

The intimate photobook

After having made several excursions into the world of on-demand book publishing, we take a look at the other end of the market with David Chow

AS GOOD as photography book publishing is these days, with companies such as Nazraeli Press, Steidl, Aperture and Lodima Press leading the way in terms of absolute print quality, there is nothing finer than a book illustrated with original photographic prints, paired with text printed in letterpress and bound in fine leather. Such celebrated books from the past have included *The Pencil of Nature* by William Henry Fox Talbot. Printed in 1844 and featuring 26 calotype images, it was the first photographically illustrated book of its kind. Other such books include *Idylls of the King* published in 1874 and illustrated with 12 albumen prints by Juliet Margaret Cameron, and *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* by Peter Henry Emerson, which contained 40 original platinum prints. All beautiful books in their own right, they were, as one can imagine, very labour intensive and hence costly to produce. Published in limited numbers, they were far too expensive for the average person to purchase.

By the late 19th century the development of photomechanical processes such as photogravure offered the publishing industry more economical and superior means of illustrating books. Between 1887 and 1895 Emerson produced five new books illustrated with photogravures, with *Marsh Leaves*, regarded by many as Emerson's best artistic work, being the most notable. While these new books were

far more affordable than his first platinum print book, Emerson retained the strong belief that photogravures should be regarded as original prints, a sentiment echoed by both artists and collectors alike. Other books of note from the early 20th century included *New York* (1910) by Alvin Langdon Coburn, which was illustrated with 20 photogravures, and *The North American Indian (1907–1930)* by Edward S. Curtis, easily the most ambitious book project of its kind, which included some 20 volumes containing nearly 2000 original photogravure prints.

Coinciding with the work of Coburn and Curtis, Alfred Stieglitz was publishing *Camera Work* (1903–1917), a journal illustrated with hand-pulled photogravures, which were usually produced from the photographers' original negatives, that has been described as the most beautiful publication of its time. Important work by such photographic icons as Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, Frank Eugene and Frederick Evans graced the pages of this important publication. One of Stieglitz's main aims with *Camera Work* was the establishment of photography as a fine art, a goal he was largely successful in reaching.

Throughout the 20th century many important books were illustrated using photogravure or the more efficient rotogravure printing techniques. Among the most iconic were Brassai's *Paris de Nuit* (1933), Henri Cartier Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* (1952), and Robert Frank's *The*

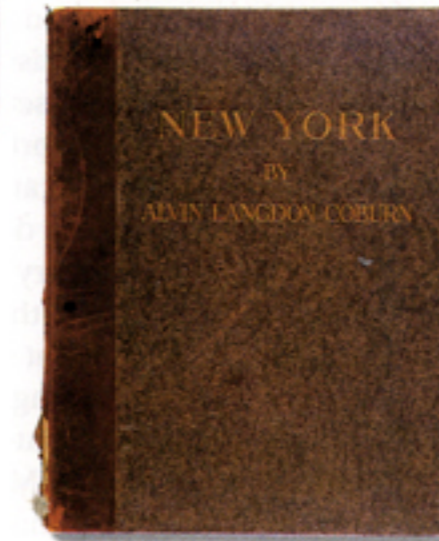
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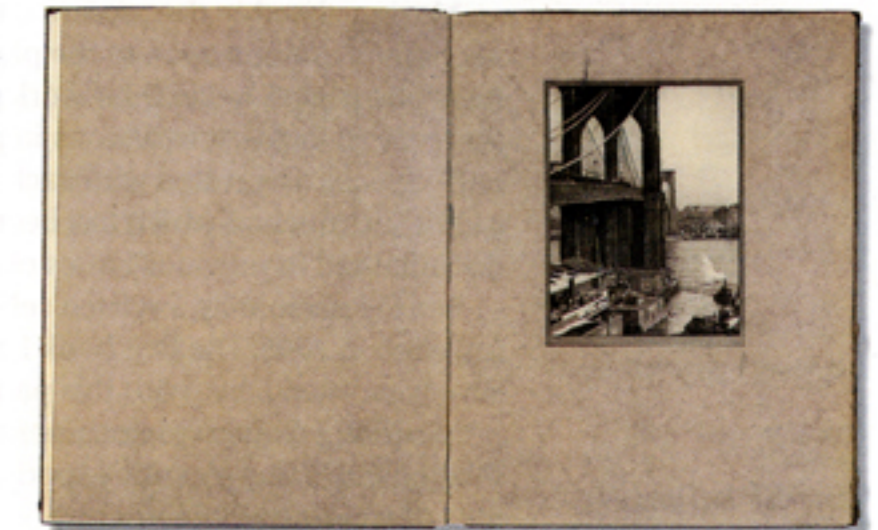
Phaidon has re-released *The Photobook: A History, Volume 1*, in softback, priced £24.95. Written by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, it is indispensable for anyone interested in the history and development of the photography book.



