



TAKING 'VERTIGO' TO NEW HEIGHTS

Mastering the increasingly rare art of dye-transfer printing has enabled the photojournalist-turned-artist Jean Curran to create works of extraordinary colour using scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's classic film noir. She talks *Liz Jobey* through this most painstaking of photographic processes

In Jean Curran's studio in east London, four shallow, rectangular, white plastic trays are gently rocking backwards and forwards, each one holding a different coloured liquid - cyan, magenta, yellow and clear. As they tip one way and then the other, the colours bloom and fade like a kind of therapeutic water feature.

Pinned up on the wall are four variants of a colour print of the back of a woman's head, her platinum hair piled into a French pleat. It's Kim Novak, the Hollywood star who famously plays a dual role in *Vertigo*, Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 psychological thriller. And the film - or rather stills from it - is Curran's principal subject.

Curran is one of a rare breed: a dye-transfer printer. Dye-transfers are the most costly, time-consuming and complicated form of colour prints, made famous by the American photographer William Eggleston, who discovered the process in the late 1960s and found it offered both the range and intensity of colour that would become characteristic of his work. Even then it was a specialised process, used mainly in advertising. Today, there are ►



Photographs from
"The Vertigo Project":
(previous pages)
Kim Novak as Madeleine;
(left) a restaurant scene;

(below) James Stewart as
detective John "Scottie"
Ferguson, dangling from
a gutter in the film's
opening scenes



◀ only a handful of skilled practitioners: notable among them are the Americans Guy Stricherz and James Browning, both highly sought after for their skills.

Curran, 37, might seem an unlikely follower. Born in County Waterford in Ireland, she grew up on a farm and decided to become a news photographer, starting out in Cork, then moving to Dublin until, with the realisation that "I was never going to make the cover of Time magazine if I was going to be hanging around Dublin", she took herself to Kenya in 2010 to join Agence France Presse as a photojournalist.

Two years later, back in Ireland, she decided she needed to change tack. It was the craft of photography she was really interested in. "I felt that the object, the photograph, was becoming less considered than the process behind it. I wanted to use photography to challenge the medium, and I began to research dye-transfer printing because I felt it was the highest form of photography."

Even before she knew how to do it, she knew what images she wanted to make. "I'd started by looking into the Technicolor era, because Technicolor movies were made using the dye-transfer process [it was introduced by Kodak in the 1930s]. And Hitchcock was the only one

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where I could go, as an artist; each and every scene is uniquely his own vision. They're so cleverly put together. You really have to study them to understand how well layered they are, how conceptually robust."

And if it was Hitchcock, then there was only one film. "For me, it was always going to be *Vertigo*," she says. "I wanted to take it apart, I wanted to look at the individual images, I wanted to study the significance of the colour and the composition within the frames. And the funny thing about it is that all the themes are about voyeurism, about deep dark sexual fantasies; it's explored without it being so blatant, so obvious. I couldn't have said growing up I was the greatest Hitchcock fan. But when I started to research

how he put his movies together, I started to realise that, as an image maker, he was a genius.

"Ultimately," she adds, "wanting to spend time with the images [was important]. You know, it takes a long time to make a dye-transfer print."

The trays rocking to and fro in her studio contain the dyes that constitute the basic spectrum of colour printing, and which, layered one over the other, can create a full range of colours from the bright to the very subtle. The clear liquid is a chemical wash that removes excess dye from the sheets of transparent film, before the layer of colour is transferred to a sheet of paper nearby.

To make a dye-transfer print, a colour image is separated into its constituent three channels, red, green and blue. Each channel is then exposed to make three separation negatives. Each negative is then placed into an enlarger and exposed on to a sheet of film coated with a thin layer of gelatine called a "matrix". The matrix holds the positive information of the corresponding channel. The three matrices are then each placed into a tray of dye and left to absorb it. Then, one by one, they are removed, washed and rolled on to a coated paper to which the dye adheres, gradually building up the colour range to make the finished print.

It takes her about a week, Curran says, from start to finish. One of the studio walls that serves as a blackboard is covered in scribbled calculations and formulae, testimony to the many adjustments in the chemistry and timing.

As with all analogue printing, the materials are disappearing fast. In 2016, Curran moved to London. She sought out John McCarthy, who runs Labyrinth, an analogue processing lab in Bethnal Green.

"I asked if I could buy his materials from him, and he said, 'No, but you can come over here and learn how to dye-transfer print.'" So she spent the next two years there. "We had some of the materials in Labyrinth, but I had to design my own dyes. I had to come up with the formulas for mordanting [coating] the paper. I make all my own developers. Most of the chemistry that's needed I make myself."

She also managed to negotiate an agreement with the Hitchcock Trust and Universal to use scans from the original Technicolor reel from *Vertigo* and remake them as dye-transfer prints. She says that her contract prevents her from disclosing the details, but the trust has been supportive "from the get-go".

'Wanting to spend time with the images was important. Dye-transfer prints take a long time'

Before setting up on her own in Hackney, she went out to Lebanon, New Hampshire, to work with James Browning. Last year, talking about his art, Browning reckoned that there were fewer than 10 people across the US, Europe and Australia still making dye-transfers.

Principal among them are Guy Stricherz and his wife Irene Mali, who are based on Vashon Island in Puget Sound, Washington state. "They started out in a small studio on Prince Street in Lower Manhattan," explains Rose Shoshana, whose gallery in Santa Monica represents Eggleston. "I still remember the first dye-transfer print I saw at Guy and Irene's. It was a portrait of Balthus's studio by [the late German-American photographer] Evelyn Hofer. The colours were

so saturated and sublime, unlike any other colour print I'd ever seen. Soon after, I returned to the studio with William Eggleston, who had been a most enthusiastic dye-transfer practitioner since he was first introduced to the process in the late 1960s. Eggleston, Guy and Irene have been collaborating on making dyes ever since."

Back in Hackney, Curran is preparing the first fruits of her work - four scenes from *Vertigo* - for Photo London next week, to be followed by an exhibition of the full series in New York. Although she makes her own "abstract" pictures from the dyes, she is planning more film works too. Aware that she might be criticised for her choice of Hitchcock because of his mistreatment of women stars, she is wary of taking on anything contentious (although the Polanski horror film *Rosemary's Baby* came up in conversation as a contender). In the future, like her peers, she will need to work out how to manufacture her own materials. But once that's sorted, she will be able "to print away to my heart's content - into the later hours of my life, hopefully".

Jean Curran's pictures are at Danziger Gallery, Photo London, Somerset House, May 17-20 and at Danziger Gallery New York, December 7-January 12 2019; photolondon.org, danzigergallery.com