JON GOODMAN

BY ANDREW WILKES

No other method of printing multiple copies of black-and-white photographs compares in subtlety and richness with photogravure. A continuous-tone process so painstakingly exact and complex as to be arcane, it produces prints unequalled in luminosity and dimensional definition. To Jon Goodman-contemporary, photogravure's unquestioned master-what its creators were searching for, "the light-drawn image in ink on paper," is "a mystery of the highest order."

First devised in 1878 by the Czech printer Karl Klic-although the technique also derived from William Henry Fox Talbot's photoglvphic engraving-the process reigned supreme until 1918, after which it precipitously lost ground to quicker, cheaper, mechanical printing methods. By the late forties, despite the fact that such photographic pioneers as Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, and Paul Strand considered photogravure the apotheosis of the philosophical and aesthetic gesture of making a picture, the method had become largely a glorious memory-accorded the same awe as the illumination of manuscripts perhaps, but a memory nonetheless.

Then, in the early seventies, Jon Goodman appeared. Himself a photographer, the Antioch College student found his imagination caught and held by the mystery, and beauty of this all but vanished art. Over the last two decades, he has devoted himself with almost religious fervor to reviving and perfecting the method. He is arguably the only photogravurist working today to realize the dream of making a living solely from it.

THE PROCESS The French term *pbotogravure* traditionally refers to high-contrast photoetching, which produces a strictly

black-and-white print. A photogravure is an ink print, pressed onto paper from a copper plate etched from a film positive. The *heliograph,* or intaglio photoetching, is a tonal process when prepared by means of the Talbot-Klic methods that Jon Goodman employs.

Of the three main varieties of printing processes, the most common for five hundred years was *letterpress,* which is typographic; in letterpress printing, a raised surface is inked and printed, while cutaway areas remain white. *Lithographic* printing, the most popular technique today, depends on the mutual antipathy of oil and water: the image to be printed is ink-receptive, while the blank areas are ink-repellent. Photogravure utilizes the *intaglio* printing process, which obtains tone from recessed areas on the plate that are etched to varying depths, thus holding different quantities of ink. The resulting print produces a continuous range of gray, tones, from very light-almost white in the areas not deeply etched-to rich blacks in the deepest areas, creating an extraordinary tonal gamut not available in silver prints. This range seems to become more expansive, its luminosity more variable, depending upon the ambient light levels of viewing-from the front, from behind, from a distance. The varying density of ink creates profound subtleties in the print; in fact, it is not uncommon for photographers to discover previously unseen details from their negatives in photogravures.

THE STUDENT Both as a photographer and gravurist, Jon Goodman is a self-admitted Romantic in the late-nineteenth-century tradition of William Morris. He has always resolutely rejected the current and fashionable in favor of, as he puts it, "the philosophy of craft-of making something well, of incorporating an aesthetic and vision which deepens the power of each picture." Early on, the young photographer demonstrated his diametric opposition to prevailing counterculture aesthetics by selecting the 4-by-5 view camera over the more popular 35-millimeter model. Struck by the pristine clarity of its large-format negative, he set out to master perspective, rise and fall, shift, tilt, and the swing of the view

camera, using back-country settings as his subjects. But Jon Goodman's greatest, most life-altering discovery was still to come.

While in high school, Goodman had been enormously impressed by Paul Strand's "Mexican Portfolio"-considered with *Camera* Work and the Stieglitz gravures to be the most important work in photogravure ever done. Then, in 1971, at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, he was able to view closely Strand's original prints. The experience would transform him: the pursuer of perfection had glimpsed his grail. Subsequently, Goodman was awarded, through Antioch, the prestigious Thomas J. Watson Foundation Fellowship, which funded a year of independent postgraduate study and travel abroad. His course was clear-he would spend the year learning photogravure.

Realizing that ambition, however, was far more tortuous than Goodman could ever have imagined; he wrote countless letters attempting to locate practicing photogravurists, but was invariably disappointed. "It was something that was literally dead, " he recalls, "and such a mystery, that simply trying to find out where I could go to learn, who knew about it was almost impossible. " But Goodman was a man with a mission who would not be denied.

Following his graduation in 1976, he scoured Europe for a place to study, buoyed by his bible, Herbert Dennison's A *Treatise On Photogravure* (first published in 1865 and reprinted **in** 1974 by Visual Studies Workshop). Eventually, he happened upon the Centre Genevoise de Gravure Contemporaine in Geneva, Switzerland, a printmaking establishment that made its presses, etching room, rudimentary- basement darkroom, and vacuum table available to him. "The way I learned to do photogravure," he remembers, "was to make every mistake possible and find the solution." Still, after three frustrating months, Goodman's vision quest began to bear fruit: he had made his first successful gravure plate.

