



20Q

7Q with Christopher James

**Author of**  
***The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes***

**First Edition published June 2001**

**Second Edition published February 2008**

**Third Edition published 2016**

At the beginning of 2012, to commemorate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invention of the Daguerreotype, South by Southeast (SXSE) undertook a series of featured interviews and articles delving into alternative process photography. This month we are featuring the noted artist and scholar Christopher James, author of *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes: Third Edition*. He is the Director of the MFA Photography and Integrated Media program at the College of Art and Design at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*South x Southeast* caught up with Christopher James at his studio in the wilds of New Hampshire.

- This interview has been updated to reflect changes to my face, the MFA program and institutional references.

*1. Tech sources estimate that another billion digital cameras and camera phones have appeared on Earth since the Second Edition of TBAPP was published four years ago. Concededly, there are fewer traditional darkrooms operating, but paradoxically there is a resurgence of interest in archaic photo processes. How will the Third edition, forthcoming in 2013,*

*be revised and extended to reflect these developments?*

I've been really fortunate having a publisher like Delmar Cengage, and a great editor like Jim Gish, who have given me near total autonomy to make the best book that I can. I don't know of many authors who have had it better. In the first edition I went from 400 pages to a 650-page Second edition with more images, processes, and four more years of learning experiences to draw upon.



Christopher James\_Rebecca & Wisteria\_wet\_plate\_2010

This Third edition will be more than 900 pages and will have somewhere between 650 to 700 four-color images. This difference in weight will be represented by expanding the dialogue about specific processes, such as wet-plate collodion for example, which will go from 44 pages in the Second edition to nearly 100 pages in the new one. This increase will be realized with an abundance of new information, more trouble-shooting, how to work on the road and in different conditions, and a lot more great work from students, fellow alt-process artists, and collections. Recently my editor was talking to me about publishing this chapter early, as a stand-alone pamphlet.

I'm also going to be working with several new contemporary alternative processes, such as [Richard Sullivan's Athenatype](#) <sup>1</sup> LINK: <http://www.vimeo.com/32930613> and the Santa Fe research team's work, that I am fortunate to be involved with, using fumed silica and fumed alumina paper preparations. As well, significant updates of all the chapters and detailed work on photo-polymer plates and gum separations. In short, there will be a good reason to upgrade. Best of all, for the student of the art, the publisher has decided to reduce the price of the book significantly without sacrificing the quality of reproduction or materials.

*2. You tell your students at the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University that "the future of photography is in its past." You mention in your 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2007 introduction, "Update From Pictureville" that an 1859-caliber solar flare has the potential to wipe out all digital storage in its path. Obviously most photographers have evolved ways of scanning their works to ensure that a high-resolution version exists in case of getting wiped out, for whatever reason. Therefore: How do you ensure that all of your artistic output remains indelible, for perpetuity; and why is the furtherance of students' skills and knowledge in the photography subfield of alternative processes so important to the future of our profession?*

Ha ha .... When I wrote that, I was trying to make a humorous point about how nature will always win and that everything is impermanent. I was thinking about what an archeologist might deduce 5,000 years from now (the same time frame

chronologically from us to the first step pyramid of Djoser in Saqqara) and all that would be found would be porcelain toilets and bathtubs ... and how these would be interpreted as being quite important to our spiritual identity.

The truth of it is, images made out of iron, platinum, silver, and gold will likely last a great deal longer than any constructed of pixels. Probably as long as their substrate. <sup>2</sup> If you truly care about keeping an image of family, or some personal event that has great value, it is a far better idea to interpret it in a noble metal alternative process, using a digital contact negative if you wish, than hoping that your JPEG version will last into the next century.

When I went to see my new grandson, Rhys, I made a picture of him with my iPhone to show him off. However, at the earliest I can arrange it, I intend to make his image again, and that of his parents, Brian and Amy, in wet-plate collodion because I want Rhys to be able to show it to his grandchildren.

