

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT RICHARD BENSON decades ago in an *Aperture* article on the portfolios he printed with Paul Strand at the end of the maestro's life. From Calvin Tompkins's 1990 profile in the *New Yorker*, I discovered that Benson had started his career in the mid 1960s as a camera operator at the legendary Connecticut printing firm Meriden Gravure. (In the sixties my father was a salesman for a competitor of Meriden Gravure and I can still hear Dad's disappointment after he lost yet another job to Meriden.) What Benson inhaled at Meriden, you might say, was a rich tradition of exquisite printing made for illustrious clients. In 1972, he left Meriden to make his own photographs and to work as freelance halftone cameraman and printer. Over the next decades Benson and a handful of other innovative offset printers (Sid Rappaport in New York was another larger-than-life personage) helped revolutionize printing black-and-white photographs. Benson's major books, *Lay This Laurel* (1973), which featured his own photographs of Saint-Gaudens's Shaw Memorial; *The American Monument* (1976), with photographs by Lee Friedlander; *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (1987); MoMA's *Work of Atget* (1981); the National Gallery's *Paul Strand, An American Vision* (1993); and the magisterial *Photographs from the Collection of the Gilman Paper Company* (1985), are the apex of black-and-white, offset lithography presswork.

When I met Benson in 1996, he was just beginning what would turn out to be a ten-year tenure as dean of the School of Art at Yale. He sat me down in his office in the Paul Rudolph Art and Architecture building and explained how Photoshop curves worked as he adjusted a Friedlander photograph he was preparing for publication. At that point, Benson was scanning his 8 x 10 transparencies and printing them on a Hewlett Packard DesignJet plotter. Prints were casually strewn all over the office. After the Photoshop tutorial, he barked, "Oh take some, if you like them so much," and I gathered up a few prints. Over the next few years, as Yale MFAs made their way to UCLA to teach for me, I carefully quizzed them about Benson's ideas on all things digital. In the early days of scanning, ink-jet printing, and digital SLRs, all the tricks and protocols were passed on by word of mouth. There were plenty of knowledgeable printers and digital gurus on the West Coast, but for me Benson was always the last word on this stuff. He spoke the machine language, as it were, of analog and digital photography—and made his prodigious knowledge accessible.

Over the years, Benson printed his 8 x 10 negatives in platinum and later on an offset press. In the 1980s, he perfected a process to print his photographs in acrylic paint before switching over to working with ink-jet printers. In the early 2000s he began fiddling around with a digital Canon single-lens reflex camera, and his work exploded. The subjects of these new pictures were pure Benson: oil wells, trucks, irrigation systems, snowplows, cemeteries, houses, boats, apple trees in snow, cinder blocks, aluminum siding, pumpkins—pulsating with color. Then came his shows at Pace/MacGill, where he exhibited these new works as multiple-impression ink-jet prints made on a kit-bashed 4880 Epson printer. In 2011, *North South East West* was published, collecting these photographs. As revolutionary as his earlier duotone and tritone black-and-white printing was, *North South East West* upped the ante. It is easily the most beautiful book of color photographs ever printed. In a postscript, Benson described how the ink-jets and the book were produced: The wall pieces went through the Epson printer three times, and then, in an unorthodox workflow, the signatures of *North South East West* went through

GHP's presses in West Haven, Connecticut, three times, mirroring the multiple impressions created with the Epsoms.

Stories of Benson's technical smarts abound, and not only on the pressroom floor. Consider the platform he constructed to photograph the Shaw Memorial in Boston or the precise adjustments he made to his Epson printer for those multiple-impression ink-jets or the Model A that he drove or the incredibly painstaking photographs made using acrylic paint. These were technological problems solved by someone with arcane know-how and gumption.

The last time I saw Benson was a few winters ago on an early morning train to Boston. We bumped into each other in the café car and reflected on our respective mothers' struggles with dementia. And, of course, we talked about photography too. Benson said he'd stopped printing his pictures on paper; he was now creating images to be displayed on 4K monitors. And, of course, he was the one writing code. After I recovered from the shock that he wasn't making paper prints any longer, I marveled at the incredible distance he'd traveled, starting by assisting Paul Strand in the darkroom and arriving at 4K display.

While Benson loomed large in my creative imagination, I really knew him only slightly, and this meeting on Amtrak was typical of our brief conversations. There was, however, one memorable afternoon I spent with him in his backyard in New Haven in June 1998. I'd become obsessed with his acrylic-paint photographs after seeing them in an astonishing show at Washburn Gallery. Benson had cobbled together this unique photographic process by combining halftone separations with elements of the gum-bichromate process. He had invented what was simultaneously a straightforward and cheap way to make color photographs, and an overwhelmingly time-consuming process. Each image was made by exposing a sheet of thin aluminum coated with bichromated gelatin with a halftone positive and UV light. The gelatin resist that formed was then dunked in watered-down acrylic paint. When dry, the paint covering the resist was washed away, revealing a faint positive image. Each cycle of exposure, coating, washing off, and drying took about an hour—and the process itself was repeated up to forty times to build up an image.

This approach was clearly not for the impatient, like me, but I stumbled along, making some very unsuccessful pictures. After I peppered Benson with questions over the telephone, he said, "Oh just come over and I'll show you the damn things." By this point he'd already abandoned the process for inkjet. When I arrived at his house, he rummaged around, located a half dozen acrylics, and poured two glasses of red wine. As I looked at pictures of railroad tracks vanishing into a verdant forest; murky, emerald-green Alaskan waters; furrowed fields and a farmhouse in the Midwest; a weathered, blue-and-white staircase in New Orleans—their bas-relief layers glistening in the sunlight—I was absolutely stunned. Of all Benson's well-deserved laurels, it is these photographs, for me, that are his very great achievement. But it was not only their rectos that had floored me. On their versos, thin rivulets of cyan, magenta, yellow, and black pigment crisscrossed the unpainted aluminum. Like the spiraling fingers of a great Merlot running down the interior of a wineglass, these inadvertent ribbons of

paint indexed the creative intelligence that had crafted some of the most sumptuous and challenging color photographs imaginable.