

WaveRocker for Alternative Print Clearing

Background

I am primarily a platinum/palladium printer. My darkroom is configured for making 20 × 24-inch prints, although most of my work is printed at 8 × 11 inches using 14 × 18-inch trays. Recently, I completed a series of handmade books featuring Japanese kitchen tools. Producing hundreds of prints required a highly consistent workflow, and the WaveRocker proved to be an invaluable tool for simplifying print processing.

The following are my observations after using the WaveRocker during four weeks of production printing.

First Impressions

The WaveRocker is a thoughtfully designed and very useful darkroom tool. It arrived well protected in a sturdy box and is both compact and lightweight. Because every darkroom sink is different, the unit must be fitted or aligned for each setup.

Installation in my darkroom was straightforward. I cut a few pieces of leftover 2 × 4 lumber to create a mounting platform, and the entire installation took only a few minutes. Be sure to read the instructions carefully, as the unit is not designed to be submerged in water. I also routed the power cord to keep it safely out of the way and covered the indicator light with black tape to eliminate unnecessary light in the darkroom.

Setup and Operation

The manufacturer provides recommendations for aligning the WaveRocker with the trays to achieve maximum agitation, both side-to-side and front-to-back.

Because I use the standard three-tray palladium clearing sequence, I positioned the WaveRocker so it efficiently agitates the first two clearing trays simultaneously. The third clearing bath does not require the same level of agitation, so processing simply involves moving the print from one tray to the next.

This arrangement allows me to monitor the clearing process while attending to other printing tasks instead of continuously rocking trays by hand. The attached video demonstrates my simple but highly effective two-tray setup.

Advantages

After four weeks of use, I find the WaveRocker's benefits fall into three categories:

- Consistent clearing
- Elimination of repetitive manual work
- Improved workflow and productivity

Consistent Clearing

The WaveRocker provides nearly identical agitation from print to print, resulting in much more consistent clearing.

One useful way to evaluate any clearing process is to test an unexposed but coated sheet of paper. First, clear it manually using your normal technique and evaluate the results. Then repeat the test using the WaveRocker and compare the two.

For an excellent discussion of platinum/palladium clearing, staining, and archival processing, I recommend the Library of Congress video on the subject.

Eliminating the Drudgery

Most alternative process printers learn to manually rock trays because it is simple, inexpensive, and effective. Some even consider it part of the experience of bonding with the print.

After processing a large number of prints, manual tray rocking becomes physically tiring and mentally repetitive. With the WaveRocker handling agitation, I can concentrate on timing and overall workflow instead of continuously rocking trays—and I no longer need an assistant.

During a typical printing session, I have prints moving through all three clearing baths while simultaneously operating three rinse baths. The WaveRocker automates much of this activity, allowing me to focus on other important tasks such as:

- Developing exposed prints
- Mixing or replenishing chemistry
- Cleaning brushes and work surfaces
- Hanging finished prints to dry
- Preparing the next print
- Taking the occasional break for a snack or drink

Improved Productivity

Although I usually print once or twice each week, a normal session consists of 8 to 20 prints.

Previously, producing this volume efficiently required an assistant. With the WaveRocker, I recently coated, exposed, developed, and cleared twelve prints in a single morning while handling all of the associated darkroom tasks myself.

Then I rewarded myself with a well-earned lunch.

Testing and Optimization

Before evaluating the WaveRocker, you should establish a reliable platinum/palladium process with appropriate chemistry and clearing times.

The Library of Congress provides an excellent, in-depth discussion of the chemistry behind proper clearing. Tim Layton also offers a concise implementation guide. Of course, you can simply compare the WaveRocker against your own established workflow.

As part of my normal quality-control routine, I process a step wedge to verify that I achieve both maximum black density and complete clearing to paper white. I also examine an unexposed coated sheet for any evidence of staining.

When first setting up the WaveRocker, I recommend:

- Using water tinted with food coloring to observe agitation patterns.
- Adjusting the unit for the most effective wave action within the tray.
- Determining the optimum position if you plan to agitate two trays simultaneously.

After One Year of Use

I still love the WaveRocker, which is my most reliable darkroom assistant. I'll never go back to manually shaking trays. It is a small form factor motor that doesn't groan under the weight of fully loaded trays or get hot after extended processing sessions.

Summary

The WaveRocker was designed by Mark Nelson, who also created the PDN 31-Step Tablet for alternative process calibration.

I consider the WaveRocker an outstanding addition to my darkroom. It provides consistent clearing, reduces physical fatigue, streamlines workflow, and makes high-volume printing significantly easier. For anyone producing a substantial number of alternative process prints, it is a practical tool that quickly proves its value.

For more information, please visit the developer's website:

<https://precisiondigitalnegatives.com/products/media-and-entertainment-example-product-2>

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Resources for Optimum Palladium Clearing

<https://www.routledge.com/.../Anderson/p/book/9781041253105>

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=pG4qpGllGmc>

<https://timlaytonfineart.com/2024/07/06/clearing-bath-options-my-workflow-for-platinum-palladium-fine-art-printmaking/>

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