At the end of 1977, Goodman met with the Atelier de TailleDouce in Saint Prex, Switzerland. Although the workshop's raison d'être was making very fine à *la poupée prints*-multicolor engravings made in one pass of a press-the artisans expressed an interest in collaborating with him on photogravure. They were engravers and painters, while he was a photographer, but working with them enhanced Goodman's perspective and versatility in printing. The aspiring photogravurist was learning his craft.

THE CRAFTSMAN Intent on making photogravures, Goodman returned to New York in 1978, and, after talking with galleries, artists, and publishers, contacted the Aperture Foundation. This felicitous meeting resulted in an invitation by the foundation's director, Michael Hoffman, to test the process on a series of Paul Strand photographs. Goodman felt uneasy about the project since up until then he had worked only from his own negatives; but passion prevailed, and his work commenced.

Goodman's first Strand gravures, *Fisherman, Gaspe* and *Iris, Maine,* were made in collaboration with Strand's master printer, Richard Benson, in Newport, Rhode Island. Strand had died in 1976, but Goodman says, "Benson knew each negative b), heart." The test, which was to take two weeks, stretched into three months, at the end of which he had the first plate.

Goodman-with just enough money, to feed his dog, if not always himself-was able to remain in Newport largely due to the generosity of Benson and his family. Then Hoffman suggested the gravurist relocate to Millerton, New York-where Aperture's Strand Archive was situated-and talked of establishing the Photogravure Workshop, to be started up under the aegis of and with the financial aid of Aperture.

At Millerton, Goodman began resurrecting "The Early Years: Edward Steichen," the photographer's last great project, which Steichen had asked Hoffman to undertake in 1968. The first plate had been well crafted and successful, but subsequent

ones failed; ten years later, the portfolio remained unfinished. Goodman traveled to Germany and Switzerland on stipend from Aperture to iron out details, then, back in America, arranged to make the plates in Benson's studio. Creating the twelve plates took one full year. The portfolio was printed at Goodman's alma mater, the Atelier de Taille-Douce, where the gravurist stayed for another year while the work was in process. The production of the portfolio was an extraordinary feat: twelve plates, six hundred prints per plate, totaling 7,200 final prints.

Once the project was completed in 1981, Goodman settled in Millerton, living in the home of Hazel Strand, Paul Strand's widow. Committed to ensuring that the photogravure process so cherished by her late husband would not be lost, Hazel joined Aperture as a Goodman patron, helping him purchase equipment and supplies. It was here that he finally custom-designed and supervised the construction of a press by a master machinist in Millerton from old Swiss plans. The Photogravure Workshop had come to be.

THE MASTER During the Millerton period (19781984), Goodman produced in collaboration with Aperture the portfolios "The Formative Years: Paul Strand 1914-1917," "The Golden Age of British Photography," and the aforementioned "The Early Years: Edward Steichen." He also produced single gravure prints, including: *The Spinner,* by W. Eugene Smith; *Migrant Mother,* by Dorothea Lange, and *Wire Wheel,* by Paul Strand. All the while, he went on refining his technique, imparting a look and level of quality unique to his gravures, while maintaining fidelity to the photographer's vision far beyond what anyone thought possible.

In the fall of 1984, Goodman moved the Photogravure Workshop to its permanent home in Hadley, Massachusetts, a thriving arts center affording him both solitude and community. He continues working with Aperture, having recently produced the Paul Strand *White Fence* gravure, made from the original catalog negative and unpublished to date, and developing the large-format Hill and Adamson portfolio. At the same time, he pursues such independent assignments as printing photographs

by Robert Mapplethorpe, Joel-Peter Witkin, Brassai, Walker Evans, William Clift, and *Andre* Kert6sz, among others. "Somehow or other, people find me," he notes. He also perseveres with his own photography, examples of which appear here.

When asked what has motivated him to struggle so long for perfection and sacrifice so much to concentrate on photogravure, Goodman replies, "The pursuit of *a* mystery: a beauty dreamed of, the indescribable effect on a man's soul of the marriage of ink and paper, born of **a** technical discipline, but whose magic lies in its very presence and effect on the viewer. Or," he adds wryly, " maybe it's as simple as stubbornness."

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