*2a. (Follow-up): Why are JPEGs, TIFFs, PNGs, etc., predestined to degrade? Is it because old DVDs are only as good as the backward-compatible next-wave DVD players upon which they are played back? Or because entropy is inevitable in digital storage?*

As you have witnessed, entropy is inevitable in digital anything. From Joseph Marie Jacquard's (1752-1834) simplified punch-hole card system for looms in 1801, to Charles Babbage's (1791-1871) Analytical Engine, to Herman Hollerith's (1860-1929) Census counting machine in the 1880's (Hollerith invented IBM and its "do not fold, spindle, or mutilate" cards), to tape, floppy disk, Zip, CD, DVD... and so on. As for degradation, JPEGs are the worst offenders .... Every time they are opened they degrade. I tell my students: procure a lead-lined safe as a fortress for irreplaceable hard drives and other digital works. If an 1859-caliber solar flare hit, do all of us want to trust our respective "Clouds" for foolproof backup?

*3. How do you divide your time between departmental duties at Lesley University / Art Institute of Boston, classroom time, academic research, studio time (painting, video, graphic design), exhibiting/portfolio-reviewing/jurying, and*

*scuba-diving? How has this proportionality shapeshifted over the years?*

I am simply incompetent at separating my work from my living and over the last decade I've found it impossible to compartmentalize my interests. At the moment I'm the Director of the MFA in Photography and Integrated Media, the Chair of a BFA program, teaching full time, and trying to find time to write this new edition. In a nutshell, there is no division or prioritization ... it's all part of a whole life experience.



Christopher James\_Gellert Baths\_Budapest\_1983\_argyrotpe

*4. How many years of curriculum development did it take to create the Photography MFA program at Lesley University /AIB, which first year in operation you are currently finishing? Why did the world (or at least New England) need another MFA in Photography, and how did your academic team design the program to be distinctive?*

This is a good question .... Certainly, neither the world, nor New England, was in need of another MFA program that could successfully launch critically astute, and visually talented, graduates into a saturated marketplace of photographically related opportunities. Had I been given the task of creating another incarnation, in the predictable MFA tradition, I would have rejected the opportunity.

I had been thinking about creating a graduate program like this since my time at Harvard (1978 – 1991), one that was allowed to be developed without being held to the predictability of outcomes. That educational model generally results in an inflexible program that is a hostage to mediocrity... or worse, generality. When I left Harvard to Chair the BFA program at The Art Institute of Boston, I constructed the undergraduate curriculum as a “test-kitchen” for the eventual MFA that I am directing now.

Three years ago I was given the green light to begin creating the program. We recognized that photography was squarely at a crossroads in the evolution of medium and that we had a rare opportunity to design and build a graduate program from the ground up – one that is predicated upon the philosophy that photography is no longer a single entity, but is unique among the visual arts in its ability to successfully merge new technologies, and traditional influences, with personal artistic production. It is, now more than any other form of visual expression, an ideal nexus of art and culture.



Christopher James\_Amanda\_New Mexico wet\_plate\_2011

We are in an interesting time for our medium. Photography is evolving into something entirely new. From an alternative-process perspective: the opportunity of finding the future in the past, returning to the unpredictable and the hand-made image. Consider the ramifications of photography in the early 1800s, a truly radical innovation that set painters free. With the current speed of processing and digital invention, I don't think we have a clue about all of the ways in which digital imaging will influence and alter hand-made photography.

To the upcoming generation of photographic artists, schooled with the pixelated sterility of digital imaging, and a social-networking visual aesthetic, using one's hands to make an image is a persuasive argument simply because it is imperfect ... and as a result, a profound and precise reflection of us all.

There is a hunger for the accident; I literally feel it in the energy of my students, and this curriculum, with a balance of critical theory, studio and seminar, art history, and professional studies, has resulted in a model where the graduates will be able to present themselves as representatives to the "new" photography.

