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### Mordancage with Erin Antognoli

I've been thinking a lot lately about printing. I miss spending time in the darkroom; being able to watch the image appear on the paper is as exciting the 100th time as it is the first time. Having a photograph that you, alone, produced, from the moment you depressed the shutter, loaded the reel, inverted the tank, and burned and dodged by hand is a unique end-product of one artistic experience: yours.

But, there are other printing methods and processes you might not be familiar with that take traditional printing beyond choosing between glossy or pearl or developer preference.

A process I've wanted to try for a long time is [mordancage](#), in which a finished print is subjected to chemicals and is pretty much destroyed.

The mordancage solution uses copper chloride, which reacts with the silver and lightens the dark areas of the print, and hydrogen peroxide that dissolves the gelatin, allowing for manipulation. The results are unpredictable and one-of-a-kind and completely awesome.

One of my favorite photographers, [Erin Antognoli](#), has been focusing on this technique lately, and, it turns out, she even did it for her thesis project in college, so I asked her a few questions.



**AK:** You've created a pretty specific niche for yourself in your Holga multiple-exposure work, even integrating it into your wedding photography business. Recently, you've begun focusing on your printing techniques using a gelatin relief process called mordancage. Can you tell me a little about the process?

**EA:** The mordancage technique is a photo process based on traditional darkroom print developing, but with a twist. You start with a regularly-printed black and white print and put it through a bleach in the mordancage solution. This causes the print to turn a milky white and the gelatin areas that were dark begin to lift away and form veils. The print is then redeveloped, which brings the tone back to varying degrees depending on what type of developer is used and how the original print was made. The veils can be moved around or wiped away, and you can play with the texture a bit at this stage. Different developing solutions yield different colors as well, and that, combined with creative use of toner, can give the prints a wide variety of colors even though it's technically a black and white print. The prints have a shimmery, metallic quality that's better seen in person than online.

The final print is one of a kind, and cannot be duplicated exactly, even by using the same exact negative. The veils, textures, color, and tone will all vary from print to print - sometimes slightly, and sometimes drastically.



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**AK:** Is this a process you've used in the past or are you learning as you go?

**EA:** I worked with this process quite extensively in college for my thesis project. Though I hadn't worked with it in a decade, picking it back up wasn't too hard, although now I'm using it differently, so there was that learning curve of initial experimenting to find the results I wanted. I'm still experimenting in a way, and always looking to expand on what I've already done. Since the process is so unpredictable and has such a wide variety of results, it's important to keep track of what you're doing if you hope to duplicate or build on them at all. Every single step (and, there are a lot of them), from the initial print-making to the finishing touches, impacts the final outcome. Changing any part of that will change your results, and it's difficult to improve or learn from your successes or mistakes if you start from scratch every single time. You can achieve a broad range of results with this process so it's helpful to have some ideas for finished images in mind before starting or it can be overwhelming.



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**AK:** Are you using this process as part of an overall project using a specific series of photographs or is this an experimental process with specific photos? Do some types of photos work best with this technique than others?

**EA:** Right now, I'm working on a series involving trees and branches and other things in nature made to look something like rorschach patterns. I have cherry blossom photos, as well as snow covered tree photos, and I plan to make some images when the leaves are a bit more full to round out that series and expand on what I already have. I also use this process on straight photographs, though not for a particular series as of yet. Many people will argue that the darker a photo is, the better it will work, but I would disagree. I say there really aren't any types of photos that work "best" unless you have a particular goal in mind, and then you need to focus on taking photos with whatever criteria that will get you the particular results that you want. But, then again, I usually look at the rules and promptly figure out how I can break them. ;)



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**AK: If someone, like, myself, is interested in trying this gelatin relief technique, what type of advice would you give?**

**EA:** Firstly, understand how acids and bases work so the chemicals don't explode in your face. Always follow the directions for each solution, be aware that you should never add water to acid...make sure you always add the acid to water.

Next, either find a photo facility with an industrial strength ventilation system, or plan to work outside, and use a respirator mask, regardless. These are toxic chemicals, so you don't want to touch, breathe, or otherwise have any contact with this stuff, and don't want to subject others working nearby to the fumes, either. I use latex or vinyl gloves and a respirator mask suitable for acids when I'm working. Always be extremely careful - once my glove ripped while I was working and I got solution on my hand. I will spare you the details, but needless to say, that only had to happen once to make me take extra precautions from then on!

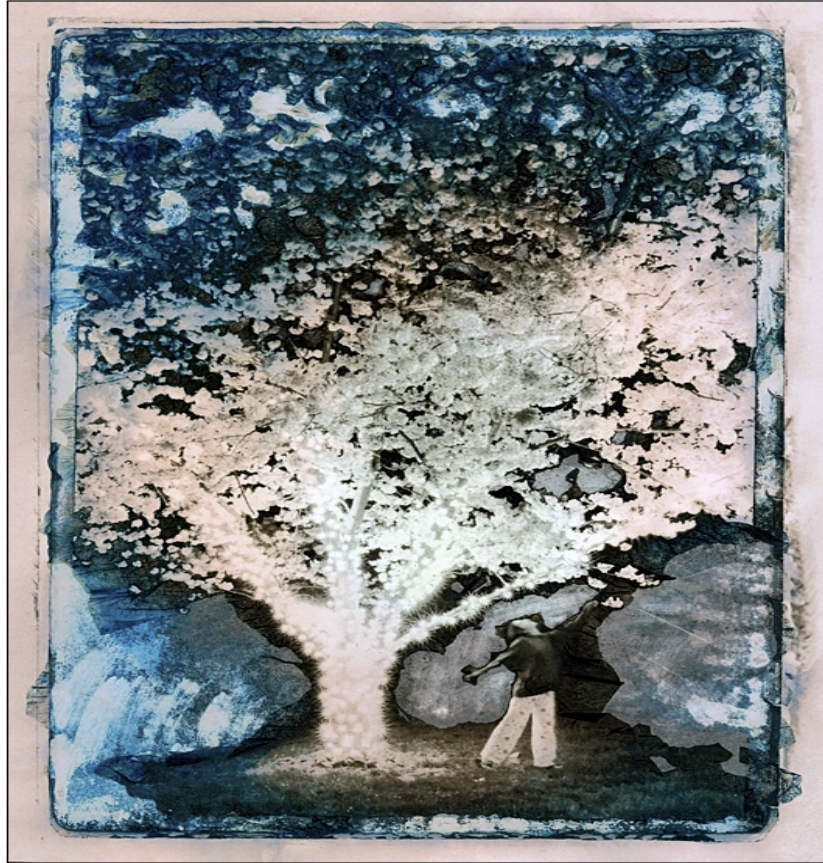
And, this should be common sense, but don't dump the solution down the drain. When it's used up, take it to a proper hazardous chemical disposal area in your neck of the woods.

The rest is simply doing it, often, and taking good notes, and seeing what you get and how you can use that or improve upon them.

**AK: When will we be able to see your finished work? Do you have any shows coming up?**

**EA:** I just finished two group shows that featured my mordancage work - one at the Laurel Arts Guild and one at the Fraser Gallery. I don't have any other shows featuring this work scheduled right now, but if Artomatic happens this year, I will definitely be displaying this project. A feature exhibit at Black Rock Center for the Arts in April 2011 will feature my Holga work, and new shows always tend to come up. My [art site](#) and [blog](#) are kept up-to-date with my upcoming exhibits and other art news, so check back often!

So, there you have it. If you have any specific questions for Erin about the mordancage process or any of her other work, just ask using her [Formspring page](#). Have you tried this process, yourself? If so, please link to your work in the comments!!



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-Angela

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