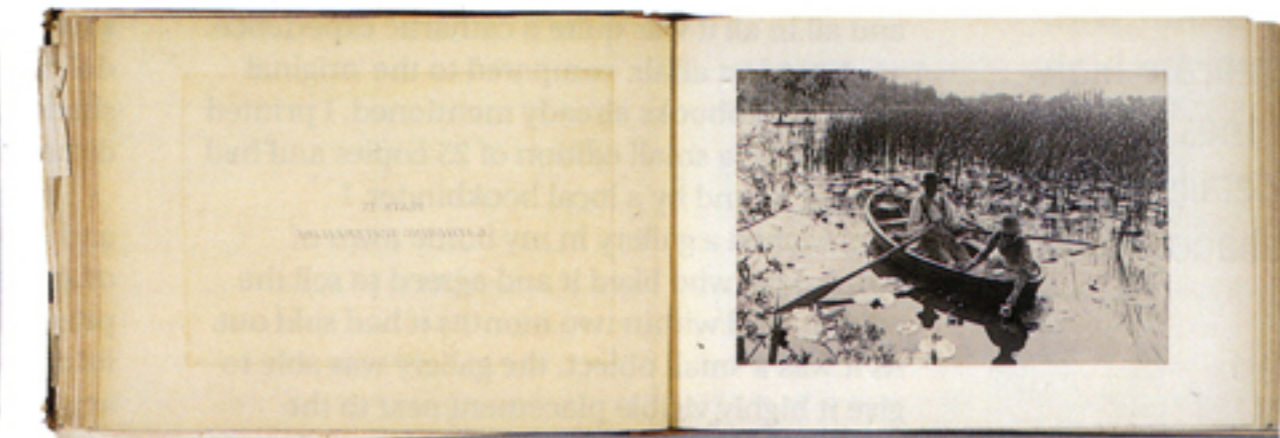
The Pencil of Nature by William Henry Fox Talbot. 26 calotype prints with letterpress commentaries, published 1844-46.



New York by Alvin Langdon Coburn, 20 tipped-in warm-toned photogravures, foreword by H.G Wells, published in 1910.



Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads by Peter Henry Emerson, contained 40 original platinum prints with text and commentaries by Emerson and T F Goodall, published in 1886, limited to 25 copies.



“// Never before had I seen text and images work so well together, as the whole book felt very intimate. It was the first time I had viewed a platinum print, and I was astonished by the subtle yet powerful quality of such prints, radiating gentle warmth with delicate high tones and rich details in the shadows.”

Americans (1958). In *Karsh Portfolio* (1967), Yousuf Karsh comments in the introduction that never before has his work been printed with such “fidelity” and “so true is the result that friends have said they find it difficult to distinguish between the book-page and the hand-printed original from my darkroom.” Nowadays such books command high prices, and some have even been broken up with the prints sold individually to collectors, as has been the case for many copies of Karl Blossfeldt’s *Art Forms in Nature*, published in 1928.

Moving ahead to the present day, there are now many options open to the photographer if he or she wishes to get their work published, and there are in fact vast variations in print quality and expense associated with each press or publisher, much of which has been well documented in previous issues of *Ag*.