We have had the rare opportunity to create a MFA program at a time when the medium itself is being re-defined .... Where concentrated studio practice, and a passionate respect for the hand-made image, has been the guiding force. Our program development has been motivated by the premise that the medium of photography is in a state of flux, and that its subsequent identity will be built, in part, where the terms "antiquarian," and "craft," will be synonymous with innovation ... and it is the young artists who will cognitively define the future of photography.

*4a. (Follow-up): The presumption was a team of curriculum developers worked on the MFA course sequence. Are you saying you wrote all the learning objectives yourself, over a three-year period?*

I wrote the MFA program top to bottom, and constructed it to address the problems and shortcomings of graduate programs I had experienced and had familiarity with.

The nuts and bolts of the development had to be vetted by the University, its trustees, the assorted committees that approve curriculum and new programs, and finally, the national, state, and regional accreditation bodies that required the MFA program to meet its own criteria before it granted us accreditation.

The curriculum development was the least of the problems. I wanted it to be a seminar experience and team taught at every level in the program, in order to avoid the cult of personality that is so restrictive and difficult to change once it gets cemented in place. Hell, there are graduate programs operating now on the reputation of faculty who taught in their respective institutions in the 1950s and 60s.

An example of a piece of this change is the Graduate Studio Seminar, which is a team taught course with a core faculty from AIB and a Visiting Artist. Its place in the program is intended to promote curricular flexibility and a timely reflection, and response, to the constantly changing identity of photography.

Each semester, a Visiting Artist/Scholar is paired with a core faculty member, and a small cohort of MFA in Photography candidates, for an intensive studio and critical studies experience. These Visiting Artists will be leaders in the constantly evolving photographic arts and will include contemporary artists, historians, curators, thinkers, and theorists. Among those who are teaching now and who have committed to participate in the first years of the program: Luis Gonzalez Palma, Sally Mann, Keith Carter, Dan Estabrook, Lyle Rexer, Holly Roberts, Susan Bright, and Vicki Goldberg.

This Graduate Studio Seminar is held in conjunction with critical studies electives, Professional Studies internships, teaching fellowships, and independent study, and studio electives. I only accept 12 students a year and the experience is personal, demanding, and a lot of fun.

*4b. (Follow-up): Take a stab at one or more of the following:*

*- Tell us how critical theory impacts photography.*

*- Who do “postmodern” and “poststructural” mean, in your academic worldview?*

*- If Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) were alive now, how would they react to your answers?*

*- How do you overlay image-making and -capturing, as against their social-theorist writings/musings spread across history, politics, and the humanities? Did they touch on photography as a discrete body of knowledge?*

*- Is there a Marxist, or existentialist, or reactionary way to be a photographer? Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco had staff photographers/filmmakers!*

Ha! .... Questions like these are why I consider giving away my shoes and moving to the South Pacific to start a dive operation .... As I told you, I really hate critical theory discussions because they eventually distill themselves down to far too intelligent people playing with themselves. But since you asked .....

I think a short answer would have to be related to Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) observations that there is a signifier, or the form which a sign takes – and the signified, the concept that form/signifier represents. An oft-used example is “apple” vs. “Apple” ... a simple fruit popular in biblical dialogues, or the company that made the computer I'm working on ... or in a different context, a record company founded by the Beatles.

Saussure referred to this as a *dyadic*, or two-part model that defined a “sign.” In this case, each element in the conversation, the fruit apple, or the business Apple, required an explanation. As the explanation was being offered, the discussion and meanings became more complicated because each component required still more interpretations.

This became more obtuse as the one explaining worked harder to make meaning of the signs and signifiers, ignoring the fact that meaning would always change with each individual's life experience or in what social or cultural context the meaning was seen in. This would mean that the original meaning would always be altered by context, whether personal, cultural, or political.

A simple example would be Margaret Bourke-White's (1904-1971) photograph of the people standing in a Red Cross relief line after the Ohio River flooded in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1937 ... beneath a sign explaining that we lived in a country with the "World's Highest Standard of Living."

