

Tom Baril

fine-art
photography's
phenom
brings
consummate
craft to
classical
tradition

Before Tom Baril became one of the hottest contemporary fine-art photographers in the country, he was best known as the man who made Robert Mapplethorpe's exquisite prints. Baril took that job in 1979, when he was a student at New York's School of Visual Arts. Mapplethorpe got more than a technician when he hired Baril. He got a kindred sensibility: Though Baril's subject matter is often different from Mapplethorpe's, they shared a love of classical tradition.

That sensibility comes through in Baril's work. "I celebrate photography's past history, rather than trying to figure out where it's going," says Baril, who still lives in New York and prints in Mapplethorpe's original darkroom, now part of the Mapplethorpe



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Foundation. But Baril isn't interested in a rehash. "I don't want to duplicate what's been done," he says. "I want to comment on it and rework it instead."

Baril's enthusiasts seem to understand that. "I find that even the most cerebral collectors—people who first reject the work as too decorative—end up buying prints," says photo impresario David Fahey, who sells Baril's work at the Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles. "And collectors for whom the print is mainly a beautiful object just can't resist."

Baril's classical bent and darkroom wizardry are more evident than ever in his most recent body of work. "In 1994 I had the idea of taking subjects you've seen through the history of photography—the Brooklyn Bridge, the Chrysler Building, calla lillies—and shooting them with a pinhole," he says. Working with a 4x5 view camera, Baril soon found the pinhole unnecessary—its exposures awkwardly long for many subjects. Now he uses lenses for most pictures, with the exception of an ongoing series of ocean views in which the pinhole's long exposures blur waves into featureless tones.

What ties this new work together, though, is its unique print quality. "I felt I needed something other than what I was getting from the usual cold, clinical bromide papers," says Baril. Baril turned to Kodak Ektalure, a warm-black "portrait" paper that has been around for decades. "It's the only thing out there that has any real richness," he says. But Ektalure is just the beginning. After dunking prints in tried-and-true selenium toner, Baril goes on to give them a long soak in tea—the drinking kind. "The tea gives prints an extra warmth and depth," he explains. "People sometimes mistake the color for platinum." Baril's brand? Off-the-shelf Lipton.

Baril's tea-toned pictures are the subject of a new book, *Tom Baril* (4AD Publishing/D.A.P., \$65), published by photo collector Ivo Watts-Russell (owner of the 4AD record label) and magnificently printed by high-end Allethaire Press. The book is sure to garner

Top: "Chrysler Building, 1997." Left: "Morning Glory, 1997." Opposite: "Two Lilies, 1996."



“I think a photograph is bound to be better if you print it yourself,” says Baril.



more attention for the photographer. “Any good book puts an artist on a different playing field,” says David Fahey, who introduced Watts-Russell to Baril’s work and helped guide the project through. “But this one is just spectacular.” —RUSSELL HART

Clockwise from top: “Ranunculus, 1996”; portrait of Tom Baril; “Smokestacks, 1994.”



■ **ON FILM** When you’re shooting with a pinhole, you can’t compose on a ground glass the way you do with a lens. So I started using 4x5 Polaroid Type 55 Positive/Negative instant film for my pinhole pictures to be able to see exactly what I was getting. The negative it produces is so great, though, that I started to use it for my prints as well. Sometimes I shoot both regular sheet film and Type 55, and in almost every case I end up using the Type 55 negative because the contrast is right on the money and the grain stays really fine in big prints. (Most of my prints are 20x24 inches.) And because you see the negative right away, there’s no chance of blowing the processing. I print the whole frame, including the edge effects from the chemicals. I’ve even figured out how to solarize the negative, which I sometimes do for the flower pictures.

■ **ON NONSILVER** I’ve never tried platinum printing, but now that you can make good 30x40-inch digital internegatives, I’m thinking about it. It would be a natural thing for me, given that the manipulation I do in silver printing is to try to give the image a depth and richness that you just can’t get with straight silver prints. There’s nothing wrong with the cold, clinical look of bromide papers—that’s what I used for my earlier work. But it’s just not right for what I’m doing now. I’d also like to publish a portfolio in gravure; since it’s ink on regular paper, I’d have much more choice of color and surface than I get with photo papers.

■ **ON TEA** The Eastern European photographers sometimes finished their prints in tea, and I’ve heard the Chinese use tea in papermaking. Tea gives me an edge—

a way to add warmth and depth to the print. Since the tea stains the whole paper, you have to print a little on the light side. It basically eliminates any white in the image, but the overall contrast remains pretty much the same. The tea requires as much control as any toner—and not just in how long it’s steeped or how long the print is soaked. Even its temperature affects the color and intensity it adds to the image.

■ **ON HIS BOOK** The book really does recreate the quality of the original pictures. It was made with a process called dry-trap printing, which is the best way to get rich results on uncoated paper stock.



PATRICK SELITTO

You start by shooting tritone negatives from the prints—individual “separations” for the deep tones, midtones, and highlights. Offset plates are made from each negative and printed in register, starting with black and progressing to lighter inks. But after each plate is printed, the ink is allowed to dry completely before the next impression. And if an impression is weak, you can run it back through as many times as needed. With this book there was a fourth run-through to add a heavy tinted varnish. You don’t see books like this very often. It took more than four months to print 80 pictures. It’s basically handmade.