

"Maryke" (opposite)  
and "Still Life for  
Vernon" (this page)  
are modern-day  
ambrotypes  
by Robert Maxwell.

# WET- PLATE REVIVAL

**R**obert Maxwell is surprisingly nonchalant about showing off the images he has been making so passionately for the past year. He hands them over for inspection casually—even though what he's handing over are fragile glass plates. "Don't worry," he says, "they really don't shatter that easily. Unless you drop them or something. Then they go into about a million pieces."

Maxwell, a successful editorial and fashion photographer represented by New York superagent Vernon Jolly, has lately been devoting a good deal of creative energy to the arcane art of making ambrotypes—an especially painstaking spin-off of the 19th-century collodion wet plate. The entire enterprise, he admits, can be vexing, and even dangerous, what with the rich chemical soup used. For some of the people who practice such old-time photo techniques (a few hearty artists, craftsmen, and photo-school students), the laborious process is the point—a reaction, perhaps, to the ease and automation of modern photography. But for Maxwell, a former surfer from La Jolla, California, now based near New York City, ambrotype offers qualities that simply can't be achieved with traditional silver printing—its creamy, muted highlights, deep shadows, soft contrast, and a curious depth that comes partly from the picture's glass support.

The hard work he just endures. "If I could make a thousand ambrotypes a day I'd be happier," he says. Indeed, on a good day, Maxwell is lucky to squeeze in 20 exposures. In true mid-19th-century style, each shot requires that the plate be coated, sensitized, exposed, and processed before the next picture can be made.

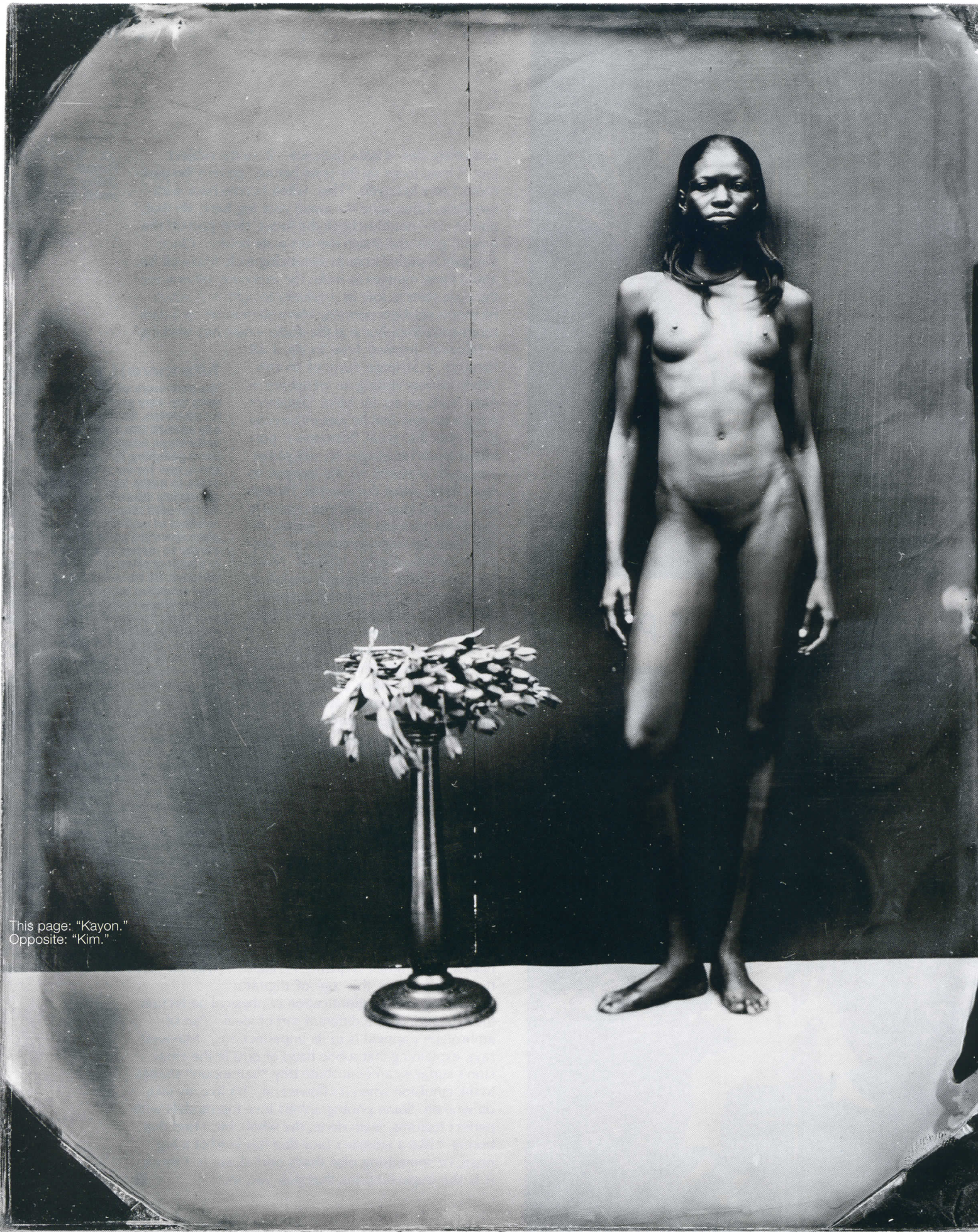
With still lifes, that's not such a big deal. With models