Clickable thumbnail link: [Margaret Bourke White\\_The Louisville Flood](#)

LINK: <http://owl.library.louisville.edu/2012/Owl0212.pdf>

Clickable photo credit: Margaret Bourke-White – The Louisville Flood

Image of African-American flood victims queued up to receive food and clothing from a Red Cross relief station, Louisville, Kentucky, February 1937.

Credit line:

Clickable link: University of Louisville Libraries (2012: 75th anniversary of the Flood).

Image copyright Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Americans saw this as charity and benevolence personified, where hungry and displaced people could be cared for by those who were unaffected by the floods. America's enemies used this identical image to express the oppression of the poor and non-white people in America by the wealthy white folk, made up of white dad, white mom, two white kids ... just the right age-distance apart, and a white dog ... all smiling and out for a drive. And this cartoon of America hovered above the people standing in the relief line. All of these things were the signifiers, and the signified, simultaneously simply because the medium of photography allowed that to happen.

Derrida wrote that meaning is an endless chain of deferments of meaning, and that the difference between what is signified, and the signifier, was the unexplained space in between the two. In truth, everything is context. A photograph, because of its specific relationship to reality, and time, constantly shifts from one meaning to another based upon our personal, cultural,

or political perspective and knowledge. A photograph of the World Trade Center meant one thing before 9/11 ... and quite another on September 12th.

Now, aren't you sorry you asked?

*Not in the least. Roland Barthes, Alan Trachtenberg, and Ashley la Grange told us to do our homework when we talk with you about the white space between philosophy and photography.*

*4c. (Follow-up): There is a legend that Margaret Bourke-White had to hitchhike via rowboat in order to get to that deluged neighborhood of Louisville. In the old days photographers underwent extreme privation in either jerry-rigging a lab to field-develop their work, or, striving to get to a postal facility so they could snail-mail their film. Uploading digital images from war-torn albeit downtown Tripoli, and having them post and be visible in an instant to cognoscenti and hoi polloi alike, takes away a little glamour, perhaps.*

I'm pretty sure that most photojournalists would not characterize their lives as glamorous. Perhaps later on, when they are remembering their life on the edge of Ockham's razor, the simple acts of making pictures and staying alive would leave the impression of romance. The mental picture of W. Eugene Smith (b. 1918-d. 1978) developing film in a toilet in a Spanish Village ... well, for me, that's romantic.

*4d. (Follow-up): "Antiquarian" combined with "innovation" as one possible – no, probable – future of photography ... hmm. Suppose ....*

*Scenario 1: Aliens arrive on Earth and ask to be rendered in the alt-process method, Physionotrace. You propose a different alt-process because the level of detail captured with be more favorable to alien vanity. Why?*

S1: The Physionotrace would be a lovely exercise if the aliens had patience for the rendering. However, if their vanity were an issue I would recommend a Dageurreotype, so that they could experience their likeness reflectively while looking at

themselves subjectively. We of course, having no sense of what they had to be vain about, would objectify them.



No higher resolution available.

Pierre Gaveaux, French opera singer and composer (1761-1825), image dated 1821

Aquatint after a physionotrace by Edme Quenedey (1756-1830)

Pierre\_Gaveaux.jpg (188 × 228 pixels, file size: 37 KB, MIME type: image/jpeg)

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France – United States public domain



This is a file from the Wikimedia Commons, a freely licensed media file repository.

*Scenario 2: The arriving aliens ask you to explain the significance of your Daguerreotype, Foot of the Pyramid.*

S2: I could be a wise ass with this one.... because the Pi has to sit on something.



Christopher James\_Foot of the Pyramid\_1994

5. We notice that neither the First nor Second Edition is available as an e-pub; neither Kindle, Nook, nor platform-agnostic. If you can talk about it, is there any intention to release the Third Edition for the e-book platform?

