

The Devil's in the (Printing) Details

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“You made this yourself?” I’m often asked this question by shoppers, and often I notice a bit of cautious optimism in their voices. After all, we know that computers and copiers do amazing things these days, seemingly at the mere “push of a button.” *It must be so easy to do*, is the hopeful thought.

New desktop ink jet printers and archival inks have opened up a world of opportunity for any artist wanting to self-publish high quality art prints. After trying my hand at this for the past few years, I have learned much about the process, the benefits, and the challenges of making my own art prints. I’m self-taught and definitely not an expert, so I won’t bore you with any real technical details. I’ll stick to the basics, because that’s all I know;

and therein lies the inspiration. If I can do it--anybody else without a real life can too! It’s not so bad. As my husband has said many times, “Where there’s a passionate artist, there’s a way.” Actually, I think he said “fool,” not “artist,” but that’s before his nose got broken.

Painting watercolors is my **real** passion; printing and marketing are what make painting feasible and keep IRS happy. The printing part is much more complex than the painting part. There are so many more variables--hardware, software, tiffs, pixels. If I paint something that doesn’t work, it quickly goes in my reject box on the floor. No fuss. Mishaps on the computer tend to expand in time and energy, like some manic theory of relativity. Watercolor paint is comparatively inexpensive, as is paper. Computer upgrades and repairs aren’t. Brushes never get outdated or need more Ram, rom, or hard drive space. So why punish myself making my own art prints? I’m not sure, but I think it has something to do with being a creative control advocate (surely, not an obsessive control freak). I like being able to make my own adjustments until the print is perfect, according to ME. I have my original to compare to the print, as opposed to sending off a slide or computer file to a printer somewhere in the wide web world. And, mostly, I am willing to pay for my own extensive set up time so I can get it right and have the flexibility to print on demand.



Digital fine-art printing had its beginnings in the late 1980s with the unlikely combination of Graham Nash, his collection of photographs of *Crosby, Stills, and Nash*, and new **Iris** ink jet printing technology. All that, and great music too! Since then, fine art digital printing has evolved from being a prohibitively expensive process available only on room sized printers to the now efficient and affordable desktop printers. The large-format machines are still used by the commercial printers; however, the new archival inks and desktop printers have, according to printer Kevin Rich of *Hunter Editions* in Kennebunk, Maine, “developed to a degree of quality where they are considered by some to be challengers to the Iris’s long held top spot in the fine art Giclée field.”

Which brings us to that intimidating French term for a digital fine-art print, **Gicle`e**. It’s pronounced Zhee-clay, not **Gik**-lee (*like prickly*) as my husband decided after his five other guttural utterances already had me in hysterics. Gicle`e literally means “that which is sprayed”--*ink*, in this case. Thankfully, some bright person figured the French *Gicle`e* sounded better than *sprayed print*. “*Hope you enjoy your new sprayed print, sir.*”

Making a digital print starts with capturing a high-resolution scan or digital photo of the work. If the piece is larger than your scanner capabilities, use a high megapixel digital camera set to “fine” or “high,” a tripod, and as much natural lighting as possible. Save the images as raw or tiff files if that option is available, since jpeg files result in lost data.



My low dollar photo studio includes four floodlights with daylight type bulbs, a digital camera on a tripod, and a surface to attach unframed watercolor paintings to easily. The bare wall would do well, but I found that the rows of holes in this old pegboard stand helped me level my paintings easily. Attach the paintings to the vertical surface using removable poster tack on the back of each of the four corners. This way, it can be repositioned easily and the tack won’t damage your painting. Use a blank, white sheet of paper to measure and calibrate the white balance before taking the

photos, since the lighting may vary each time you shoot. If you don't have a cable release for your camera, use the built in timer so you can avoid any shaking caused by pushing the shutter release button down.

After shooting your photos, upload the image files to your computer and open them in a photo editor as tiffs or raw. You need a good full-featured photo editor such as *Adobe Photoshop*, or even *Photoshop Elements*, so you can make custom adjustments in size, color, levels, sharpness, etc. This process can take a few minutes or few hours, depending on the particular image and your goals. The many variables involved in making adjustments can be complex so it is good to have plenty of time and paper on hand for testing. There are many good web sites and resources for editing help--do a search or go to <http://www.photoshop-help.com/>. If you'd like to learn photo editing **and** keep your sanity, consider taking some official Adobe training or a semester long credit class offered by a local college or university. *Mastering Digital Printing*, by Harald Johnson, available from Amazon.com is a great resource if you just want to do the "read, try, and cry" method that I'm so familiar with.

When your print is finally adjusted and looks absolutely fantastic on the computer monitor, you will need to make a proof. This is where things can get real sticky, since what is see is not usually what you get. A high resolution printer and quality paper give the best results. I have an Epson Stylus Photo 2200 that uses 7 Ultrachrome pigment-based inks (which means I'm always running out of one color or another) and prints up to 2880x1440 dpi. I don't think those numbers really mean much because every printer I've ever seen boasts that it prints at least 3 trillion dpi. Paper affects your print color and quality to a large degree. Epson has several good (i.e. not cheap) art papers available in various sizes. I've found the Epson enhanced matte paper wonderful for reproducing rich, deep colors. A good source for papers, inks, and digital equipment is BH Photo, <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/>.



Finally, when the set-up is complete, the color proofs are perfect, the printer is primed, the paper loaded and ready, and the computer is purring softly. . . .then you press that magical button while secretly praying to the great technology spirit in the sky. Seeing a print emerge just as beautiful as the original piece is a very exiting feeling. Just remember to back up every bit of data frequently and sign up for a Roling session to unkink everything above your waist. The craftsmanship and artistic skill involved in self-publishing is considerable, but is a natural extension of the artist's creative process. Following a painting through from inspiration to packaged print gives the artist a larger hand in the end product--and that's a *good* thing for everyone.

Betsy Bear is a local watercolor artist who has recently set up a studio in her North Pole, Alaska home where she sells her original watercolors, prints, and note cards. Betsy taught in the North Pole area schools for over 20 years, retiring in 2001 to pursue her passion for art. Alaskan florals and landscapes have been her focus, although she also paints still life and figures and does commission work. Betsy's work is available throughout Alaska, but mainly in Fairbanks. She has had many solo and group shows over painting career. She attributes much of her painting success to her membership in the Fairbanks Watercolor Society and the Fairbanks Arts Assn. Her web site is www.betsybearcreations.com