Robert Maxwell loves the imperfections of ambrotypes.

STATE OF THE ART





This page: "Kayon."  
Opposite: "Kim."



The process requires patience.



## STATE OF THE ART

and celebrities, it takes patience—from the subject too. “I have to set up the pose before I go into the dark-room,” says Maxwell. “Then when I come back with the plate, I fine-tune it—move your leg here, do that, and so on—double-check the focus, then pop off the ground glass and attach the wet-plate holder.” Once the plate is pulled from its sensitizing bath, Maxwell has about three minutes to make the exposure; otherwise, the plate starts to lose its sensitivity to light. And when he shoots celebrity portraits, Maxwell must set up a dark-room-away-from-home at the studio where he’s working.

Maxwell learned how to do it all through a strange turn of events. While he was visiting an art gallery in New York, prints by Mike Disfarmer caught his eye, and he was incorrectly told that the great hometown portraitist made his images on wet plates. Intrigued, Maxwell hit the Internet to learn more about the process. Though he learned that Disfarmer actually made his pictures on dry plates, he did hook up with an expert on wet-plate photography named Mark Osterman. After attending a workshop with Osterman and putting in considerable time experimenting, he began making ambrotypes in earnest.

He’s confident enough these days to use the process to photograph celebrities—such as author Tom Wolfe, for *Entertainment Weekly*. (Maxwell also shoots for *W*, *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*.) “Robert’s success goes way beyond his technique,” says Los Angeles photo impresario David Fahey, whose Fahey/Klein Gallery represents Maxwell exclusively. “He brings a sort of refined 19th-century eye to modern subject matter. His pictures seem fresher because they’re actually more thought out.” Fahey and Maxwell are currently putting together a book of Maxwell’s work that is slated to be published by 4AD Publishing.

Maxwell’s ambrotypes certainly have a vital if timeless quality. Perhaps that’s because in this age of digital retouching and the glorification of physical perfection, these images offer a different sort of ideal. “Part of ambrotype’s appeal is in its imperfections,” Maxwell says, explaining that subtle flaws or dust in the emulsion’s surface can contribute tiny “half moon” shapes to the emulsion when it’s flowed on. “It’s like my take on women. Some photographers love top models with perfect features, teeth done, the whole bit. I find that boring. I like a woman’s face that has kind of a big nose, or something else that’s odd about it. I think it is the imperfections that pull you in.” ■

Top: “Tulips.”  
Bottom: “Justin  
Sitting in  
Amish Chair.”

### Maxwell at work

**The hard work of ambrotype begins with the very glass that supports its emulsion. Robert Maxwell usually spends the night before an ambrotype session meticulously hand-polishing 8x10 sheets of glass, one for each exposure he plans to make. Each sheet must be absolutely smooth and dust-free for the next step, coating a syrupy solution of collodion on the glass plate. Once the glass is coated from corner to corner, Maxwell dips it in a bath of silver nitrate for several minutes. He removes the plate—now sensitive to light—and immediately places it into a custom-built wet-plate holder. Then he makes a mad dash upstairs to his studio, because the plate loses its sensitivity as it starts to dry—within about three minutes. He attaches the plate holder to the back of his view camera, which is a modified 11x14 Deardorff. Then he takes the lens cap off to make the exposure, usually three to five seconds.**

**That’s fairly short by wet-plate standards, because an ambrotype must be deliberately underexposed by quite a bit. This makes the negative’s shadows and midtones thinner, so the black background shows through the emulsion, turning the image into a deep-toned positive. Once exposed, the glass plate is developed in ferrous sulfate and fixed. The fixer? Lately Maxwell has favored potassium cyanide for the way it adds depth to ambrotypes shot on wine-red stained glass and backed with black velvet. “There’s a reason they call ambrotype the black art,” he says. —R.H.**

