

MJ Sharp
Methods and Materials

Let me start by saying how much I appreciate being able to bring my 5x6 foot “studio copy” of the *Dark Dill* still life out to play for this exhibit. I often live with a big proof of something for months or years before I know how it wants to be printed, and it’s a real kick for me to be able to share that experience of process with you here in the gallery space.

Similarly, the photographs of prehistoric ruins in Cornwall are ones I am just beginning to proof. Originally created during a Fulbright Scholar year in the UK, up until now they’ve been exhibited only as massive projections in dark spaces — first at the Fruit in Durham during the Click! Photography Festival of 2023 and then at the College of Wooster Art Museum in 2024, where they showed just one image per day in their darkened main gallery, which was lit only by navigational red lights on the floor. Some of these images will also be projected this March as part of Cary’s GLOW festival. I’ve gotten to know every last detail of them as projections of light. It’s been a real pleasure to begin experimenting with them as lasting objects in the form of physical photographs.

Speaking of photographic prints, there are a few varieties on view. *Outside Amarillo*, for example, is a digital C-print from 2012. Digital C-prints are color darkroom paper prints, whether exposed by the light of a traditional enlarger or by laser light writing the image file onto the paper in a literal dark room, after which they go through the traditional wet paper chemicals. Pigment prints are, as the name implies, pigmented ink laid down on paper via a professional inkjet printer.

Printing technologies are ever-changing. Even though for this moment I have control over the variables in my printing, it is only for this moment. My current workflow — the printer, the inks, the papers, and the software and hardware that drives them all can change on a dime. Just when you’ve got everything the way you want it in this game of 5-dimensional Star Trek chess, something stops being made or supported. Think cell phones. It’s impossible to just keep them the way you like them. iPhone updates keep coming, whether you want them or not, and they inevitably cause mayhem in what had been up to that point a smooth and reliable system. Printing is like that too. These “First Printing” photographic editions represent the finely-honed system I’ve got going at this moment in 2025.

I realize it was ever thus. Back when I was a young pup of a photographer, there was a gorgeous black and white printing paper, with creamy whites and rich deep blacks. I bought exactly one pack of this glorious confection (Ektalure, for my fellow photo nerds) thinking it would be my new go-to paper for *very important prints*. It became increasingly difficult to find until it just disappeared completely. My favorite long-exposure color negative film (Fuji NPL) was discontinued over a decade ago, and I’m still always on eBay to see if some retiring photographer is clearing out their freezer and has a stash of 4x5 or 8x10 sheets of it.

I guess I say all that to say that in my long experience with printing photographs, you can never circle back to something you did before. Not really. So you make some beautiful prints while you can, and the next time you make beautiful prints, guaranteed it will be by some slightly different method with a slightly different final result. Onward!