Without question this is a very important consideration that any publisher must incorporate into their library and planning. With the Second edition we produced a “Learning Resource” DVD that had an abundance of cool stuff for teachers, including Keynote and PowerPoint presentations, resources, and such. The move to the more integrated electronic resource, which is

designed for specific technologies such as iPad, is part of the wave of the future and a part of our current conversations. One of the strongest considerations of going in this e-book direction is that it requires an entirely new business model in which a percentage of the income is now shared with the author, the publisher (who shoulders the production costs), the distributor, the e-book formatter, and the manufacturer of the device itself.

Lately, I've been thinking about an enterprise, like [Inkling.com](http://www.inkling.com/), [LINK: http://www.inkling.com/](http://www.inkling.com/) and how their offerings can be employed to make a reader's experience with my books a stronger one. Personally, I love the luminosity of seeing the images back-lit on a digital screen. I'm less enthusiastic about using an electronic book near all of that water and wet chemistry.

6. Christopher, in the introduction to the (forthcoming) Third Edition, you make the point:

*“The invention of photography, and its ultimate mass democratization, as represented in the inexpensive, and easily procured, tintype and ambrotype, changed the role of the painter in society. For the first time, it was unnecessary to be wealthy or powerful, as an individual or institution, to commission a painter to depict a likeness of oneself ... or of one's theology. Faced with this reality, painters were free to explore the way a subject felt, what it might represent metaphorically, and the unique impressions that the artist expressed in relation to that subject.”*

How does digital imaging (whether or not combined with alternative processes) take this evolution one step further? As you mentioned, in the same sense photography freed painters from a certain drudgery, and altered the milieu regarding how artists seek “perfection”, does digital imaging as the next wave mean we are all headed toward a kind of synaesthesia ... a blending and merging of many art forms, without boundaries? If all photography were digital in 100 years, would we end up like the spaceship passengers in the movie Wall-E ... useless, pointless, passionless and purposeless? In fairness is there not a massive societal upside to ubiquitous image-capturing and -making?

Perhaps ... but for me it's likely to be more closely related to "anaesthesia." Rather than producing sensory impressions, and having them realized by different sensory impressions, as in synaesthesia, we are being inundated with photographic uniformity, simple and nearly-free archiving, that is technology-dependent, with imagery that is built upon an aesthetic of social networking and marketing. There is no price to pay for this work and with the exception of showing friends pictures of, and to, other friends, the experience of making images is often a sterile one, without relationships to the hand of the artist ... or her senses.

If you want to get a premature take on this possibility just read Susan Sontag (*On Photography*), who felt that too many images rendered them all meaningless; or John Szarkowski (*Looking At Photographs, The Photographer's Eye*), who opined once, in a lecture at Wellesley College, that there were now more photographs in the world than bricks.

Personally, I love my iPhone camera and the ease with which I can record and share images with my family. I think Photoshop is a wonder and love how I can use it to improve the quality of images for various reproductions. I love being able to create image presentations to go with lectures in Keynote. And I think it is extraordinary to be able to teach alternative processes by creating digital negatives on Pictorico inkjet film, and incorporating specific curve profiles for individual processes in Photoshop. But, for me, this is digital imaging and digital syntax ... tools, materials, and how I use them in context with a final product. I don't look at a house and marvel at the hammer that pounded the nail. The personal, emotional, and physical investment I have with the experience of photographic printmaking, the experience that I cannot live without, is in the making of the image by hand.



Christopher James\_Nelske & Chucks\_2010\_wet\_plate

I believe that digital technology will be a valuable tool to those artists who make their photographs by hand. Making digital separations for a gum bichromate print versus doing it in camera, or a darkroom, with film is a perfect example. However, to get to the last part of your question, I think it will be photography, rather than the syntax of digital technology, that will be responsible for the blending and merging of many art forms without boundaries.

