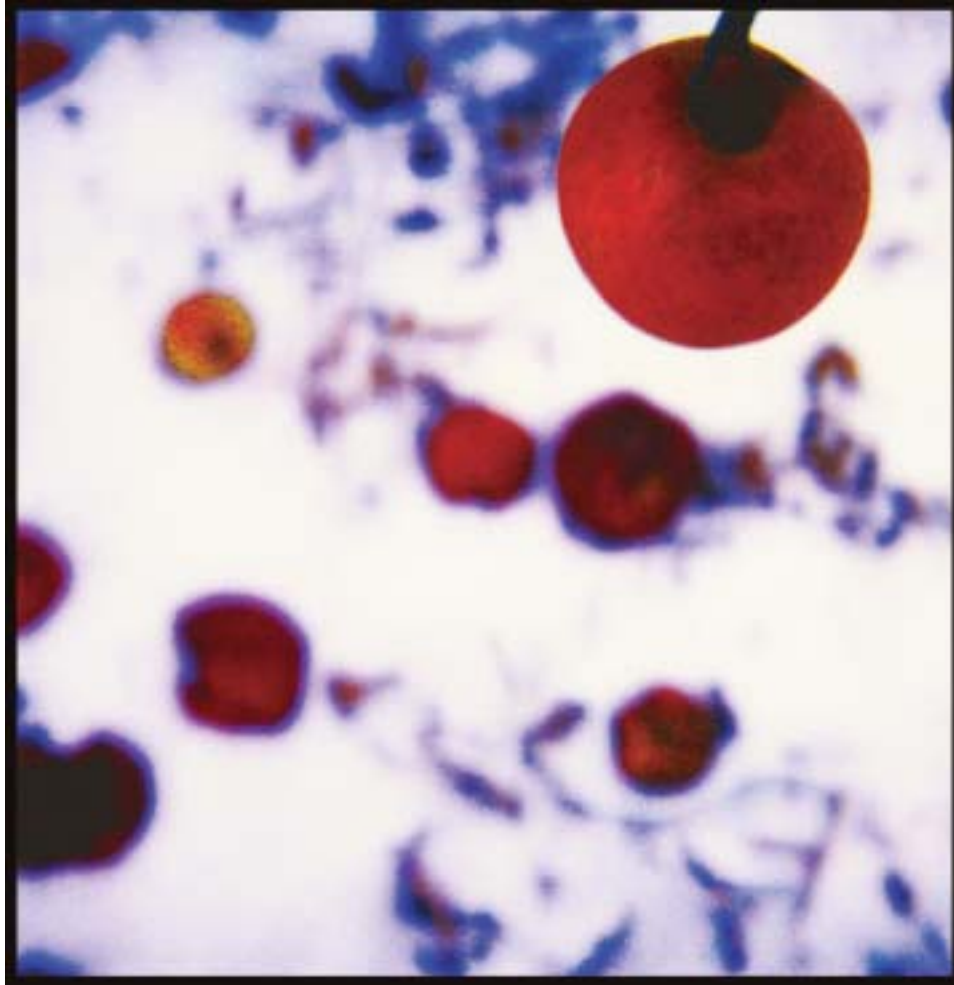


# Stephen Schaub's Hybrid Haiku

by Eve Ogden



Apple, 2005. ©Stephen Schaub

Who says you can't have it both ways? Photographic artist Stephen Schaub is making a name for himself with a unique brand of photography that is equal parts digital and traditional.

From his use of rare Japanese Gampi paper, to cutting edge software and a 54-inch wide digital printer, self-taught innovator Stephen Schaub employs an impressive spectrum of tools and resources in the creation of his hybrid photographic artwork.

"The purpose of digital is not to try to equal traditional materials in a one-to-one fashion," says Schaub, "In my opinion, that's a meaningless conversation. Rather, digital enables the artist to explore ways of working that were never before possible."