For me personally, I started self-publishing my work in 2003. The first book I created was simply entitled *Love*. With this particular publication I wanted to document a broken relationship I had recently experienced, and the idea of creating a photography book seemed particularly appropriate. It was illustrated with 18 original photographic prints placed alongside poems that had been inspired by the images, and all in all it was quite a cathartic experience.

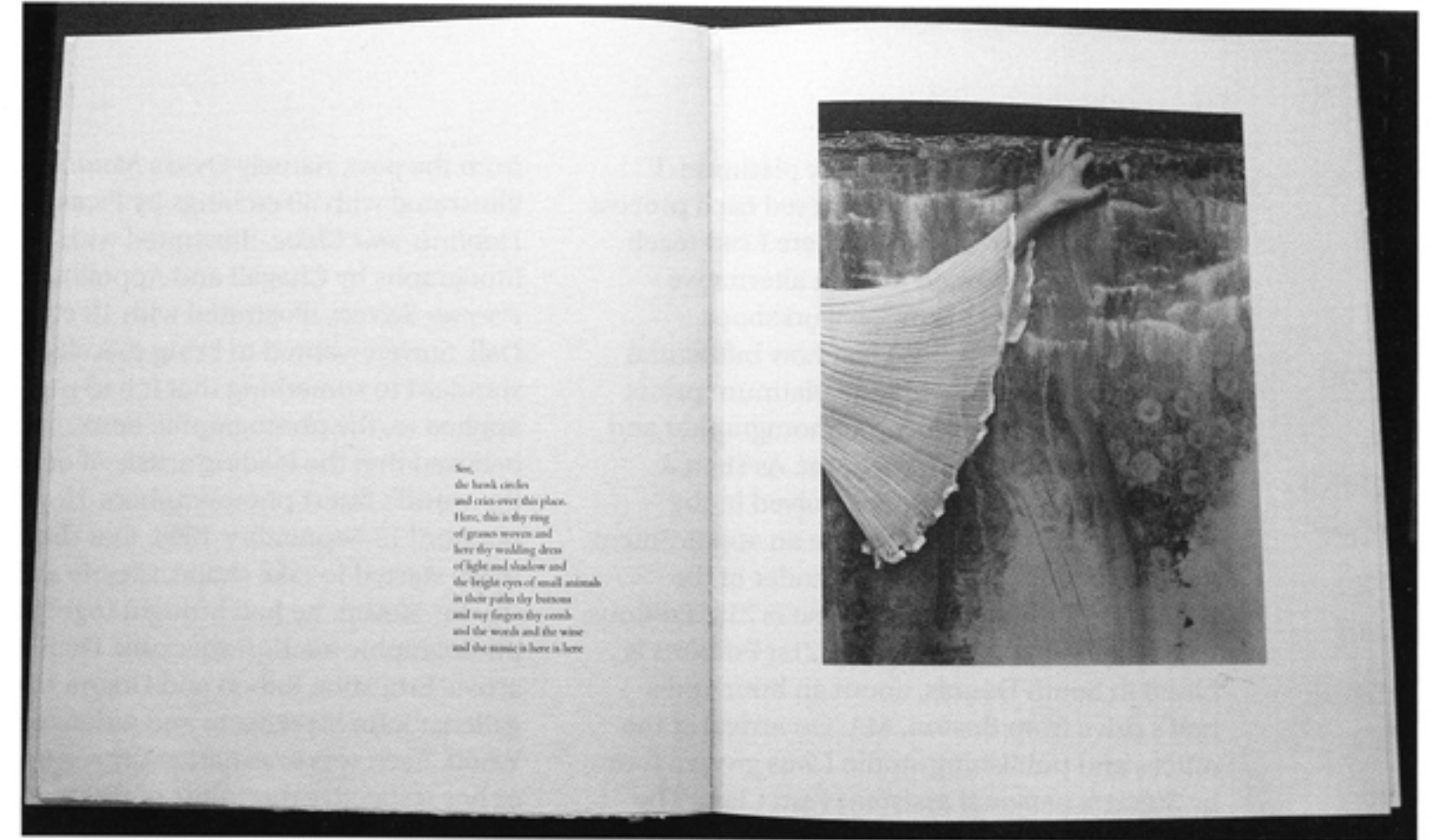
A modest affair, compared to the ‘original print’ photobooks already mentioned, I printed it myself in a small edition of 25 copies and had it hand bound by a local bookbinder. I approached a gallery in my home town of Cambridge who liked it and agreed to sell the edition, and within two months it had sold out. As it was a small object, the gallery was able to give it highly visible placement next to the payment counter, and this proved a good way to introduce people visiting the gallery to my work as the book format served as a small portfolio.

