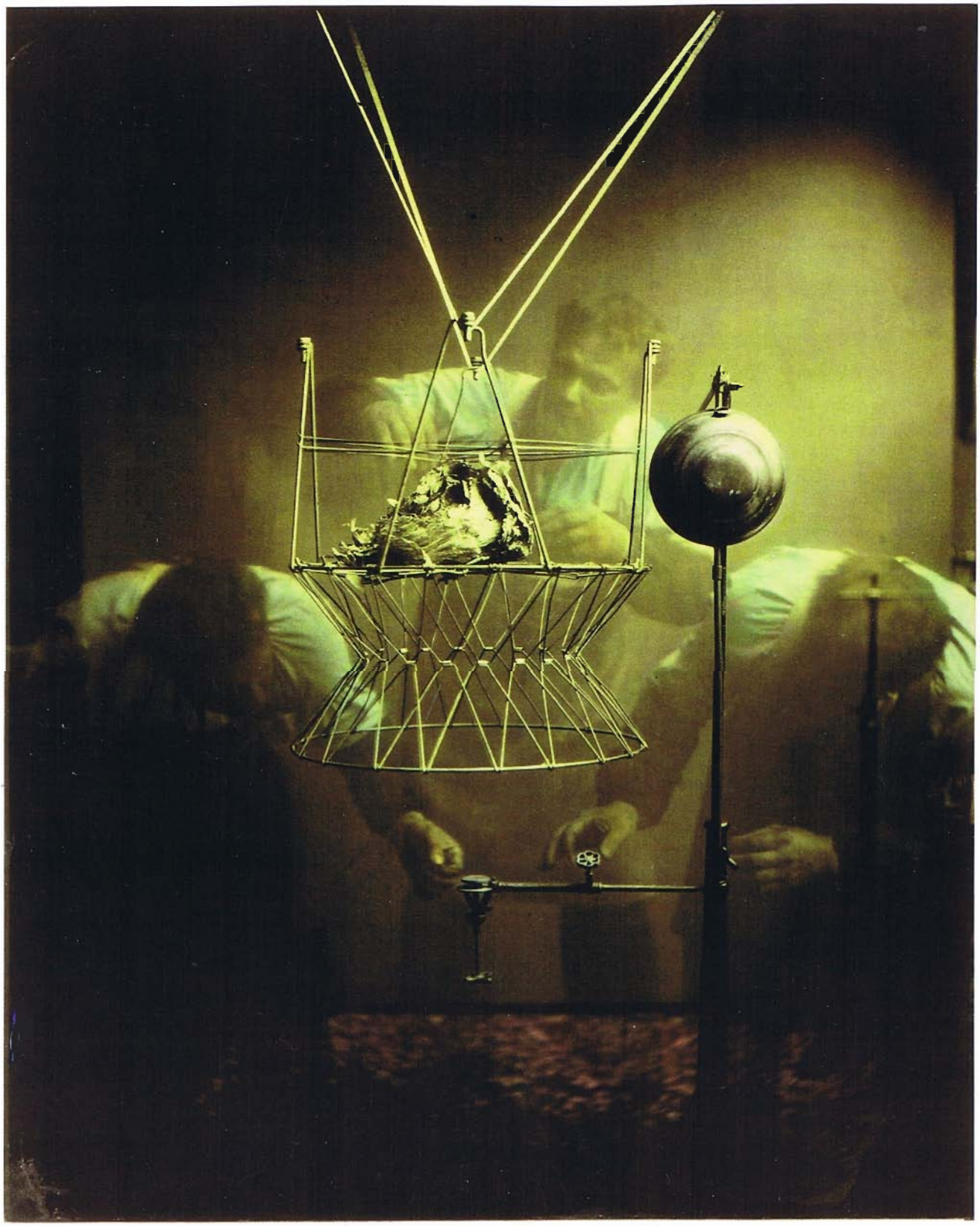

Paper Wasp Extraction. Ruby Ambrotype. 8x10. Unique Plate by Mark Osterman. Hallmark Collection

