

Number 5 Studio

Discovering the Wet Plate Process

Photographs and Text by Douglas Winter and Kathryn Mayo



Plate No. 11, Full Plate (6.5 X 8.5") Alumitype



Plate No. 23, 7 X 14" Alumentype

In the Spring of 2009, as I was preparing to teach a photo history course at Cosumnes River College where I am a photography professor, I embarked on learning the wet plate collodion process. I originally wanted to learn the basics of the process so I could give demonstrations on it to my class in the hope that seeing a wet plate made would peak their interest and allow the material to come alive. I didn't realize that I was embarking on a long-term love affair.

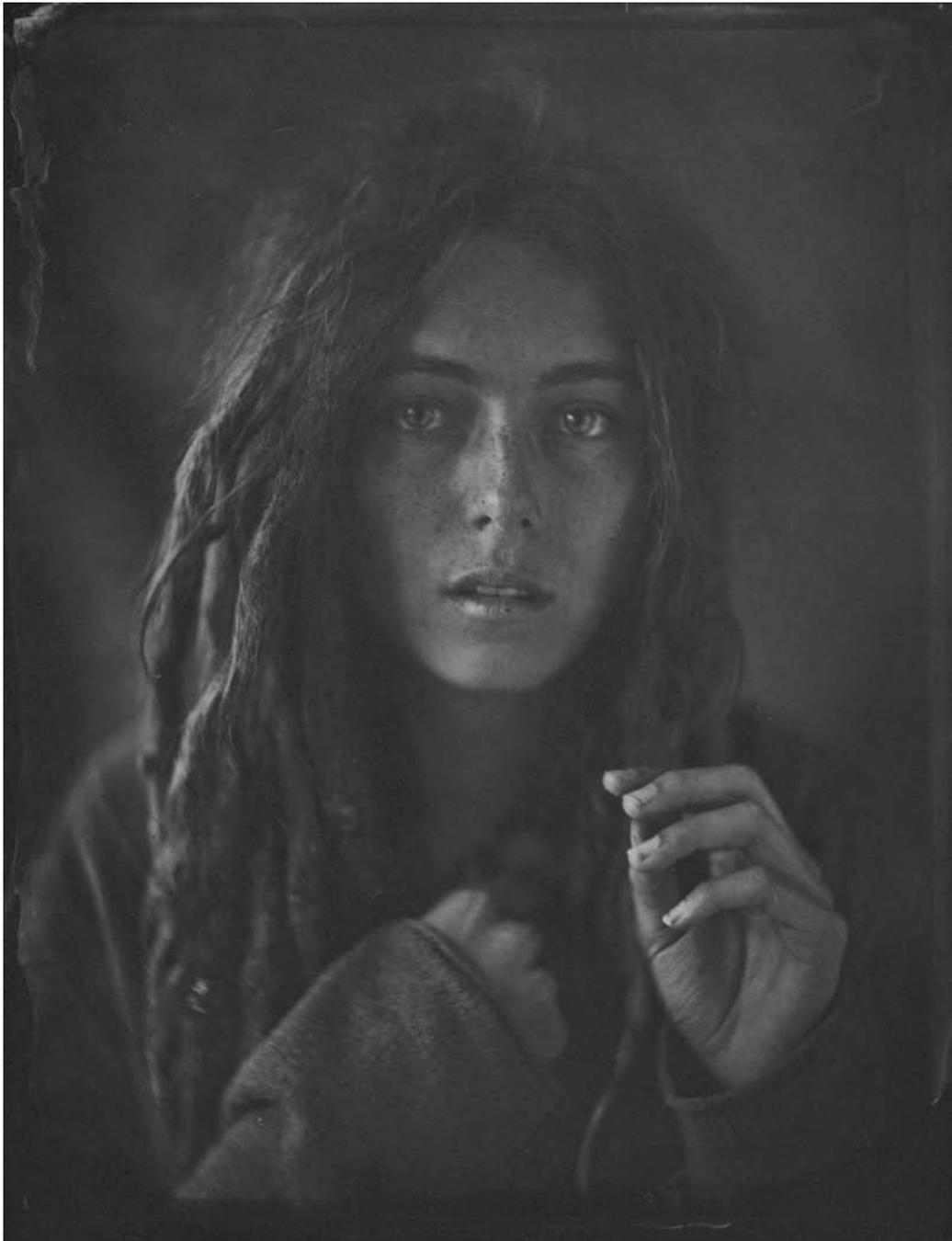


Plate No. 7, Half Plate (4.25 X 5.5") Salt Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative



The first time I saw a collodion image develop on a plate, I was immediately hooked and transported back to the very first time I saw an image come up on silver paper—a photogram I made after school in 7th grade. I felt the same rush of excitement as I did at 13 and that feeling has not left since. I almost always feel a sense of giddiness when making a plate.



