

A WALK ON THE WHITE SIDE

For years photographer and printer **Tim Rudman** waited for the exact conditions to shoot a stark winter series. His patience paid off with a new body of work, printed with his 'faux lith' technique. Simon Frost reports.





Browsing in a bookshop one day in the mid-1960s, Tim Rudman happened upon something special. 'It was an epiphany moment,' he remembers, 'I had no idea photography could be used in that graphic art form. Huge grain, blown-out whites, blocked-up blacks and dynamic angles in the image – I just thought it was fantastic. I thought this is what I need to do, this is my medium; I knew it immediately.'

The book was Sam Haskins' *Cowboy Kate and Other Stories*, and within two weeks of his discovery the inspired young medical student had found a communal darkroom and was teaching himself to print, gradually learning the ropes in the background during his medical career. He balanced his two loves of photography and medicine with dedication for many years, 'Time was difficult, and I didn't have a darkroom. I had a friend who had one in a caravan at the bottom of her

garden. I would come back from work quite late, have a quick bite to eat and then drive over there, set up at maybe 10 o'clock, print until 2am, come home, hang up the prints, go to bed and then get up and go to work again.'

Tim became friends with the late Gene Nocon, a revered printer who had developed lith printing, and through him was introduced to the little-understood process in its infancy. Tim Rudman is now widely known as the authority on the subject. His new series, *A Walk on the White Side*, employs what he calls a 'faux-lith' toning process; silver gelatine prints with soft, creamy whites, similar to that of early lith prints made with the papers available when the method was first conceived.

But to introduce 'faux-lith', you need first to know about lith itself. 'It's all about colours and soft tones juxtaposed against high-contrast tones, which you can't do with any other process,' Tim explains. The distinctive

appearance of lith is created in part by over-exposure followed by snatching halfway through development. The developer is heavily diluted, and through a toning process soft, subtle hues can be achieved in light areas.

Tim discovered lith at a time when the practice was rare, very little was known and nothing was written about it. He tells me that even the expert printer Mike Warburn, employed at the time to duplicate the winning prints for Ilford's Developer of the Year competition, was stumped by a lith print of Nocon's. 'Mike rang him up and said "Gene, I give up! How did you make this print?"' What was agreed was that it was notoriously unpredictable – even the best printers would avow that you couldn't control the outcome or replicate a print, but Tim's scientific background told him otherwise. 'I thought that couldn't be true – the laws of physics and chemistry are there, it has to follow those rules, of course it's controllable!'





Enchanted by the beauty of lith prints and desiring to reproduce each print exactly as he envisioned, Tim pursued mastery of the process, experimenting over several years. 'One of the things about lith is there are many different variables. Every paper gives a different result, as does the dilution of the developer, the temperature of the developer, which developer you use and any additives. The point at which you snatch it can have a radical effect on the picture, as can how much exposure you give it.'

Tim laboriously set about isolating each of these variables, drawing on the scientific expertise of his training to single-handedly conduct all of the research on a process perceived to be like taking blind aim at a target. He knew that the rules must be there and he proved them, 'Eventually I found that I could predict exactly what I wanted – I knew how I wanted to print and what I wanted the print to say, and I could do it again and again and again.'

A strong believer that information must be shared, Tim wrote a book on the subject, *The*

Master Photographer's Lith Printing Course, and with a guide to the process available for the first time, lith took off. While Nocon had developed the process, Tim Rudman had made it controllable, deciphered the method and written the rulebook. 'After a while there were so many people doing lith and they had all developed their own approach – the process is so flexible that artists can take it in so many different directions. People were doing soft, romantic stuff, gritty, graphic stuff, portraits, flower studies, everything; whatever people wanted to do, they could find a home for it with this process.' So Tim put together *The World of Lith Printing*, a collection of portfolios that represented the variety of work that had sprung up in the years since his book had elucidated the mysteries of lith.

The faux-lith process used for these

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images replicates the look of early lith prints. 'I used a toning technique and got rid of all the middle tones by selecting subjects with restricted tonal range. In printing I changed the contrast to get good blacks and light colours and not much in between, then toned to that beautiful lith colour. Superficially, they look like the original lith prints; with later papers it became much more pink and magenta and other colours. This was the colour of lith prints, but these don't behave like lith prints or use any lith developer.'

Originally set entirely in Montana, the series spilled over into neighbouring areas including Utah and Wyoming as he travelled the American northwest. *A Walk on the White Side* had been on the backburner for some years before Tim found the conditions he needed. 'Every year for 10 years or so I did residential workshops in Montana on printing. I'd do a three or four-week course and go over for maybe six weeks at a time so I would have a couple of weeks to travel round and shoot.' >





◀ On the prairies of Montana, where he says it is ‘flat forever’, Tim found the imagery he wanted to explore under winter conditions, but with such a precise vision of what he wanted to capture, hit a succession of years where the winter hadn’t fallen quite as he wanted it. ‘I was doing other projects but this one was always ticking over in the background. I had a certain type of image in mind for years, but I couldn’t find much that filled that need.’

His patience paid off; pure white snow dominates the foreground of these sublime landscapes, subtly contrasted against softly toned skies, with strong blacks in the carefully selected and deftly composed features of

the landscape. The images have a soothing, peaceful effect, with simple, sparse subject matter gently augmenting the lay of the land.

Tim Rudman is not only a wonderful printer, his innate photographer’s eye for a striking composition is clear to see, though the finished print is always in his mind. ‘I do love taking the photographs too. I look through the camera and I see the black & white print in my head and try to produce that mental image on the paper. I nearly always know exactly what it’s going to look like, but sometimes I play with it and take it somewhere else, which is important to do too.’

Even while photographing, it seems that much of the pleasure Rudman gets is the

anticipation of getting his shots back to the darkroom, and it’s a pleasure he has gladly shared with countless students. ‘I like the craft, handling the print through all the chemicals, changing it bit by bit and ending up with the same bit of paper that I started with, having the image on it just as I want it. People who like to print by hand, once they start to see how it changes the image they had, and how it starts to say different things, how they can move it in different directions, they just fall in love with it, they really do.’

▶ To see more of Tim Rudman’s work visit timrudman.com