Platinotype: an interview with Giancarlo Vaiarelli

What is platinotype?

The platinotype is a patented printing technique born in the distant 1870. Platinum prints, also called platinotypes, are photographic prints made with a monochromatic printing process. Platinum tones range from warm black to reddish brown. The strength of this printing technique lies in the range of greys with an unattainable yield for all other types of printing.

Durability is another strong point of platinum prints. In fact, platinum and palladium are very stable noble metals and difficult to attack by chemical reactions that could degrade printing over time. It is estimated that a platinum image can last for thousands of years.

We are in **Milan**, in Giancarlo Vaiarelli "camera obscura", Class '63, Roman by birth, Milanese by adoption. The prints are in wash, an old radio gives us a suggestive background music, the light is little, the images of a life attached to the walls.

Hello Giancarlo, where does this passion – your job as a developer – come from?

Let's say that love for photography and later for development was born very soon. At elementary school I would say. We had a teacher passionate about photography. I remember that when the fateful day of the class photo arrived, unlike all the other schools that called a photographer, we had our teacher armed

of **Rollerflex**. Immediately I was intrigued by this object. In the fifth grade, the teacher decided to teach me how to prepare chemichals for film development. A few years later they gave me my first camera. As a kid I found myself holding an object that allowed me to portray two infinite subjects, the sea in **Ostia** where I lived, and Rome, the **Ancient Rome** with all its suggestive views.

So the passion for photography comes first and then you discover the art of darkroom development?
Let’s say yes, even if things went a bit together. Around 17/18 I started working as a scene photographer assistant and then became a professional freelance photographer. At the time I found myself following the various events in the news of the Rome of the ’70s among politicians, actors, actresses, Cinecitt‡ and ministries.

Developing my shots, however, I was often dissatisfied, not so much by the photograph itself but by the quality once developed. My yardstick was the various American and British photojournalists who frequented Rome.

They had prints of another level. Just talking and comparing myself with the latter, they advised me to go to London to deepen my knowledge in photographic development. It was in the English capital, where I was working in a prestigious development laboratory, Joe’s Basement, that I realized that my interest in printing was superior to photography.

Regarding the platinotype, when and how did you come into contact with this type of printing?
Always in England. It was 1985 when I saw the exhibition of the American photographer Dick Arentz and I was struck by the beauty of the prints, all made with the platinotype. He was present at the show and I asked about it. From there I decided, upon his invitation, to move to the United States to learn the platinum-palladium technique. It was 1987.

In which part of the United States precisely?
In **Flagstaff**, a city in the middle of **Arizona**, or in the middle of nowhere. A city made famous also by the mythical adventures of Tex Willer, the comic book cowboy. Here I learned the technique of development from my teacher and mentor Dick Arentz.

How long has the US adventure lasted?
About 4-5 years, very intense. After that I returned to Italy, starting to devote myself to development with this technique. It was the beginning of the 90s.

How was the platinotype received?
In Italy especially in the early days, platinum printing requests came from foreign photographers. In the *Belpaese* it was the **golden age of fashion** and the major Italian photographers were linked to the speed and immediacy of **commercial photography**. Platinotype being closely linked to artistic photography was not required by the latter, although I tried to make them understand the importance of following both ways, commercial and artistic, as the foreign photographers did. The latter, in fact, once the clothes of the commercial photographer were abandoned, continued with their artistic projects, and they were my major customers at the time.

You have identified fashion photography with Italian photography. Can you better describe this relationship?
Yes, in Italy we say a misdeed has happened. The message that fashion is the mother of photography has been passed on, when in reality, photography is born and grows independently from it. Photography has simply lent itself to the world of fashion, this is the reality.

From what you tell me, I gather that often the relationship with photographers is not easy, so I ask you, what relationship is established between the photographer and who will develop his work?

Let’s say it’s a meeting between two “photographers”. A “positive” that triggers and the other “negative” that develops in the darkroom, a photographer on the contrary. It’s a four-handed job. This relationship is sometimes good, others less so, in the sense that you need to think about the dark room and the result you want to achieve. Several photographers arrive with a certain type of shots and would like a certain result in development, but often this is not possible due to the fact that that particular photograph was not taken thinking of the next phase.

This applies to those who shoot with film. What about those who shoot digital? Can they also have a platinum print?
Of course, my work is not just limited to film. With those who shoot digital obviously the workflow is a bit different. The file is processed minimally with Photoshop and from here a negative is printed and it will later pass through contact development. However, the same previous rule apply: we must think about the shot for this type of development. This applies to all types of printing, both for digital printing and for silver salts, and finally for platinum.

What are the most important differences between a photo printed on platinum and one printed with inkjet?
Ah, they are two different planets. Not to feather my own nest, but in terms of quality there is no comparison. I recommend everyone to go and see exhibitions made with platinum prints to get an idea of the beauty of this type of development. Beyond the fundamental, aesthetic side there are other intrinsic characteristics. Platinum lasts for hundreds of years, obviously if it is fixed on precious papers, let’s say it is almost eternal. Furthermore, it is an “ecological” material, unlike inkjet printing inks, even though in recent years there have been giant steps in this field.

Fulvio Rotier. From the exhibition in Venice at Tre Oci. Photo Courtesy Tre Oci @Fulvio Roiter

Here in Italy you have collaborated with many famous photographers, can you tell us a name?

Certainly. In 2018 I was lucky enough to make prints for the Fulvio Roiter exhibition at the Tre Oci in Venice. I was lucky enough to meet him in **London back in 1984.** At the time I was working in an Italian restaurant. Hanging on the walls of the hall were these beautiful pictures. I immediately recognized the author, it was Fulvio. Talking to the owner, he revealed

me that they were photos of a great friend and that he would soon come to visit him in England. From that followed the meeting with the great artist with whom I had the good fortune to work.

Thanks to Carmen McIntosh for the proofreading.

*Follow @positive_mag on twitter for the last updates*https://www.positive-magazine.com/platinotype-giancarlo-vaiarelli/