The very process of creating and publishing a book not only allowed me to focus on assembling a coherent series of prints, but led to my printing the images from the book as larger individual photographic prints to be sold in other provincial galleries

A year later I came across a photobook of ‘original prints’ at Photo London that had such a profound and lasting effect on me that it changed the nature and course of the next five years of my life.

The book was entitled *Sally Mann* (2004), and was created and published by 21st Editions, a small publisher and printing press based in Massachusetts. The book contained 10 bound platinum prints that were simply breathtaking, from both an aesthetic and technical point of view. They depicted the artist’s graceful figure and drapery studies that were taken in 1978, preceding the *Immediate Family* (1992) series of images that the artist is perhaps best known for. Paired alongside the images were haiku-like poems printed in beautiful letterpress and written by Mann herself. Never before had I seen text and images work so well together, as the whole book felt very intimate. It was the first time I had viewed a platinum print, and I was astonished by the subtle yet powerful quality of such prints, radiating gentle warmth with delicate high tones and rich details in the shadows. They indeed had an almost three-dimensional quality to them.

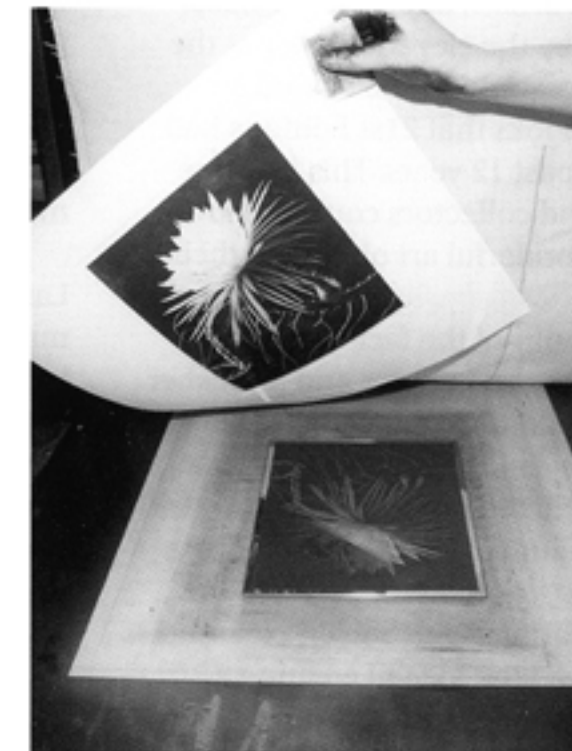
I went away from the show totally inspired and determined to somehow incorporate some of the magic seen in this book into my own personal work. Over the subsequent years I found myself on a journey of discovery as I attempted to learn all I could about alternative photographic printing techniques and book arts in general. Initially I learned how to make cyanotypes, then moved on to photogravure,



Sally Mann featuring 10 bound and one free-standing platinum print, paired with poetry written by Mann herself and printed in letterpress.



Inking the copperplate.



Hand pulling a copperplate photogravure.



Developing a platinum print.

