

# Elizabeth Opalenik

## Mordançaçe alternative printing process

**I will never forget the day I met Jean Pierre Sudre standing in his darkroom and viewed his works in Mordançaçe. It was the summer of 1983 in Lacoste, France, and as I stood there waiting to be introduced; I was taken by his sparkling blue eyes and the knowledge that this was someone that had figured out life. The Maine Photographic Workshops were beginning to organize photographic programs in Provence conducted by Kate Carter and Craig Stevens and I was assisting my former teachers. Another friend of the Workshops, Ginette Vachon, had told Craig about this incredible photographer and his wife Claudine. I was mesmerized, but it would take another 8 years of visiting their studio annually before a class in the Mordançaçe process was offered in English, with Craig doing translations when needed. Immediately enrolling, I knew that I had come home photographically. In that week, I learned more than photography. I learned that in Mordançaçe, like life, you have possibilities.**

Granted, part of it was the magical Provencal setting in which the class was conducted. I remember the cicadas, with their alluring chants in the midday heat, beckoning us to the landscape of wild herbs and smells. At their mas and studio that Jean Pierre and Claudine called home we worked, processing the images in the Mordançaçe chemistry, while pondering this incredible beauty through the ateliers huge picture window. The view alone stroked the imagination and is one in which Sudre found inspiration. From their fields we would carry in wheat and oats and bits of landscape to include in our photograms as we spent a week in the trial and error process. Under the mulberry tree we would take lunch, discuss our successes, failures and talk about life. Today we want instant gratification. In Provence, it was about the journey not the destination.

Immediately, the silver veils of emulsion lifting off the darkroom print fascinated me. Taught to remove them, I wanted to find a way to save and use them as part of my voice in this process. Trying to save the loosened silver "skin" seemed a natural extension of my draped figure models in the past. To Jean Pierre that day, it seemed strange or appalling, but with my first successful print, he was asking for my notes and the print signed to him with love.

In the world of photography, Mordançaçe is a somewhat obscure process and often misunderstood. The draped veils even more confusing and often mistaken for Polaroid emulsion lifts or currently, Photoshop magic. In a recent exhibition of Mordançaçe work, I included a series of photographs depicting the process of rearranging the silver emulsion. The response has led to this article and the shared knowledge that when you understand the photographs you are

viewing in any process, it only enhances the experience. Exactly what is Mordançaçe? This is a process whereby the artist strips away the darkest parts of the emulsion of a silver gelatine print. The stripping away of the emulsion creates the image transformation and a raised area on the print. The photograph's emulsion is then dried and then using water floated back onto the print.

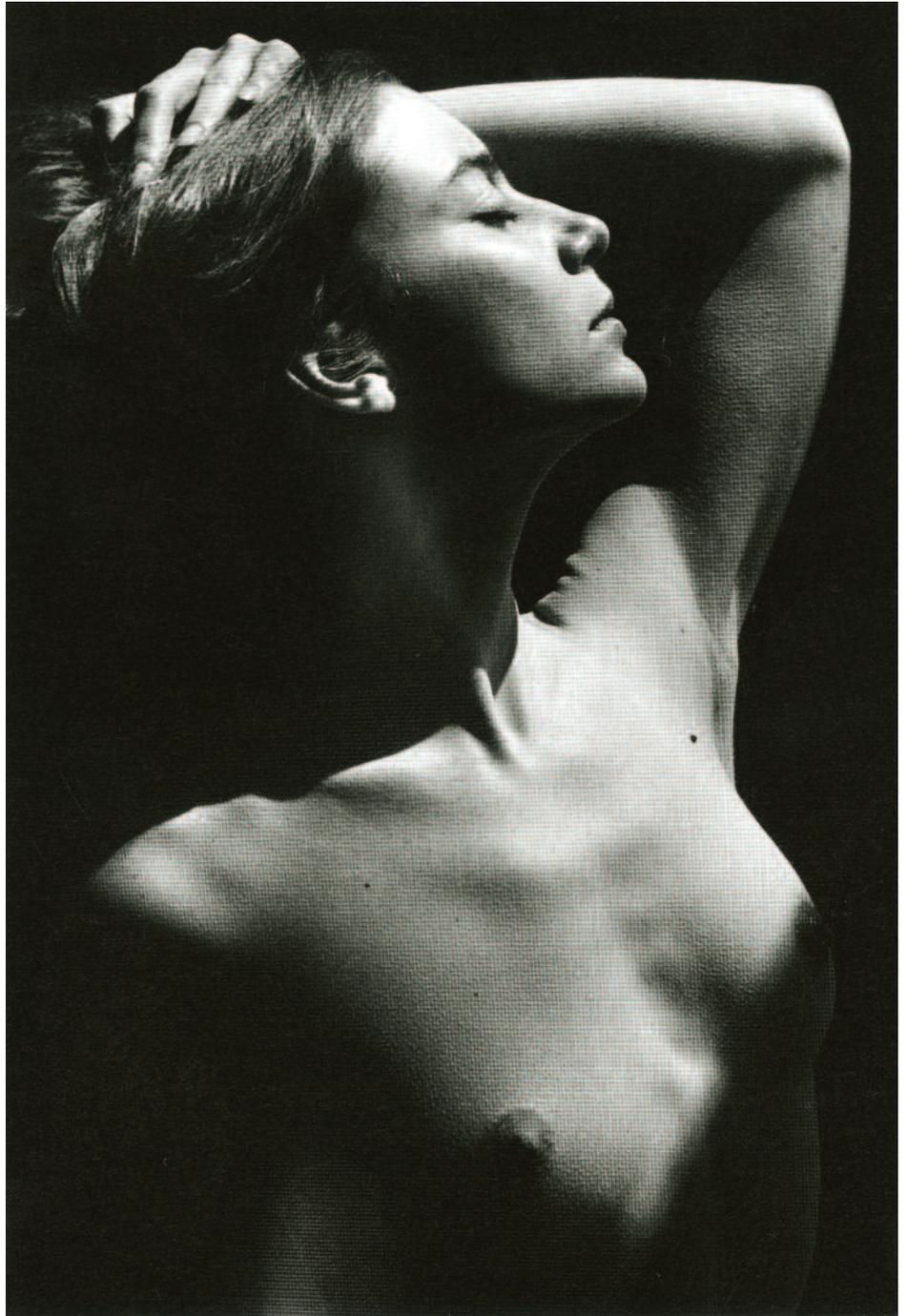
In the mordancaçe process, you start with a high contrast silver gelatine print. Agfa and Ilford papers were always my favourites, but all offer possibilities if you are willing to spend time testing to see what works best for you. Sadly, many of the papers that we have all loved are disappearing, but finding one with the most silver will be best for the purpose of saving the veils. Some images have taken an entire afternoon to complete. They are meditations into possibilities.