Plate No. 9, 10 X 7" Aluminotype diptych

When creating a plate, I often think back to an afternoon many years ago when I happened upon a wonderful box of glass plates in an attic. The attic was huge and spanned almost the entire length of the 1845 plantation style home I lived in for the first ten years of my life. Situated in rural Pleasant Hill, Alabama, it was filled with artifacts, objects and the fingerprint of families that resided way before I existed. Often, I would explore the old home in search of new "treasures." One day I found a box of old 4 X 5" dry plate glass negatives. As I held them up to the light I could see how lovely the people in them were. I saw the clothes and the hair-styles that dated them to the turn of the century and peered into eyes that oddly looked like mine. I felt a deep and intense connection to the plates and the people in them. I never forgot this experience and I feel that it has always had much to do with my fascination with photography and antique and alternative processes.



Plate No. 15: In Repose, 14" X 5" Aluminotype diptych

I have always wanted to make photographs that capture the experience of time passed. In college, I sought ways to create texture, depth and distress on the negative or in the print. As a child of the postmodern movement, I felt free to distress and experiment with my negatives—to try to create a sense of history and of time passing. No matter what I tried, I felt as if I constantly failed in this aspect. I could never really make my images seem to be authentically OLD. Eventually I gave up and moved on to other processes, other imagery and other stories to tell with my photography. Learning wet plate instantly solved so many of the problems I had encountered. At first I was fascinated with the process and then I began to see how it could help me achieve the visual effect I so longed for.

As I learned the nuances of the process, I became aware of how the wet plate process afforded me opportunities that I had never been able to achieve previously in my work. I also saw how collaborative the nature of this process is and asked my husband Doug Winter to join me in making my first wet plate image. He became hooked as well and since that first plate we made together, we have always collaborated on our images in some fashion. It has been a wonderful experience being able to photograph with my husband and I feel that the discovery of the wet plate process is nothing short of magical at times. Our photographic vision fits the process and it affords us a myriad of opportunities to solve problems, create new ways of solving lighting issues and to grow in our photographic vision.



Plate No. 6: Hypnotism Study, 11 X 14" Alumentype

We started out making alumentypes and have moved on to creating ambrotypes and wet plate collodion negatives in a variety of plate sizes, cameras and lenses. Our plate sizes range from the traditional quarter plate (3 ¼ X 4 ¼") and whole plate (6.5 X 8.5") to 5 X 7" and larger 11" X 14" and 7 X 14" sizes.

Using antique brass Petzval lenses from the 1860's to the turn of the 20th century fits naturally with the process and I've found that the truthfulness of the image is truly dependent on using these lenses along with natural light. The lenses that we have used primarily for portrait work are a Darlot Petzval with coverage for a 5 X 7" plate and a more generic "no name" f4.5 Petzval and a Wollensak f3.8 with a 20" coverage



Plate No. 18, Full Plate Alumotype

for larger plates. Each lens has a unique learning curve that must be mastered for it to reveal its nuances and allow us to determine for what plate it should be used. For many plates, the Darlot, the first lens we purchased, has proven to be a wonderful lens to come back to again and again. It has a very shallow and delicate focus and it's wonderful for portrait work, but can prove difficult when attempting to capture more ambitious images such as the diptych Plate No. 15: In Repose. Newer UV coated lenses slow the exposures down and while longer exposures are part and parcel of the wet plate process and can help create some of the most lovely emotions in an image, coated lenses can turn a 5 second exposure into a 25 second exposure.

Working with receptive and interested models is also an extremely large part of the process. We have been very lucky in finding the right models and most have a true interest and love of photography and are willing to be patient as the process can sometimes be tedious. Over the years, we have developed a photographic friendship with models and have come back to them again and again as subjects.

Using a traditional-style head brace made by a local Sacramento artist helps the model remain steady during the long exposure and when a head brace cannot be used, we will often steady the model by using furniture or props to help reduce movement. Exposures can sometime require up to 6 or 7 seconds and although we don't use a light meter in the traditional sense, using an ultra violet index iphone app helps gauge the initial test exposure.

A typical shoot will involve positioning the model and making sure the light is appropriate, then coating the plate and making the exposure. We usually sketch out a shot and lighting diagram before embarking on the collodion image. It's an "up and down" process as each plate is created. The pacing of making plates is slow, then fast, then slow again, beginning as the plate is coated and then sensitized in silver nitrate for three to four minutes. During this time, a double check of the focus is made. After the exposure is made, it is immediately processed in freshly mixed developer, which creates a negative image. After the development has been stopped, it is then quickly placed in fix where the negative image turns into a positive image. If the exposure isn't perfect, the process begins again.

Working quickly, we can create up to four or five exposures in an hour. Inviting the model into the darkroom to watch the process furthers their interest in the creation of the plate. It is very important for us that the model feel as if they are collaborators in the process. It's an intimate and slow, almost calculated dance that would not work if the model was not as fully involved. Developing a strong working relationship with the model has proven to be an integral part of creating a successful plate. Working in a collaborative environment fuels my interest in the process and using the portrait genre as a way to delve into more conceptual ideas appeals to me, too.

Making wet plates simply makes us happy. It has made photography a very exciting medium and perhaps one day someone will be exploring in an old attic and find a box of our ambrotypes, dust them off and wonder about the people in them.



Plate No. 56: Hide Under the Shadow of Your Wings, 11 X 14" Aluminotype