

All in a tray's work

John Cyr explains how he started his intriguing collection of images based around developing trays from photographers past and present. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

SOMETIMES the simplest projects have the most to say. Just take a look at John Cyr's well-received collection of images. John has spent the past two years travelling around North America capturing an object that every photographer (who's been darkroom printing) will be familiar with: the humble developing tray. It may seem unremarkable, but these images say a lot about the history of silver-gelatin printing and where film photography is headed.

'The beginning of my project was pretty basic,' says John, from his home in New York. 'I was getting my masters at the School of Visual Arts in New York and had managed to set up my own space where I was able to establish myself as a black & white printer, not just of my own work but of other photographers' work as well. I had reached the last year of my time studying in 2010 and realised I hadn't decided what my thesis project was going to be. I had to rack my brains and it was then that I hit upon the idea of shooting developing trays.'

Below left:
'Eileen Travell's
Developer Tray'

John was spending a lot of time in the darkroom printing for an exhibition and was consequently staring into his own developing tray for large parts of the day. It was then that he began to notice his developing tray's little characteristics.

'I was so drawn to the texture on the surface of the tray,' says John. 'There were all these little marks and stains that, in a lot of ways, held a kind of visual history. It was so strange and abstract. I wanted to capture this, so I set about photographing my tray.'

John started photographing his tray using an Osaka 4x5 field camera. He took a more abstract approach by focusing exclusively on the surface patterns, cropping out the edges of the object and filling the frame with these almost painterly markings.

'The images were much more about composition and how those abstract forms could work in the frame,' says John.

'A little later I took a couple more images, but this time pulled the camera back and included the entire object. That became

the first image of the project and it set me on a course of thinking that would find me producing another 70-plus images.'

Once John saw the results of his initial image, he began to imagine the impact if he could access the developing trays of well-known photographers, past and present.

'The idea was to travel across America and create an archive of developing trays,' he says. 'My first port of call was Emmet Gowin. He was the first photographer who agreed to be part of the project. Once he said yes, that gave me the confidence to really push the project forward.'

While three of the trays were mailed to John, a large number of the images were taken after he had travelled to various locations throughout the US. 'A big moment for me was photographing Ansel Adams' tray,' says John. 'Seeing Ansel's tray in front of me was oddly moving.'

SCRATCHES AND STAINS

One of the most interesting aspects of John's project is the markings on the surfaces of the trays. Looking at these strange smudges and scratches, it's easy to speculate how much history they hold.

'I could have picked any object to make a statement about the current state of analogue photography,' says John. 'But the tray is an object that doesn't really wear out. It's something that every film photographer will have in their darkroom. Sid Kaplan not only prints his own work, but also prints for the Robert Frank and Weegee estates, and he's used the same tray since the '60s.'

The images of the trays are incredibly

simple and consistent. The lighting is uniform without being sterile. It's a basic set-up (the tray is placed on the ground on top of a velvet sheet), but this allows the trays to speak for themselves.

FILM AND DIGITAL

John shoots his images using Kodak NC160 film. He then scans and outputs them as inkjet prints. He also edits his images using Photoshop. His aim is to showcase the objects and to communicate a message about film's place within a digital world.

'I'm not saying that film is dead and I'm definitely not bemoaning the rise of digital technology,' says John. 'I work with digital cameras and computers, and they're capable of creating stunning images. I'm just showing that silver-gelatin printing was the method that was in vogue for longer than any other process.'

Some photographers and estates have already thrown away their trays and darkroom equipment, so the timing of John's project is very important. Had he attempted this in ten years' time, it's unlikely it would have come together so well.

As it stands, all the trays that John has shot have been in North America. While this was a logistical decision, John is not averse to shooting outside the US. 'So far, all the shots have been US-based, but if I'm out travelling in Europe or somewhere one day, then I'll set up some appointments to shoot other trays,' he says. **AP**

To see more of John's work, visit www.johncyrphotography.com

Right: 'Joni Sternbach's
Developer Tray'



Below left:
'George Eastman's
Developer Tray'

Below right:
'Ansel Adams'
Developer Tray'