Below: Jean Pierre 1983



Right Top: Image 1. Because print exposure determines the degree to which the gelatine lifts, start by doing banded test strips to determine where to begin. Though time consuming, it is well worth the effort. Be sure to leave white space around the image, as the emulsion stretches beyond its borders and needs a place to rest. Make your first black and white print with this information, washing well.

Right Below: Image 2. Detail The print is put into the mordantage solution of water, copper chloride, glacial acetic acid and hydrogen peroxide. The print will begin to bleach out and change colours, generally within 3 minutes. In this image titled *Windswept*, the model is behind a screen door, thus causing the texture on her body. You will begin to see the emulsion swell in the shadow areas. You can use motion of the water to further loosen the gelatine, but do not be offhand about this stage. If you are trying to save this gelatine, it is best to rock gently as the emulsion is extremely fragile. The print now needs to be washed for 15 minutes, completely changing the water every 5 minutes. This is best done in a tray, one print at a time. Good washing avoids chemical staining.



Top Right: Image 3. You have choices about redevelopment that can be done in weakened solutions of film or paper developers or sulphurized toners. Oxidation and what you had for lunch can also affect the outcome! As the print redevelops, more lifting occurs, causing the silver emulsion to start floating free from the surface of the print. Just the motion of removing the image from the redeveloper can cause the loosened emulsion to detach from the highlights of the print. Often I work on Plexiglas in the trays. Since this article is about saving the gelatin, I will again mention gentle rocking in the redeveloper 2-3 minutes and the next 15 minute wash. At this point, if you wish to remove the swollen gelatin, use a ball of cotton or jet of water. Remember, just because you can save the draping, doesn't mean you always should. Like any process, each step must enhance. Many of my mordancage images do not have veils. It is by choice.

Bottom Right: Image 4. Detail You can use the gelatine movement to help clean the surface of the paper base where the gelatine has lifted and where a haze often exists. You can also use a Q-tip, being careful not to touch the floating emulsion, which will act like slimy egg whites. Depending on the image and amount of silver veils I am trying to save, I can spend hours trying to get it right, get it clean and just as suddenly watch my efforts float away. There is other redeveloping or stop baths that the print can go through affecting colour shifts, but each requires an exchange of liquids and further washing that can destroy the veils. Often I am working with an eyedropper to move the emulsion and a needle to help remove water out of larger bubbles. When I achieve a draping that pleases me, the print needs to be dried face up on a towel or screen so the emulsion then attaches back down on the print. Once dry, it can be washed further if necessary. If I have any secrets to my success in the mordancage process today, it is patience and the knowledge that what takes time to create, time respects.



Right and Overleaf: Image 5, 6. Though from the same negative, each draped and three-dimensional etched print is unique. That is the beauty of the process for me. I made 35 attempts one week and was rewarded with 2 or 3 versions of Windswept I kept. Each printing session has notes and whether a success or failure, it is an opportunity for possibilities to begin again.

#### Editors note

Elizabeth Opalenik's newest work, Poetic Grace, includes selected works from her 30 year career. The book was released in 2009 in conjunction with an exhibition of her prints at Gallery de Forest in Ashland, Oregon.

Her innovative images feature figurative and flower themes interpreted in a range of media from silver gelatine, mordantage to ink jet and have been displayed in over sixty international exhibitions. Elizabeth conducts workshops centred around figure work and alternative printing processes, she has held classes from California to Tuscany, from Provence to Maine and Mexico to Argentina. To view more of her images, buy a print or book, or perhaps even attend a workshop.

Visit her website [www.opalenik.com](http://www.opalenik.com)







Centered in the universe





Left: Jojo dancing, Cumberland Island, Georgia 1996  
Above: Breeze #2, Buonconvento Italy 1997



Changer in black



Hidden heart final



Above: I'll fly away 2 2008  
Left: Lady of the woods 2009