MARK OSTERMAN

AND

FRANCE SCULLY OSTERMAN

By Sarah Coleman

In the dining room of Mark and France Osterman's spacious house in Rochester, New York, there's an imposing, four-faced clock from the 1880s. Built to sit in a high tower, it ticks off the seconds with a slow, solemn beat, giving the impression that time itself is infinitely relaxed and leisurely. But don't be fooled: things can happen very quickly in the Osterman house. Within a half-hour of my arrival, Mark has produced a still-life collodion ambrotype image from start to finish – doing everything from cutting a 5x7-inch plate from a sheet of window glass, to varnishing the fixed plate with a fragrant mixture of gum and oil of lavender. "The light isn't good in the studio much after two o'clock, so we have to get this done right away," he says by way of explanation, as he hustles me from the basement darkroom to the attic studio.

Widely acknowledged to be world experts in wet-plate collodion photography, the Ostermans have seen this process – and its 19th century relatives like daguerreotype and tintype – explode in popularity over the last two decades. Their own passion has played a large part in the boom. When Mark first started experimenting with collodion in the late 1980s, there were perhaps a dozen people worldwide using the process correctly. Now, as a result of the workshops the Ostermans have taught all over the world, hundreds of photographers have learned to use collodion to produce delicate, moody still-lifes, portraits, and landscapes. One famous student is Sally Mann, who used wet-plate collodion to make images in her books *Deep South* and *What Remains*. Mann calls the Ostermans "masters" of the genre.

Certainly, the intricate, finicky process of wet-plate collodion isn't easily mastered. It takes a steady hand, for example, to coat a large-format glass negative with a thin, even layer of collodion — which has the color and viscosity of good quality maple syrup – and then dip the plate into silver nitrate solution before the collodion has dried. It also takes a practiced eye to calculate exposure times on the Ostermans' 19th century Scovill camera ("We haven't used a light meter since 1992," France confides). And then there's the fact that the plate is fixed with a solution of cyanide that the couple cheerfully confirms is "deadly."

The results, however, are worth the trouble. The Ostermans have been working for over a decade on a series of landscapes that they like to describe as "memories of places you've never been"... a windswept field in Ireland; a crumbling stone barn covered with pigeons; a bombed-out Spanish Civil War town. The subjects might not have much in common, but what draws them together is the Ostermans' aesthetic sensibility, which combines the precision of large format photography with a muted softness. In their landscapes, certain rocks, trees, and buildings might appear in sharp focus, but there's also a blurry vagueness that happens when moving objects are caught in a long exposure, so that swaying branches, birds' wings, and moving water become hazy and indistinct. The effect is striking and slightly uncanny – it's like a dreamscape where some things loom large in the imagination, while others slowly melt into oblivion.

"For me, it's the idea of painting with light," France says. Mark refers to the couple's photography as "photo-humanism," saying that "it's making photographs the way your eyes see things."

This aesthetic separates them from the way their 19th century forebears worked, even though the equipment and process are identical. When photography was first invented, landscapes were usually shot with the maximum depth of field, rendering everything in the frame sharply. "The Victorians would never have shot a building from this close up," says Mark, pointing to his image of an old stone barn. "They would have pulled back, painted out the sky – actually, they probably wouldn't have thought the subject was worth shooting in the first place." France cites one image, Timothy O'Sullivan's 1863 "A Harvest of Death," which shows bodies on a battlefield receding into dimness. "He used a portrait lens outside, which was really unusual then, but because it's such a memorable image, people see it and think of that aesthetic as 19th century photography."

One characteristic of collodion negatives and ambrotypes is "process artifacts," minor flaws that can appear on the plate. Imperfections like fingerprints, drip marks, and scratches are common, and they give the plate an appealingly handcrafted look. The Ostermans like the fact that these flaws can crop up, but don't go out of their way to make "sloppy" plates. "Some people use this process because they like that whole hand-made look," says Mark. "We show the edge of the plate and some of the flaws, but it's not as heavily played as you might see in other artists' work." The Victorians, meanwhile, would probably have retouched or cropped any imperfections out.