Steven received a call from Lance Speer, a curator, writer, teacher and marketer. Lance shared Steven's vision of building a unique kind of journal that would maintain the highest standards at every level. Steven needed a counterpoint, someone he could bounce ideas off of, and he had found it in Lance. //

followed by kallitype and finally platinum. I would not say that I have mastered each process yet; however, I am at a level where I can teach other people interested in such alternative printing techniques through workshops.

On reflection I realised just how influential that one book of Sally Mann's platinum prints was in my development as a photographer and alternative photographic printer. As such, I wanted to meet the people involved in the creation of this book, so I made an appointment to visit Steven Albahari, the founder of the unique publishing company that is 21st Editions.

A relatively small company, 21st Editions is based in South Dennis, about an hour and a half's drive from Boston, MA. On arrival at the offices and publishing studio I was given a tour by Steven's personal assistant Pam Clark. The interior of the building had a sense of elegance and serenity about it, and many impressive photographs, which Steven had acquired or had been given by other artists, adorned the walls.

I was impressed by the elegant library at the entrance to the offices, which showcased a collection of all 31 books that 21st Editions had published over the past 12 years. This is where interested buyers and collectors could sit down and peruse these wonderful art objects at their leisure.

Following Pam's tour of the facilities, I was introduced to Steven, the founder and publisher of the company. In addition to having previously worked as a full time landscape photographer, Steven has had an interesting and varied background that included the arts, marketing and manufacturing.

In initial conversations with Steven I learned that he first conceived the idea of creating a unique publishing company dedicated to photography in 1990. Having been inspired by exquisitely printed limited edition artist books

from the past, namely Ovid's *Metamorphoses* illustrated with 30 etchings by Picasso, Longu's *Daphnis and Chloe*, illustrated with original lithographs by Chagall and Appollinaire's *Le Poemes Secrets*, illustrated with 18 etchings by Dali, Steven wanted to bring this classical standard to something that it had not been applied to, the photographic book, because he believed that the leading artists of our time are the world's finest photographers. However it was not until 13 September 1998, that the company really started to take shape. Clearly a memorable day for Steven, he had brought together photographic auction specialist Denise Bethel, artists Ernestine Ruben and Duane Michaels, gallerist John Stevenson, and writer/scholar John Wood. Each was internationally regarded in his or her respective discipline of photographic expertise, and the meeting was a tremendous success, as described by Steven:

"It was full of undulating dynamics, accented with seriousness and laughter. Titles for the journal were suggested and rejected and speculation on how it would be received was discussed. Here came together a meeting of very different, but equally passionate minds and this marked the starting point for 21st".

Around this time Steven received a call from Lance Speer, a curator, writer, teacher and marketer. Lance shared Steven's vision of building a unique kind of journal that would maintain the highest standards at every level. Steven needed a counterpoint, someone he could bounce ideas off of, and he had found it in Lance.

Initially 21st focused its attention on producing a publication every year. Published under the umbrella title of *21st: The Journal of Contemporary Photography*, these beautiful books contained images from a vast array of leading photographers. They were interspersed



Assembling each book involves a number of labour intensive processes, all done by hand.



“ The monographs can often take two to three years to complete. This begins with the initial proposal to the artists and writers, followed by decisions on integrated bindings and handmade papers, talks with designers, labour intensive letterpress type-setting and image printing, all leading up to the final assembly of each individual book. ”

with articles by internationally acclaimed writers, and contained interviews with historians, curators and literary figures. The Journal was printed in three editions: trade, deluxe and museum, the latter two featuring original hand-pulled photogravures, with the books bound in the finest leathers, Japanese silks, and Italian fabrics. It is hard to put into words how beautiful these books are, as they have to be experienced first hand. Not since Stieglitz's *Camera Work* had such care been taken at every stage to produce such a fine publication with original prints. Initial praise for these books was high and indeed universal, with the Wall Street Journal stating that what 21st had accomplished with *The Journal of Contemporary Photography* was "In Stieglitz's footsteps."

