Ink droplets in motion snag top prize in Nikon Small World contest

A 25-year-old German experimental photographer has won the 2026 Nikon Small World photomicrography competition with a striking image of droplets of ink being deposited on paper by an inkjet printer. Ole Bielfeldt beat out 1,802 other entries hailing from 69 different countries.

Bielfeldt became interested in photomicrography during the COVID-19 lockdown after discovering an old microscope in his parents' attic. He figured out how to build an adaptor out of a tube and some wood to connect the microscope to his father's camera and taught himself the art through trial and error, building custom tools as needed. He documents how he captures transformative images of everyday objects with behind-the-scenes videos posted to macrofying, his photography and videography brand.

It was Bielfeldt's curiosity about the inner workings of inkjet printers that inspired his winning entry, but capturing the action of ink drops being deposited on paper was a challenge, given that the process happens so quickly. The droplets, for instance, moved faster than the camera's shutter speed. Bielfeldt's solution was to deconstruct the printer so that the paper moved under a stationary (rather than moving) printhead, and then take the image in a dark room, using a flash to serve as the shutter, thereby freezing the ink drops mid-air. There was no need for pricey equipment. Bielfeldt does not use AI in his images, preferring to rely on traditional techniques.

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