

MORDANÇAGE

A PRINTING PROCESS INVENTED IN THE 1960S BY FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER JEAN-PIERRE SUDRE, THE STRIKING IMAGERY IT PRODUCED HAS SELDOM BEEN SEEN ON THE AMERICAN SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC. CONTRIBUTING EDITOR DEAN BRIERLY LOOKS AT THE SUDRE LEGACY AND TALKS WITH ELIZABETH OPALENIK, A MORDANÇAGE PRACTITIONER.

From the inception of photography, its practitioners have generally split into two groups: the overwhelming majority, content to rely on the medium's reproductive nature; and the relative few who have pioneered less literal, more adventurous routes of artistic expression. Two names that belong firmly in the latter category are Jean-Pierre Sudre and Elizabeth OpaLENIK, disparate yet simpatico individuals who have consistently sought keys that open new doors of perception. One of those keys, a chemical process known as Mordançage, also brought them together, although they made very different use of it. Mordançage was not the only technique they used to push past visual boundaries, but it can be argued that it was the one through which they realized their most stimulating and rewarding results.

To talk about Mordançage one must first speak of Sudre, the French photographer who pioneered the process in 1960. Born in Paris in 1921, he originally studied film at the Institute for Advanced Film Studies (IDHEC) with the aim of becoming a director. Limited professional opportunities in postwar France, however, caused him to switch mediums in 1949. He decided to specialize in industrial photography and quickly developed a style distinctive enough to earn praise from the famous photographer Brassai.

In 1958, Sudre opened a black and white lab with his wife Claudine (herself a noted expert on 19th century photographic printing processes), and for the next



Jean-Pierre Sudre, photographed by his wife, Claudine, in 1960.

10 years provided developing and printing services for prestigious publishing companies like Delpire and noted photographers like Jeanloup Sieff. Sudre's personal work during the 1940s and 1950s largely consisted of landscapes and still lifes noted for their formal composition and strong emotional resonance.

"Yet there was a doubt lingering in me about photography, for it was but a mirror," he wrote. "Therefore, I tried to bring more into it, to recreate the feeling of

consisting of copper chloride, hydrogen peroxide and glacial acetic acid. The gelatin in the dark areas of the print lifts from the surface and can be manipulated into various shapes or removed entirely. The print can then be redeveloped with a variety of developers and/or toners. The process effects a tone reversal not dissimilar to solarization and imparts a greater sense of depth than a normal photographic print, as illustrated in the dream-like image of reeds from Sudre's *Paysage Materiographiques* series on page 49. He referred to the unpredictable nature of the process as "a theater in which night after night a different play is staged."

The Mordançage process imbued Sudre's prints with an additional layer of abstraction, but he would sometimes go even further through the application of ice blue, rust red and brown/sepia toners. His darkroom experimentation was not done solely to create striking effects, but to reveal new ways of identifying and transforming external and internal realities. He was in effect the architect of strange unknown worlds suggestive of alien topographies on some distant, forbidden planet, as in the image shown at bottom right on page 51. He described his progression from photographing the "vegetable universe" (landscapes) to the world of objects (still lifes) to that of crystals as nothing more or less than "a way of pondering life and death."

Through such utilization of chemical substances to create visual metaphors rife with metaphysical associations, Sudre became a kind of spiritual ancestor of the medium's pioneers: "Think about

touch." His desire to penetrate beneath the surface of his subject matter led to ongoing experimentation with various printing techniques, including solarization, photograms and cliché verre, the last achieved through crystallizing chromium salts onto glass plates and projecting the image under the enlarger.

Sudre's efforts eventually led him to innovate the Mordançage process, in which a silver gelatin print is placed in a bleach bath



Top: Much of Sudre's work sprang directly from his imagination, as in this abstract image, part of the *Soleils* series. Bottom left: The bas-relief effect of the Mordançage process is apparent in one of Sudre's *Paysage Matériographiques* images and Opalenik's *Looking at You*, 1997, bottom right.

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all those lonely researchers who, at the end of the 19th century, presented the result of their work to learned societies, one for a new process, one for a manifesto on new aesthetics.... What emotion they must have felt."

Sudre approached photography in much the same way as an avant-garde composer gives form and rhythm to abstract sounds. Looking into the pure abstraction of Sudre's *Soleils* (top, page 49) is like listening to a musical work by fellow Frenchman Henri Dutilleux, with its exquisite balance between tonality and atonality, its strange yet accessible rhythms and, above all, its ability to cast a dreamlike spell resonant of time, memory and space.