21st Editions has since diversified into publishing original print monographs and portfolios in collaboration with such acclaimed artists as Michael Kenna, Joel-Peter Witkin, Robert & Shana Parke-Harrison, Eikoh Hosoe, Josephine Sacabo, Shelia Metzner and Tom Baril, to name a few. They are printed in a number of photographic media including cyanotype, kallitype, silver gelatin, platinum, and photogravure. They are published in editions limited to between 25 and 100 copies, and are priced from \$300 to \$25,000 each. I was interested to find out from Steven how long these publications take to create, and what is the process by which they come together.

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In more detailed discussions about how the

books are created, Steven talked passionately about how he enjoyed every part of this "process." An integral part of the process for him is to delegate; this involves selecting the best craftsman or individual in each of the relevant publishing and printmaking fields, and directing them all in a synergistic way to create the final publication, much like a conductor of an orchestra. Without proper direction and delegation I don't believe it would be possible for any one person to create books of this incredibly high standard.

Having had a good look around the studio I could see how much work was involved in the production of these fine art publications, and I was interested to know from Steven what was the most challenging aspect of publishing 'original print' publications and portfolios?

"It's all challenging, every day is different, all of our challenges are driven by passion and that in itself is really the saving grace. Managing the dynamics takes a lot of energy and probably the most challenging thing for most people would be multi-tasking and managing the risk."

I went onto ask about how many books the company is currently working on at any one time, and what projects he is working on for the future:

"I am usually working on about 3 or 4 books simultaneously, and at the same time generating new relationships for another 5 to 10 books. In terms of the future we have recently launched our new sister imprint called Legacy Editions, which utilises the same processes as 21st Editions, but covers different subject matter including history, the performing and dramatic arts, outstanding athletic achievement, and the dynamic nuances of culture."

In terms of marketing and selling 'original print' books, they clearly require a different approach compared to that of an average



Steven Albahari, founder and publisher of 21st Editions.



The 21st Master Collection. 27 signed 'original print' photobooks bound in leather, silk and elegant fabrics, featuring hand-coated platinum and silver gelatine prints paired with writings by such luminaries as Walt Whitman, William Blake and Guillaume Apollinaire.



The Journal of Contemporary Photography volumes 1-6, published by 21st Editions, featuring hand-pulled photogravure images from many highly respected contemporary photographers each combined with criticism, poetry and fiction from some of the world's most acclaimed writers.

“We publish the work that moves us, work we believe in. Thus there is no particular formula. We have tried to encompass the scope of contemporary photography, as much as is possible by a small company like 21st Editions with 32 titles to date. As for publishing unknown artists, half the people we have created books with are unknown.”

For further information on pricing and availability of the books published by 21st Editions visit 21stphotography.com.

photobook found in your local bookstore. I asked Steven in what way this is the case:

“You have to be more focused and understand your target market. For the first four years Lance and I were physically knocking on doors showing our books to collectors, museums and institutions, and selling them at all the relevant trade shows. It is really very important that people physically experience the books for themselves rather than viewing them on the internet or in a catalogue. We therefore offer our collectors private viewings in their own home, as we can ship our book anywhere in the world. At the price our books command we also offer a number of payment options.”

One of fastest selling books for 21st Editions was created in 2008, when they collaborated with well-known photographer Michael Kenna on a book entitled *Mont Saint-Michel*. Illustrated with 14 bound platinum prints in an edition of 60 copies and priced at \$8500, this was so successful the edition sold out within just two weeks. They have recently released a second book with Kenna entitled *Huangshan: Poems from the T'ang Dynasty*, again similarly priced and containing a selection of bound platinum prints. This too has sold very quickly. With this being the case I was interested to learn from Steven whether there were particular subjects that are more marketable than others, and whether they would publish an unknown artist.

“We publish the work that moves us, work we believe in. Thus there is no particular formula. We have tried to encompass the scope of contemporary photography, as much as is possible by a small company like 21st Editions with 32 titles to date. As for publishing unknown artists, half the people we have created books with are unknown, even though it is inevitably a higher risk to publish such work.”

