

# aperture



## The Darkroom RIP



by Martin Parr

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
MICHEL CAMPEAU

Some subjects for contemporary photography seem distinctly unpromising. Consider Paul Shambroom's series on town meetings, or the Typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher. But, as such photographers show, one of the medium's most endearing characteristics is that the simplest and most mundane idea can become engaging, given the correct attention and treatment.

Most photographers have spent hours and days in that peculiar environment known as the darkroom. Here, prints are magically created, using chemicals and light. Darkrooms are very private spaces—also rather smelly and claustrophobic. It would be difficult to imagine a less promising subject matter for a series of photographs. And yet Michel Campeau, who has visited more than seventy-five darkrooms in his native Canada, has produced a stunning set of images.

For a photographer like myself—who in fact has not worked in a darkroom for more than twenty years—these images are horribly familiar. The fix stains in the sink, the eerie red light (reminiscent of a brothel), the wonky enlarger, and a profusion of strips of different-color tapes holding the whole thing together. There are shelves full of unopened photo-paper and a variety of negative files. There is the water, gushing through with strange noises and always ending up where it

shouldn't. The prints hanging on various lines with plastic or wooden pegs.

I feel lucky to have escaped . . . and yet there is something very alluring about these images; they make me feel nostalgic for those strange rooms. I did not know I missed the darkroom until I saw these photographs. In a few years' time, these places will inevitably be extinct. Who in their right mind would want to lock themselves away and play with chemicals, when today an inkjet printer can render a print of quality equal to that of a traditional analogue print (and of superior archival durability)?

But apart from their subject, why are these images so strong? It is their simplicity, strong design, and—shot at such close range—their intimacy. The details, closely examined, say more than a wider view can convey. We also know this is a thorough and rigorous exploration, not only by the number of darkrooms visited, but because, like those fix stains, you can just smell it.

These photographs show the passing of an era. As digital production takes hold to a greater and greater extent, we will look back at these images and mourn the darkroom's passing. 📍

All photographs Untitled, from the series Darkroom, 2005–6.  
Photographs courtesy the artist



