His wife Claudine says that Sudre's restless spirit ensured that he never limited himself to one process during a lifetime of unceasing visual exploration. "My husband's work does not consist only of Mordançages," she says. "He created many other kinds of images. He was a very knowledgeable man, a great poet, a dreamer, a strong worker, a great seeker and a lover of nature. He was also very strict with his work."

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The alchemist poses with his liquid assets—bottles of image-transforming chemicals (top), as well as the results of his darkroom sorcery in 1983.

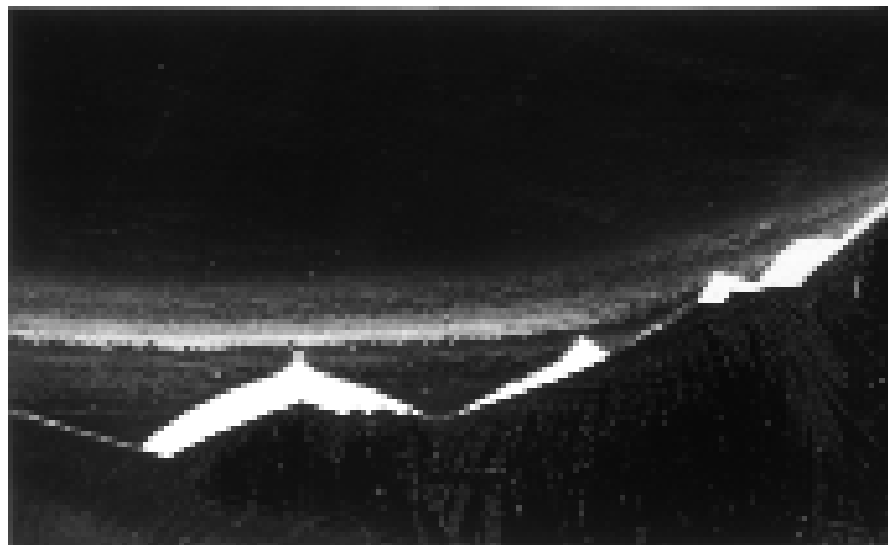
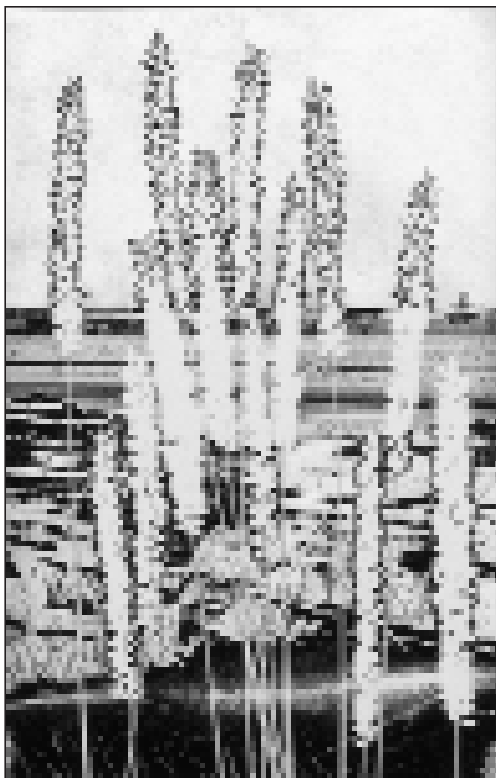
demonstrated the medium's ability to go in many directions beyond reportage. His work was exhibited widely in France and throughout Europe during his lifetime, and lives on in an eponymous monograph published in 2003.

Every sorcerer must have an apprentice, and Sudre, assisted by Claudine, began a series of workshops in 1968 (originating in Paris and ending up in the south of France) in which he shared his darkroom knowledge with

students from all over the world. One of the most prominent was Craig Stevens, who taught at the Maine Photographic Workshops from 1975 to 1985. Stevens met Sudre in 1982, quickly formed a bond with the older photographer, and assisted and translated during visits to Sudre's studio. Stevens eventually imported Mordançage into the United States, and was for a while the only person teaching the process in this country. He recalls that Sudre (who passed away in 1997) adhered to an artistic philosophy that was organically related to his everyday life.

"He knew that the poetic response was at the heart of all great work and so he looked intently at the simple things that made up his life—the woods he played in as a child, the family possessions that inhabited his still lifes (or, as he called them, 'still livings'). Finally, he began seeking the big answers to big questions in the microcosm of common salt crystals."