In homage to their 19th century predecessors, the Ostermans have renovated their attic top-to-bottom to resemble a Victorian studio. In the studio, which is called Scully & Osterman (France's maiden name is Scully), they've collected an impressive range of vintage equipment. In addition to their Scovill camera, there's a 17-inch Anthony camera, and an anonymous 1880s camera

Virginia Creek. Split toned silver gelatin print made from a 4 1/4 x 5 1/2 collodion negative. Photograph by France Scully Osterman. Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

Tamara. Waxed Salt Print from an 8x10 collodion negative. From the Sleep Series. Photograph by France Scully Osterman. Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

box that the Ostermans use with Dallmeyer lenses of various sizes. There are authentic 19th century posing tables and head braces, which were used to keep arms and heads still during long exposures, and shelves around the studio are lined with props, ranging from old medicine bottles and calipers to a human skull. In the middle of the room sits a huge solar enlarger that can be balanced out of the window on sunny days to make prints. But, Mark warns, "you can become obsessed with the technology. The less equipment you can use, the better."

The collodion process itself is fairly straightforward, if fiddly. It was discovered in 1851, by the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer, who wanted to create a durable, high-quality negative. Previously, Louis Daguerre had found a way of rendering a sharp, one-time-only positive, whereas William Fox Talbot had invented paper calotypes that could be used as negatives, but the quality was poor. In the early 1850s, Archer stumbled upon collodion, which had been invented in the mid-1840s for medical purposes. Made from acid-washed cotton dissolved in a solution of ether and alcohol, it turned out to be the perfect agent to bind silver nitrate onto glass. As well as inventing the process for wet-plate collodion negatives, Archer discovered that developing the plate for less time could produce an ambrotype, or positive image, on glass.

The Ostermans have taken this process and run with it, literally – their 1996 trip to Ireland was the first time that anyone in the modern era had traveled internationally with collodion. On that trip, they made over 120 plates in the field, not counting the many they discarded. "To actually fly someplace, to go to the middle of nowhere and make plates, is quite a challenge," Mark admits. (The combustible, toxic chemicals they use are flown in freight planes; glass negatives come back from the trip "on my lap," says Mark.) In the early 1990s, they'd tested out the portability of their equipment by going to several Civil War reenactments in rural Pennsylvania – but, although they learned a lot about using collodion in the field, they couldn't get excited by shooting gun-toting war reenactors. "The most fun we had was in the evening, when

Delaware Canal. Split toned silver gelatin print made from a 4 1/4 x 5 1/2 collodion negative. Photograph by France Scully Osterman.. Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

we'd sit around the campfire, and I'd play the banjo and France would play fiddle," Mark says.

In fact, Mark – who still picks a mean banjo version of "Arkansas Traveler" — began his working life, as a teenager, by playing banjo tunes on scenic railway tourist trips in New Hope, Pennsylvania. In art school, he studied musical instrument-making and, between 1974 and 1980, made 300 stringed instruments – a skill that's come in handy for building the lightproof boxes the couple uses for silver-coating collodion plates. A man of many talents, Mark is also a keen actor and performer. For many years, he had a thriving side career as Dr. B. Barnabus Bumstead, a 1920s quack doctor whose "celebrated lenape liquid" could supposedly make hair look thicker ("It doesn't actually grow hair, but shrinks the scalp, making the hair move closer together..."). He performed the Bumstead show at county fairs and festivals, selling tin kazoos and humanatone nose flutes, as well as the "lenape liquid" (in reality, honey and water). France, who'd had a career as a biomedical equipment saleswoman and journalist, came on board in 1990 as trick shooter K.T. Oakley. In one part of the show, she'd "shoot" a bullet that Bumstead would catch in his teeth and then spit into an upturned frying pan with a loud "ding."

Dr. Bumstead officially retired in 1999, when Mark was hired as the Photographic Process Historian at George Eastman House in Rochester. But the Bumstead spirit lives on in a set of ambrotypes Mark has created called "Confidence," in which he combines long exposures of 19th century machines with performative elements, so that his ghostly image hovers over odd-looking contraptions that mysteriously whir and blow smoke. In "Pneumatic Capillarator I," for example, an ethereal client sits under a menacing-looking dome as a semi-transparent operator hovers behind him. The effect is eerie, as though the machine has lured a pair of ghosts from the grave, to demonstrate it one more time.