Finally, I asked Steven what did he consider

his greatest achievement with 21st Editions?

“The greatest gratification for me is being able to bring so many artists and craftsmen together in a synergistic way to create these beautiful objects that are recognised by so many collectors and institutions as the finest books on photography in the world. In addition, when I die these books will live on. They will be the legacy of all of us here at 21st Editions.”

On reflecting upon my visit to the United States to see 21st Editions, it is evident that one of the keys to the company's success is that at every stage in its development Steven has surrounded himself with people who are not only experts in their fields, but passionate in everything they do, whether it be the bookbinders, the letterpress printers, the platinum printers or the editorial team. The original print books they have created are some of the finest books on photography ever published. I feel privileged to have had the chance to not only to meet them, but to have been personally inspired by them.

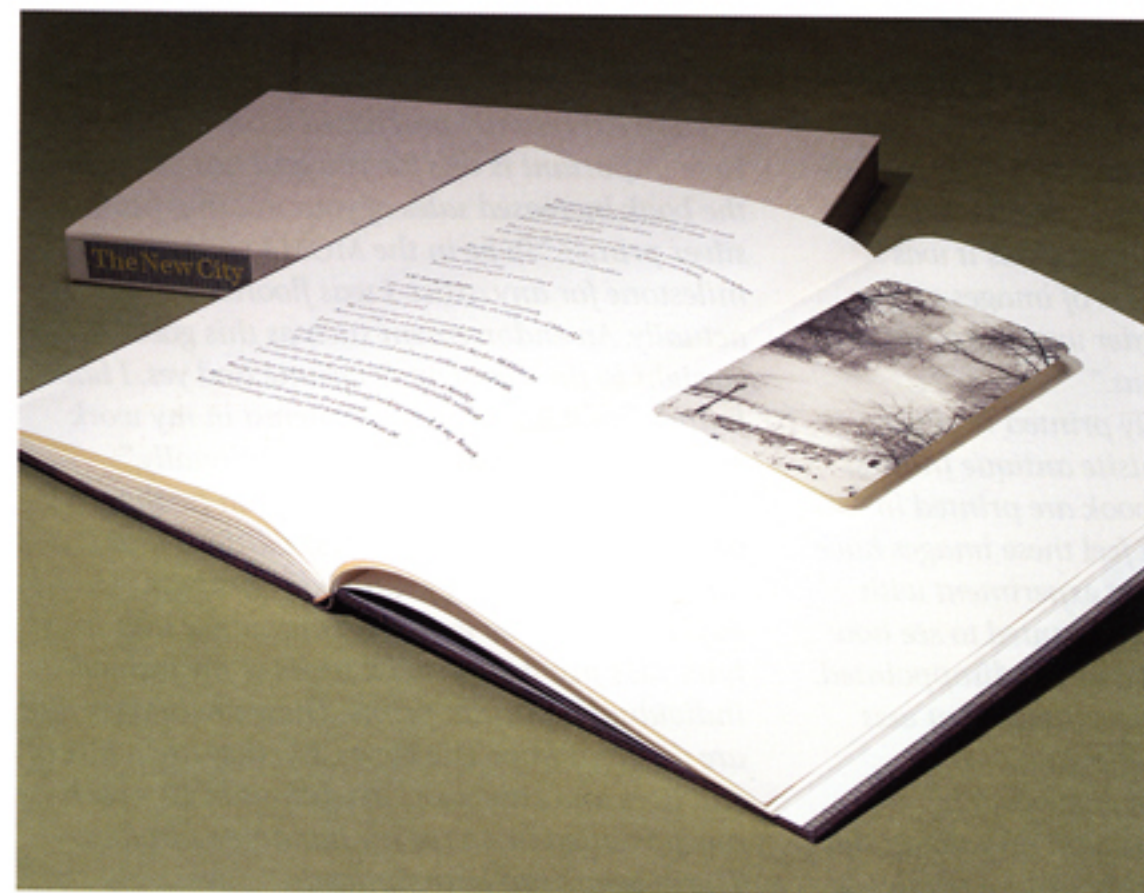
David Chow

FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW with Steven Albahari I wanted to learn more about what it is like to work with the publisher from the photographer's perspective. I contacted Jefferson Hayman and asked him a number of questions in relation to his book, The New City, an 'original print' publication on which he recently collaborated with 21st Editions.

