see is all the play that's going on, internationally. I find access to that work, what I want to give to my grad students as inspirational tools. When I look at various processes, I think, "what's wrong with this. What's the problem". As an example, wet plate collodion has become amazingly boring. The reason is that it's tied to a long exposure. It's about portraits where you draw an X on the plate, you put the sitter at a 2/3 or 1/3 position... and it looks like camera club work. There's nothing there except the rule of thirds and another nice exposure of someone sitting in front of a view camera. So, what I'm curious about is, when are people going to start making significant contributions to making wet plate collodion a conceptual medium. When are they going to start thinking of it – with all of its difficulties and faults – using it to express themselves rather than the technique. The biggest problems that alt photo faces is that when people look at a show they're first reaction is to say, "what a great print", or, the artist did a great job representing the process, rather than talking about the concept and ideas and energy and stepping off the cliff with this particular process. That's what I think is driving my interest – not being dogmatic, or pragmatic, not being middle of the road.

Adam: Are there some artists who are doing that?

Oh yeah, absolutely. Quite a lot of them. They're around. Sara Silks is a great example, Dan Estabrook is a great example. People who are working with different techniques and producing work that's original.

James: We can appreciate what you're talking about. And we can appreciate a really beautiful print. There is something nice about a well-crafted print. But if that's the only thing that's interesting is the process, it's less interesting than if there's a compelling narrative.

Yeah. Try to have a conversation after, "that's a nice print." It's a struggle to have a conversation about that image because concept doesn't enter into it. The whole idea was to succeed at making a nice piece of work. And that, by itself, is not a goal. That's just too damn easy.

Adam: You've written this book that is such an amazing contribution to literature, photography, and just art in general, that gives people the tools to make these images. But that's not everything. It's about the excitement of making the image. The play, the discovery, the wonder of making images – photographic or not. I feel like that's the essence of what you are about.

Being an artist is tough in America. It's not something you go into lightly. If you make that commitment, you have to find a way to pay the mortgage and make a living. Being an artist is not depending on social security. Being an artist is having autonomy. You need to have control over this very short time you have to be alive. Having a cubicle in an office doing a job you hate is just not the way to go. Autonomy is the goal. And the only way you're going to enjoy the difficult times of having that autonomy is if you play. If you're having a good time doing it. The whole idea of "pair-of-dimes" and "pet-a-doggy", all the things that come with academia, get in the way of play. Play is the goal. I'm 75 right now and I'm still playing every day.

Christopher James is presently University Professor and Director of the MFA in Photography and Integrated Media program at Lesley University College of Art and Design in Cambridge, MA.

Taking a workshop with Christopher is an experience you will never forget. The scenery and small towns around his home in Dublin, NH are gorgeous, and his studio is intimate, welcoming, and well-appointed. But most of all, Christopher is an outstanding instructor. As a teacher, I take workshops to learn how to do the processes but also to learn how to teach them. Christopher is patient, funny, creative, and incredibly knowledgeable, of course. He works hard to give you the experience you want. It should be a bucket-list item for anyone interested in alternative process. To learn more, visit Christopher's website: christopherjames-studio.com



Alicia in Gum, 2012 Gum Bichromate



Nelske Elzer, July 28, 2010 Wet plate collodion tintype