Stevens was one of Opalenik's first photography teachers, and in a replay of his relationship with Sudre, she began in 1983 assisting Stevens in Maine Photographic Workshops set in Provence, France, where the two annually visited Sudre's atelier. In due course, a workshop on Mordançage was offered for American students, with Sudre teaching Opalenik the process in 1991. Opalenik had already been investigating alternative printing methods, and quickly recognized the expressive possi-



Top: Opalenik explores aspects of sensuality through direct engagement with the human figure, as in *Connections*, 1996. **Bottom left:** There's an erotic element to Sudre's imagery as well, but it's expressed through symbolic forms and textures, as in these two examples from *Paysages Matériographiques*.

“From the first moment I met him, I knew that he had found the answers to life,” Opalenik says. “It is very compelling to be around someone like that who shares a feeling about the depth of life and a faith in the universe.”

bilities of this technique. Just as quickly she introduced a variation to it in which she manipulated the gelatin to produce a graceful draping effect, seen to dramatic advantage in such images as *River of Life* and *Wind in Her Hair*. Sudre was at first dubious about the results.

“He just shook his head and said to Craig, ‘Les Américains!’ To me, he said, ‘No, no, no, Elizabeth. I thought you would be my easiest student,’” Opalenik remembers. “But the next morning, he stood there smiling at my first successful attempt with the draping effect and said, ‘First, Elizabeth, you [must] put a very high price on your work, higher than Jean-Pierre. Next, you give Jean-Pierre all your notes, and finally, you sign this: *To Jean-Pierre with love.*’”

In contrast to Sudre’s Mordançage imagery, which is marked by an austere, intensely detailed abstraction and strong contrasts of darkness and light, Opalenik’s use of the process resolves itself in softly luminous visual terms. Sudre’s work evokes the forms and texture of the earth; Opalenik’s has a graceful fluidity reminiscent of water, as in the graceful lines in the image *Connections*.

Stevens says, “What Elizabeth was doing was [like] nothing that Jean-Pierre ever considered. His approach was poetic yet quite precise. Elizabeth could let the materials do other things.” Sudre was also cognizant of their different approaches, noting that Mordançage became an essential complement to her sense of creativity, one that she used “in



Sudre is pictured with his wife and longtime collaborator Claudine (left) and Opalenik, to whom he passed the Mordançage torch, a few months before he passed away in 1997.

the finest and most delicate way possible.”

Another difference is Opalenik’s frequent engagement with the human form, subject matter that Sudre referenced only symbolically. Whereas Sudre explored the inner world of crystals and other physical matter, Opalenik chooses to probe the emotional landscapes of her models. Replete with themes of liberation, vulnerability, birth and rebirth, these collaborative efforts simultaneously depict both

photographer and subject. The scenarios in which Opalenik places her figures—immersed in dark pools of water, hidden in secluded rooms, or swathed in second-skin Mordançage drapery—give them a more overt narrative thrust than Sudre’s imagery, albeit the meaning in Opalenik’s pictures often remains both enigmatic and elusive. Just like her mentor, Opalenik, by her own admission, prefers to let her pictures speak for themselves.

Opalenik connected with Sudre on a number of other levels, including similar attitudes toward teaching. Sudre never pushed his students in any particular aesthetic direction, and always encouraged them to find their own way. Claudine Sudre remembers his willingness to pass on his discoveries to successive generations of students: “He was always happy to explain his work. The darkroom is not a secret place.” Opalenik, who lives in Oakland, California, has followed the same approach in the workshops that she teaches. Most importantly, she possesses the same restless creative spirit and the gift of being able to surprise viewers with each new image. She continues to draw inspiration from their friendship.

“From the first moment I met him, I knew that he had found the answers to life,” she says. “It is very compelling to be around someone like that who shares a feeling about the depth of life and a faith in the universe. He was poetic in all things and shared his gifts for the inquisitive. Through his art and life he searched for the truths to universal questions and found them in the simplest ways. His crystallizations, what I called the ‘landscapes of his mind,’ are astounding. To look at his still lifes is like hearing the most beautiful music or reading a haiku poem. Many of them live on my walls and I am inspired daily. The more I grow as an artist, the more I see new things in them.”

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Top left: The draping effect in Opalenik's *Heart Firmly Planted*, 1999 and *Wind in Her Hair*, 1994 (bottom) represent her re-imagining of Mordanaçage. Above: Sudre achieved a much different effect with the process in this image from the *Apocalypse* series.