7. You also state, in the intro to the Third Edition:

*“I am inclined to believe, especially in an academic sense, that photography may no longer need to demand that it be curated and studied as an exclusive medium. It’s entirely possible that its greatest opportunity lies in being integrated with, and layering its influence upon, all of the arts ... and not being subject to the visual theologies that fracture the discipline into 'schools' of disciples who think and see what is often simply nothing but another new set of party clothes for the Emperor.”*

*Tom Wolfe alluded to something like that, in his 1975 book, The Painted Word. His idea was that the monopolies of art, especially modern art, were dying out, and being replaced with a kind of fusion. If the “stove piping” of visual theologies devolves, and the fractured disciplines of “schools” lose prominence, what replaces those? How do fine art photography, photo essays and photojournalism get explained to the masses, without setpiece, storyboard curation as a learning intervention? If we achieve near-complete democratization of photography (if not all the arts), what happens to the high priests?*

I recall being part of a conversation in India, in the mid-1980s, where an Indian gentleman was discussing how there were once four distinctive castes in Indian society ... from the “untouchables” to the Brahmin. When the British colonized India in the 1850s (establishing the Raj), they chose to separate the traditional communities of Indian society into separate socio-economic castes. The people being colonized promptly made separate sub-castes, because the separations were no longer about heredity, and where your family came from, but economic status. Those groups quickly made other groups and so on.



Christopher James\_Dying Man\_Mukti Bhavan, Benares, India, 1985\_Pt (1)

If you live in India for a while, and relax enough to take a Hindu-like approach to life, you'll quickly discover how rich the unexplained facets of Indian life and culture become. You find a seat at the proverbial table, and all that it takes to be a part of it is some good manners and respect for the differences. Who needs a high priest?

The same can be said about this medium. Students need to learn to love what they are seeing and creating without having to be told, via the “high priest” edictums, that their work could be important ... and maybe “art” ... if only it was in color and the size of a billboard on the highway.

The fact is, there is often precious little difference between the imagery selected by the Grand Poobahs of the museum and gallery world and much of the work I am seeing from my MFA students ... it’s just a matter of right-place-right-time, intelligence, luck, and being ready when you’re lucky. I really like the art-game but am not a fan of the religion or the politics of its high priests.

Like I tell my students, if you want to be really good at this, you need to learn how to play really hard. Little bears become very successful big bears through play, not because they follow the rules and current bear fashions.

*Interviewed by Dennis C. Graves*

## Biography

**Christopher James – University Professor – Director, MFA Photography and Integrated Media**

**Christopher James** is an internationally known artist and photographer whose photographs, paintings, prints and alternative process image-making have been exhibited in museums and galleries in this country and abroad. His work has been published and shown extensively, including solo and group exhibitions in the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, George Eastman House, Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art - Boston. Represented by the Lee Witkin Gallery in New York City for over two decades he has also shown at

Pace-McGill (NYC), Contrasts Gallery (London), Michelle Chomette (Paris), Hartje Gallery and Photokina (Berlin), Rosa Esman Gallery (New York), and The Carl Siembab Gallery and The Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston). He has published extensively including Aperture, Camera (Switzerland), American Photographer, Solstice (for short fiction), and Interview magazine and in books such as *The Antiquarian Avant Garde, á Prova de Água: Waterproof, Human Documents*, and *Handcrafted: The Art and Practice of the Handmade Print* (China).

All three editions of his book, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes* have received international critical acclaim and are universally recognized by artists, curators, historians, and educators as the definitive text in the genre of alternative process photography and photographically integrated media. A significantly expanded 900 page / 700 image, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, was published recently. Christopher, after 13 years, and an Associate Professor, at Harvard University, is presently University Professor and Director of the MFA in Photography and Integrated Media program at Lesley University College of Art and Design in Cambridge, MA. He received his undergraduate degree from Massachusetts College of Art and his masters from the Rhode Island School of Design. He is a photographer, printmaker, painter, graphic designer, author and a professional scuba diver. Christopher's web site is [www.christopherjames-studio.com](http://www.christopherjames-studio.com)