From Dr Mike Ware

Hello everyone, and greetings!

First and foremost - my thanks go to Ellie for this show, and to Keiko Goto for the video.

Some of you may be wondering what a Pom is doing here, so here’s a little autobiography:

60 years ago I started my job teaching chemistry at Manchester Uni. UK.

After serving 10 years, in 1974 I was rewarded with 6 months Sabbatical leave.

Thanks to good Australian friends I was able to spend it as a visiting lecturer at UWA in Perth.

So this year of 2024 actually marks the 50th anniversary of my first trip to your fair land!

- and I still have the Kodachrome slides to prove it!

Inspired by my early Australian experiences, I took up ‘expressive’ photography around 1979 at the ripe old age of 40: Early days were spent learning the craft of enlarged printing on silver-gelatin emulsions from my 6x9 cm roll film negatives, taken with a Mamiya Universal. I owe a lot to Paul Hill workshops at the time.

It was also in 1979 that I first read about the historical Platinotype printing process - and tried it with fair success. Pradip Malde soon contacted me when he discovered that we were probably the only two people in UK at the time making platinotypes. In following years I visited Pradip in Orkney, and we progressed the print-out process together.

In 1992, after 30 years teaching and research at Manchester, I took early retirement - and for the next 30 years travelled the world, lecturing and consulting on early photography. At Ellie’s invitation, I visited these - now famous - studios in Trentham in 2009 to conduct 8 workshops here. In 2011 I returned for another 6 workshops, making many new friends enthusiastic about alternative processes. This year of 2024 is the 21st anniversary of my first exhibiting in Ellie’s gallery originally in Melbourne.

For some of us, the opening years of the 21st century brought a total revolution in the technology of lens-based media. The wet darkroom was substantially displaced by the desktop computer and printer, and the 35 mm camera by the i-phone. This revolution has one drastic physical consequence: it effectively dematerialises our photographic images. Analogue silver-gelatin negatives are being replaced wholesale by invisible strings of binary code, stored electronically on memory sticks, cards, discs, and chips, and to view them we need an expensive electronic device with a screen. But surely most of us prefer our photographic images to be accessible, flat objects - permanent, easily stored, and readily appreciated. How best to re-make these pictures that will be so essential to our culture and records? For many purposes, the ink-jet printer serves well enough; but in the areas of fine art and historical record, the alternative photographic printing processes still offer some unique qualities which are aesthetically satisfying and archival.

You’ll now realise why I am a total devotee of the handmade photographic print on plain paper. This simply needs two or three pure chemicals to be dissolved in water, and the mixed solution applied to a sheet of the finest, pure cellulose paper. It’s as easy as that! The small volume of sensitizer can be spread uniformly with a glass rod, or you can use a brush. It penetrates only to a slight depth, regulated by the paper’s internal sizing, which is slightly hydrophobic. There are no layers of colloidal binder substances, like gum or gelatin, coating the sheet. The sensitized paper is contacted with an enlarged negative, and exposed to UV light to form the image which - with our processes - prints out without needing developer. After clearing the excess chemicals, the image remains as metallic nanoparticles trapped within the surface cellulose fibres of the paper sheet.

Our prime image substances are the noble metals, platinum, palladium, and gold: very expensive, admittedly, but their archival permanence guarantees that the artwork should last a millennium. 1300 years ago the monks of the scriptorium in Lindisfarne Abbey made good choices for the pigments to illuminate their gospels, which have survived to become national treasures today. My hope is that one day our visual archives will also include thousand-year-old photographs.

Given an appropriate photographic negative, a well-formulated siderotype sensitizer yields a print image with a subtly-nuanced tonal scale showing all the lights and shades that modulate optical reality. Although essentially monochromatic, some non-literal colour is also possible in the image, depending on the metals used and conditions of printing, such as humidity. Thus picture tonality can be controlled to match the expressive intent of the artist. To print plain paper pictures at lower cost, there are also the inexpensive options of cyanotype in Prussian blue, and argyrotype or its other silver alternatives.

The aesthetic qualities of such images cannot be fully conveyed by reproduction on any screen: they need to be appreciated by viewing originals, preferably unglazed. Plain paper prints have the advantage that they may be illuminated and viewed from any direction without suffering reflective glare or gloss, thanks to the totally matte surface of the paper - unlike silver-gelatin photographs. The very fine fibrous organic texture also confers ‘life’ on the picture, similar to those other works of graphic art on plain paper: drawings, etchings, engravings, mezzotints, and water colours.