In Schaub's case that kind of innovation involves an exciting

blend of old and new technologies and materials that make up his unique hybrid process. Initially with his black-and-white *Digital Holgaroid* series (*CameraArts*, February/March 2005), and now in his most recent color *Haiku Series*, he is achieving startling results by combining low-tech input with extreme high quality output.

Using a Polaroid positive as his starting point, which he terms his "sketch," Schaub scans the print and uses digital processes to modify the image toward a pre-visualized "emotional idea" of the final image.

"My students are often surprised to find out my method of working in Photoshop. I don't save multiple versions or work in layers," Schaub says. "I am a firm believer in 'a card laid is a card played.' Since I work this way, without comparing alternate versions, they also ask me how I know when a particular image

is 'finished.' I feel an image is finished when it is not just visually complete but also emotionally complete. I view the manipulation of the file like a musical performance or like calligraphy. It is an intuitive thing and hard to explain beyond that."

Schaub's 2004 publication, *Through a Glass Darkly* (Indian Hill Gallery of Fine Photography), featured 25 "Digital Holgaroids" derived from Polaroid positives shot with a variety of modified Holga cameras: inexpensive plastic cameras which are known for their individual, idiosyncratic nature. The result is a collection of landscapes and still-lives which are highly symbolic and evocative, and which celebrate the unpredictabilities and imperfections of the photographic process.

His current *Haiku* series continues his visual exploration, this time in color and beginning with positives from a variety of different Polaroid cameras. Again, there is a focus on lyrical symbolism and potency of the natural subject in celebration of the "joy of imperfection" inherent to his photographic process.

Each *Haiku* image is, as Schaub describes, a "meditation on the emotional energy of the original subject." Like the seventeen-syllable poetic form from which the series takes its name, the images are intended to epitomize "depth within brevity." Image titles like *Rock*, *Leaf #2* and *Reed*, reflect and amplify this distillation of subject.

Final *Haiku* artworks take the form of luminous 40x40-inch prints on translucent Gampi (14 gsm), one of the rarest and oldest of Japanese papers. Due to the extreme enlargement from the original Polaroid, round pebbles of chemistry are made visible, transforming color into shape and subject. Pointillist-like, each work's impression differs radically depending on viewing perspective. Prints are then finished, without glass, in custom black lacquer frames.

"When people see the *Haiku* prints in person the first thing they say is that they've never seen anything like this work before," says Schaub. "The second thing is they ask whether they are lit from behind. No matter what light they are displayed in, these prints seem to radiate from within. This is also why I ultimately chose to eliminate the glass. Even multi-coated Den Glass tended to mute this ephemeral, translucent effect somewhat and also to hide the innate imperfections of the Gampi which for me are an integral part of the finished piece—no two prints are ever exactly alike." After consulting with a series of industry conservation experts, Schaub made the decision instead to coat the image surface with multiple layers of UV lacquer, which, in combination with his particular choices of ink and paper, would offer extreme longevity.

Not originally intended for digital printing and by its nature an extremely delicate and non-uniform surface, the use of the Gampi paper presented a challenge to Schaub's printing capabilities. The problem was resolved by the introduction of specialty software by ErgoSoft, combined with the "d'Vinci Solution" pro printer.

"ErgoSoft's software is an incredible innovation in the printing industry," Schaub says, "because it works with the user to whatever degree of control they are looking for. It works as well as a simple stand-alone RIP as it does for those like me, who are creating entire printing environments (.icc) from scratch."



Grass, 2004. ©Stephen Schaub



Leaves, 2005. ©Stephen Schaub

Dovetailing with this software is the "d'Vinci Solution": a Roland Hi-Fi Jet Pro II, which has been modified by ErgoSoft software for extreme high-end fine art printing.

"I had been satisfied with my previous printer," explained Schaub, "until I saw what the d'Vinci Solution could do for the *Haiku* images—the new prints quite literally blew away anything I had ever done before. The tone was richer, the detail was better, the colors unbelievably more vibrant. There was no going back; I began reprinting my first *Haiku* images immediately and reconceptualizing what I was able to do with the en-

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*Branches, 2005.* ©Stephen Schaub

tire series.”