Initially, Jefferson, can you tell me what your book is about? "The New City is about my travels through this wonderful metropolis. I was, and still am, in awe of New York City. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania and Manhattan always seemed to be the centre of the world to me – this project is a love letter to my adopted town."



The New City, photographs by Jefferson Hayman and epic poem written by MacLean Gander. The book includes 17 bound and 2 signed freestanding platinum prints, edition of 53 copies.



“This was my first experiment with platinum printing. I had long wanted to see how my imagery translated and was not disappointed. Platinum lent a warmth and softness that was only hinted at with my silver prints.”

The images facing are from *The New City* by Jefferson Hayman, published by 21st Editions. For further information on his work visit his website jeffersonhayman.com.

The author, David Chow, teaches workshops in cyanotype and platinum printing. For further information visit dcfineart.net and platinumprinting.co.uk.

How did the idea of producing a book with 21st Editions come about? “I had always admired what 21st Editions produced, so I kept in touch with them. They were on my mailing list and soon after an exhibit of my works they contacted me and the conversation began.”

How long did the book take to publish from its initial inception to being available for sale to the public? “I would estimate 3 years or so. Which is amazing of you think about it – in these days of fast-paced digital results, to work with someone that takes that kind of time and care is very rare.”

Having viewed the book myself I can attest to its beauty. How much input did you have in the design of the book including the binding, typography, printing, sequencing of the prints and so on? “Steve Albahari and I extensively edited many years worth of my negatives. It was a great process of reviewing images I had never printed but that Steve thought had merit. He kept me informed of the design decisions as the project advanced – the final result was more beautiful than I could ever have imagined.”

What was the most challenging part of putting the book together? “The editing process. And that really was not challenging as much as it was exciting. To review many years of images and to put them in a sequential order was like a jigsaw puzzle from my subconscious.”

Your imagery is originally printed in silver gelatin and framed in exquisite antique frames, whereas the images in the book are printed in platinum. How well do you feel these images have translated? “This was my first experiment with platinum printing. I had long wanted to see how my imagery translated and was not disappointed. Platinum lent a warmth and softness that was only hinted at with my silver prints.”

Alongside the prints is an epic poem by MacLean Gander. How important do you feel this poetry is to the success of the book as a whole? “It

is a wonderful and perfect union. Gander’s poem captures the feel of my New York City imagery and I cannot now imagine them apart.”

How much interaction did you have with MacLean when pairing his poetry with your images? “I did not have any interaction with MacLean, which is the way it worked best. He drew inspiration from the images and I would not want to alter his creative process at all.”

What do you feel are the most important things to consider when putting a photobook such as yours together? “There are many aspects: choice of imagery, sequence, suggested narrative and so on. But when you are talking about a book from 21st it is a completely different story. There are no other books on earth like these, so the choice of materials plays a big role in the process.”

From a financial perspective has the book been personally worth the amount of time you have spent on its publication? “Yes. The New City was very well received and it is now nearly sold out.”

I gather from Steven that the Museum of Modern Art recently purchased a copy of the book. How important is this for you and has publishing the book increased sales of your existing framed silver prints? “To be in the MOMA collection is a milestone for any artist. I was floored – still am actually. An endorsement such as this goes straight to the top of one’s resumé and yes, I have found that it has increased interest in my work here in the States and also internationally.”

*Do you have any plans to publish further original print books? “Yes, 21st Editions and I have been discussing future book projects together. I am also excited to announce that we have also just completed a series of my framed individual platinum prints. These are images that are different from *The New City*; they are a mix of still lifes and cityscapes in editions of 10 – each one presented in one of my handmade frames. The response has been fantastic.”*

