



# Khem

JANE BROWN

PONCH HAWKES

SIRI HAYES

RUTH MADDISON

LLOYD STUBBER

DAVID TATNALL

CLAUDIA TERSTAPPEN

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

APRIL 11TH – MAY 3RD 2014

**Khem**; a possible derivative of the word alchemy, the native name of Egypt, is thought to mean black. Some scholars maintain that Khem is derived from a root meaning wise.<sup>1</sup>

Alchemy is described as chemistry endowed with magic, and alchemists as those who work with metals and keep these operations secret.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the obvious associations of working with metals (silver) and chemistry, there are more subtle and intimate parallels between the art and science of alchemy and darkroom practice.

It is common among darkroom practitioners to consider the process as 'magic'. When most people encounter printing their first photograph in the darkroom, the simple sight of an image appearing on the paper in the developer tray seems 'magical'. Even experienced darkroom practitioners never lose this special feeling. Exhibiting artist, **Siri Hayes** notes, *Watching images come up in developing tray is as mysterious and exciting as any magic show. Perhaps more so as there are no tricks except that the photographic product is the grandest of illusions.*

Distinct from many other forms of photography, darkroom based practice is now specialised, with few people having access to the knowledge, equipment and skills associated with the medium. Like a secret esoteric order, few share this wisdom, and even those willing to teach it may keep special recipes, techniques and discoveries to themselves or within a select dedicated group. Some of this information, although scientific, is not completely understood in rational terms of facts or calculations, but is more related to intuition and perception. It is technical and it is intuitive.

The complex rituals associated with the process allow practitioners to get into a headspace that is conducive to contemplation, bringing forth intuition, allowing space for chance and universal cause and effect. In this art and science there are so many variables with endless possibilities. **Ruth Maddison's** Sun prints are made without camera, film, enlarger or developer. She states, *the tonal range depends on variables like paper stock, length of time in sun or shade, whether the objects are wet or dry.... and an unpredictable magic that happens when light sensitive paper is touched by light.*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Alchemy*, Francis Melville, Quarto Publishing plc, 2002, pg. 6

<sup>2</sup> *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, Kurt Seligman, Pantheon Books, 1948, pg. 84

In this unpredictable environment often mistakes lead to new ideas and create new methodologies. One of the charms of analogue processes is the discovery of beauty through error. **Ponch Hawkes** recalls this as *disasters and wonderful happenstance*. **Claudia Terstappen** remarks *it is the number of variables in the darkroom that leaves the creative process wide open and it is often these inaccuracies caused by chemical reactions that lead to a new meaning. This is what makes analogue processes so valuable and irreplaceable. There are many effects in the analogue process that one can recreate with digital technologies, but not invent.*

Imperfections caused by these variables or 'mistakes' may imbue the image with a 'spirit' and otherworldliness, as if the energy of a place or person has been captured. Black and white photography too has the ability to transcend time, memory and death. **Jane Brown** says *I examine this a lot in my work – landscapes seem to have vestiges or traces of past life and memorials become otherworldly. Claudia Terstappen's work is motivated by the stories, beliefs and histories of the people who live there. Here people spoke about the forest spirits that one should be aware of. B+W images suggest a kind of silence.* At a symbolic level, silence is part of most sacred traditions<sup>3</sup>, and it is part of darkroom practice.

Using analogue processes and working in the darkroom can be aligned to the slow movement, of valuing quality over quantity and returning to a feeling of connectedness. For the images in this exhibition **David Tatnall** has used an 8 x 10 inch pinhole camera and made contact prints. He expresses of this technology, *my reasons for using this slow, cumbersome and fickle means to make photographs is because I feel it conveys the interaction of the sky and water, the presence of wind and the pulse of nature. I am particularly interested in how the long exposures and lack of sharpness make these features merge into something else... (The) simplicity: no lens, shutter or batteries, no need to upgrade, no click or buzz, no flashing lights or mega pixels no viewfinder and no distortion.* For Ruth Maddison, she says of working with hand colouring, *the pleasure of it - I love working on the real object again, and away from the screen.*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Symbols*, Editor: Ami Ronnberg, Taschen, 2010, pg. 676



Clearly there is belief and an element of trust in the medium. **Lloyd Stubber's** images in this exhibition are taken from a one-month round the world trip. On return he processed the 15 rolls of film in his laundry. Perhaps the potential fear of loss is overwhelmed by the sense of anticipation, surprise and the flood of memories that return on seeing the work at a later date, as compared to digital, which is immediate and holds none of the mystery.

Another important distinction of darkroom and analogue practice from other forms of photography is the presence of artist's hand throughout the entire progression of creation to final outcome. In each step of the process, significant choices are made from the many possibilities, from exposing light sensitive film in the camera, developing the film, to printing and finishing the art object. The artist's mark is therefore not only discernible but also inherently valuable. To Ponch Hawkes, *being the maker* is of significance. For Terstappen, *The physicality of arriving at the 'perfect' Gelatin Silver print – with its deep tonal ranges – is something that I highly value.*

Contemporary artists are driving the current resurgence in analogue photography. This is a treasured, magickal<sup>4</sup> and irreplaceable art form. It is with great pleasure that I declare the Strange Neighbour Darkroom open, and may it provide the space and opportunity for the love of darkroom practice to be enjoyed, shared and fostered.

Linsey Gosper, curator, darkroom lover, 2014.

Image credit: (detail) Claudia Terstappen, *Jungle I [Brazil]*, 1991  
from the series *Ghosts at the Jucuruçu*, Gelatin Silver Print, 46 x 68 cm

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<sup>4</sup> Magick, in the context of Aleister Crowley's *Thelema*, is a term used to differentiate the *occult* from *stage magic* and is defined as *the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will*, including both *mundane* acts of will as well as *ritual magic*.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magick\\_%28Thelema%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magick_%28Thelema%29), viewed 11/4/14