Importantly, at 54-inches wide, the d’Vinci allowed Schaub an unprecedented size for his work, as well as the capacity to handle the alternative printing papers he was exploring. The 1440x1440 variable-dot reproduction allowed the retention of shadow detail and tonality previously unreachable, in most instances. And, crucially, the printer employs a unique 12 color ink set: in addition to the standard CMYK with dilutions of cyan and magenta, it uses primaries of orange, green, and four additional dilutions of black, making it the industry’s widest archival color gamut.

“No one element in my system is the magic bullet, but it is how all the separate components work together that make the end artworks possible,” Schaub said. “If the finished piece is like a symphony, then the printer, my software, the choice of paper, and input devices are all the instruments of the orchestra. No one piece can be neglected, or the entire performance will suffer.”

Coming from a strictly traditional, wet chemistry background, specializing in panoramic formats and elaborate toning techniques, Schaub’s digital expertise is entirely self-taught. After receiving his BFA in photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology in the pre-digital era, Schaub experimented with digital technology on his own for years, while continuing with his traditional work for both fine art and commercial assignments.

“Although everyone talks about how quickly things are moving in the world of digital—which is true—it also took many years for digital to get to a place now where it can stand on its own as a medium, in terms of permanence and detail. Digital printing is particularly interesting because it isn’t limited to photography by any means—it can be interpreted in many ways as a whole new art form for all artists to engage with: painters, printmakers, and so on,” Schaub explains, “even as more and more traditional papers and chemistries are being eliminated from the market, with the explosion in only the last few years of technology in the digital realm we can see a liberation for the photographer who was previously limited to that one kind of paper or film that was available at the store.”

Even so, Schaub admits that the path from traditional to digital is not necessarily a clear or easy one—especially for the self-taught. Accordingly, he has recently agreed to serve as a “Yellowhouse Master” by the innovative company Yellowhouse, whose mission is to provide support to the digital printmaking community. For a monthly fee, Yellowhouse members receive technical support, discounts on paper, ink and other related products, as well as a monthly, renewable license for ErgoSoft software.

Schaub says, “I’m a big fan of Yellowhouse, which is all about a community of artists sharing information and ideas, working with the best materials and software available, in the pursuit of the best quality prints. What is remarkable about the Yellowhouse membership is that, because it has a variety of partner businesses and professional ‘Masters,’ the technology and expertise to make the finest prints possible is made affordable for those for whom it would ordinarily be out of reach.”

This is due in part to the fact that monthly renewable software memberships eliminate large onetime expenses of purchasing software outright. Automatic monthly updates also en-



Reed, 2004. ©Stephen Schaub

sure that all users have the most current working version. (By way of clarification, Schaub points out that Yellowhouse does not currently offer the d’Vinci Solution as part of their membership.)

Schaub joins five other masters of digital imaging profiled on the Yellowhouse website who are available for consulting through Yellowhouse and who will be featured speakers and consultants at symposiums across the country and around the world.

“Because of the nature of the industry right now, things are wide open,” Schaub says. “It’s a very exciting time in the digital printing world, and ultimately it will enable artists to think in entirely new ways and create work that looks different from anything we’ve ever seen before. It’s quite literally a Gold Rush era for those who are willing and able to make that leap—the possibilities are limitless.”

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Stephen M. Schaub is a Yellowhouse master photographer and one of 10 featured artists on Polaroid’s official website. He is the author of two published collections of his photographs and is represented by the Indian Hill Gallery of Fine Photography in Pawlet Vermont, Gretchen Rose of Johns Island, Florida, and at the Galerie Baudoin Lebon in Paris, France. For more information about Stephen M. Schaub please visit [www.stephenschaub.com](http://www.stephenschaub.com).

Additional links:

[www.ergosoftus.com](http://www.ergosoftus.com)

[www.yellowhouseonline.com](http://www.yellowhouseonline.com)

[www.rolanddga.com](http://www.rolanddga.com)

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