France, too, has an individual body of work: the "Sleep Series," which began serendipitously in 1998, when she caught a quiet, simple image of Mark sleeping. The im-

Belchite at Peace. Split toned silver gelatin print made from a 4 1/4 x 5 1/2 collodion negative. Photograph by Mark Osterman. Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

age's calm beauty intrigued her, so she began inviting friends and colleagues from George Eastman House to come by the studio and take a nap. The results, printed as 8x10 contact salt prints and waxed by hand, are unexpectedly beautiful. "People who pose while they're sleeping expect that their hair will look terrible, and there'll be drool coming out of the side of their mouth, so they're all amazed by the results," Mark says. For France, the series is "about that time of innocence, when you're in a pure state and you're just yourself – in that sense, it's a perfect portrait."

In these works, and in their landscape series, the couple has refined the use of collodion to a rare pitch. They hold themselves to a high aesthetic standard, scrutinizing each plate carefully and rejecting many. Between 1995 and 2002, they also published *The Collodion Journal*, a beautifully produced quarterly in which they'd run contemporary and historical articles about collodion side by side. Featuring Victorian-style fonts and line drawings, *The Collodion Journal* had color images that were tipped-in by hand, making it a true labor of love. "The number of pages was dictated by the size of our bed, where we'd spread them out," Mark remembers. "We'd postpone shipping the journal for a dry day, because if it was humid, the paper would swell, and it would tip the scale into another bracket for postage."

These days, the couple's success as teachers and artists has left them with little free time. A recent teaching expedition took them to the house of 19th century innovator Joseph Nicephore Niepces, who changed history in 1826, when he exposed an asphalt-covered pewter plate to create the world's first photograph, "View from the Window at Gras." Mark has also been contracted to shoot daguerreotypes from the Paris house owned by Louis Daguerre, and the couple recently took part in a documentary film called "Artists and Alchemists," about contemporary artists working with early photographic processes.

Living in Rochester, where George Eastman perfected gelatin dry plates and celluloid roll film, and which is still the world headquarters of Eastman's Kodak company, Mark and France are keenly aware of the need to con-

Fragen Farmstead, Spain. Split toned silver gelatin print from a 4 1/4 x 5 1/2 collodion negative. Photograph by Mark Osterman.Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

serve the 20th century equipment that digital technology is rendering obsolete. Unfortunately, says Mark, this is a concern Kodak doesn't seem to share. "If you go up to Kodak Park, you'll see big empty spaces and piles of rubble" that used to be buildings where paper and film was once produced, he says. "Once they've done with the machines, they slice 'em and dice 'em." Recently, he managed to save an antique coating head machine that was used for making gelatin dry-plate negatives, and he meets regularly with veteran Kodak employees to get as much oral history as he can.

Meanwhile, in his work at Eastman House, Mark does primary research on all kinds of early photographic processes. The job is sometimes amusingly absurd: this week, for example, he will manufacture fifteen paper calotype negatives that will be torn up so that museum conservators can practice restoring them. In this work, historical accuracy is of the utmost importance. Mark and France get excited about new discoveries, like the one they made when they were photographing Civil War reenactments. "If collodion gets shaken, you get little pinholes in the picture," Mark says. "So we can look at 19th century pictures taken in the field, and if there were five negatives made the same day, you can surmise that the one with the most pinholes was made when they first stopped the wagon."

When it comes to their own art, on the other hand, Mark and France are moving with the times. Recently, for example, France took a negative she'd made of an empty bed, sliced the glass plate into five strips, scanned them and printed them life-size digitally on Japanese tissue paper. "I'd wanted to make those prints as silver enlargements with our old solar enlarger," she says. "But I tried for six months, and it wasn't working. Finally, I said, 'Let me try doing them digitally to see if I even like them big.' And when I did them with pigment prints on Japanese tissue, they were gorgeous. So I thought, 'Why am I killing myself trying to use the solar enlarger?'"

Artistic innovators, teachers, guardians of an increasingly complex photographic past: it's a lot to pull off, but the Ostermans do it with panache. Given the way digital technology is taking over, "in ten years' time, we'll be getting calls to give workshops on how to make roll film," Mark says. He rubs his hands together and smiles, as if to say, "Bring it on!" – the more history to explore, the better.