



# ASTRA VELUM

*hand-printed photogravures*

FRITZ LIEDTKE

*www.fritzliedtke.com*



April, a freckled woman whom I photographed for this series, told me a story from her childhood. One day after playing outside, her grandmother asked her to go wash up. She went to the bathroom and did so, but grandma wasn't satisfied. "Your face isn't clean! Go scrub it some more!" The young girl was distraught, for all that was left on her skin were her freckles, and no amount of scrubbing would make them go away.

While many people view freckles as an aberration or blemish, my response is the opposite. I find them enchanting, unique, even exotic. More than once, while photographing for this series, a model thanked me for making something beautiful out of what they often viewed as a flaw.

This series is hand-printed by myself as a limited edition set of photogravures. I've used photogravure for this series for several reasons.

In the digital age, I feel more and more distant from the handmade quality of photography—the manual labor of developing film and dodging and burning prints. But even darkroom work—which I never particularly enjoyed in and of itself—created a product that was made by hand, but showed no evidence of it. For this reason I'm drawn to processes like tintype, encaustic, and photogravure, which show clear evidence of the artist's involvement with the final product.

Until now, I've not been a process person; I'd rather shoot and edit, and then have a print magically appear (which, of course, is the draw of inkjet printing). But I've found a real pleasure in the process of printing photogravure. While it's the most complicated printing process I've ever pursued, it does have its advantages. I enjoy the craftiness of it—cutting out handmade paper for the chin-collé, inking and wiping the plate just so, the steady rhythm of turning the crank on the press, pulling the print off the plate and catching my breath, stunned by its beauty. I like the rounded corners of the plate, the indentation of the plate in the paper, the traces of unwiped ink at its edges, the occasional fingerprint. Like freckles, these are not flaws, but beauty marks.

Photogravure also offers a final product imitated but not reproduced by any other photographic printing medium: chin-collé. This method of impressing a second paper (a handmade Japanese paper) in between the ink and the backing paper is a traditional technique in printmaking. It allows me to create a unique print, with glowing warm high values (from the warm Japanese paper), placed against the white of the backing paper. The result is a hand-made print whose depth and luminescence is unmatched by any other photographic print-making process. As Melanie McWhorter of Photo-Eye writes, "These lovely, luminescent, one-of-a-kind prints really must be seen to be appreciated."

I'm also drawn to the tactile nature of a photogravure. The papers used are often handmade, with a texture meant to be felt with your fingertips. The ink embedded in the paper also gives texture to the image itself. For these reasons, handmade photogravures seemed the perfect medium for a series which, at its essence, explores the beauty of surface textures: human skin and its freckles and scars, like a thin veil of stars.

This limited-edition series is available for show, publication, and purchase. A portfolio of 12 prints, with cover page, is bound in a custom box, and offered in an edition of 12. An educational discount is offered. A set of limited edition individual prints is also available. Please inquire for more information: [fritz@fritzphoto.com](mailto:fritz@fritzphoto.com).

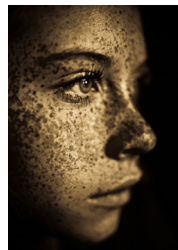
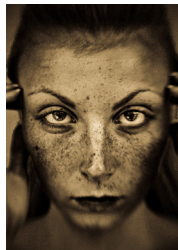
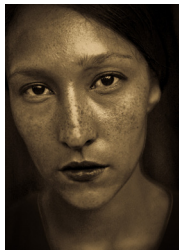
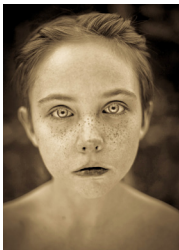
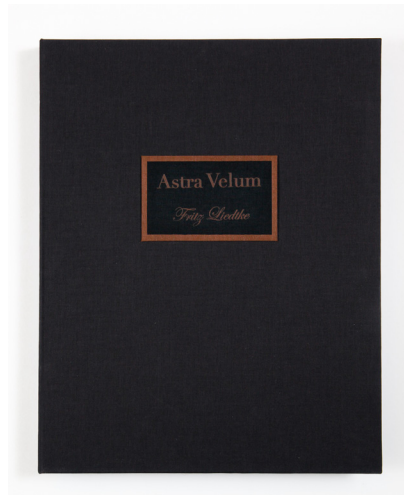


# THE ASTRA VELUM PORTFOLIO

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The limited-edition *Astra Velum Portfolio* is a set of 12 handmade photogravures, housed in a custom archival clamshell box, with a title page/colophon. The portfolio is limited to an edition of 12. Pricing begins at \$5500. A 10% discount is offered to educational collections.



# PRINTING ASTRA VELLUM



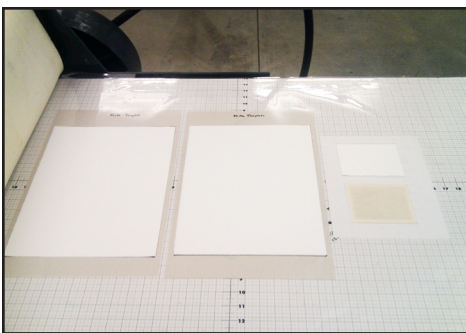
Inking the plate.



Inked plates on the press bed.



Preparing the chin-colle paper.



Plates and paper assembled and ready to press.



The unique result.

Along with my interest in other alternative processes, I've been intrigued by photogravure for many years, since I first learned of it studying printmaking in college. Several years ago, I spoke with master photogravurist Russell Dodd about his work, which inspired me to learn this beautiful--but complicated--historical process. The result: this new portfolio of photogravure prints, *Astra Vellum*.

*Astra Vellum* is a series of haunting portraits of women with freckles. Texture is an integral part of photogravure--both the lovely texture of the image, and the texture of the fine-art handmade papers on which photogravures are printed. Since freckles and skin are all about texture, photogravure was my medium of choice for this series.

The process of making photogravures is quite complex, with many opportunities for error. Beginning with a strong image, the digital file is prepared for printing by applying an appropriate adjustment curve and printing color in Photoshop. The positive image file is then printed on a clear film medium, such as Pictorico.

Making the printing plate consists of several steps, in which the positive image is exposed to the light-sensitive plate via an UV-light exposure unit. It is then 'developed' and the darker areas of the image are washed out, engraving the plate. Once the plate is hardened, it is ready for printing.

Printing an intaglio plate involves inking and wiping the plate with intaglio inks (composed of carbon, mineral pigments, and linseed oil). The plate is set face-up on the press bed, and is ready for paper.

Paper selection is very important in printmaking. For *Astra Vellum*, I chose 2 papers to work with. The first, Rives BFK, is the classic standard in printmaking. It is a thick cotton paper, mold-made, with deckled edges. The second paper I've used is a handmade Japanese paper called Kitikata. I use the Kitikata to create a chin-colle ('Chinese collage'), a process in photography unique to photogravure. The chin-colle paper must be cut to fit the size of the printing plate. Once it is cut, it is sprayed with water, and the back side of the paper is sprinkled with wheat starch. Then the paper is placed face-down (the non-wheat-starch side) on the plate. Over top of the chin-colle paper and plate, the backing paper (Rives BFK, also moistened) is placed. Thus, as the plate and papers are run through the press, the ink from the plate prints on the Kitikata, which is simultaneously embossed into and glued to the Rives.

In this way, I create a unique print, with glowing warm high values (from the Kitikata), placed against the white of the Rives paper. The result is a hand-made print whose depth and beauty is unmatched by any other photographic print-making process.

# A PHOTOGRAVURE PRIMER



William Henry Fox Talbot, *Dandelion Seeds*.  
1840. Photogravure.

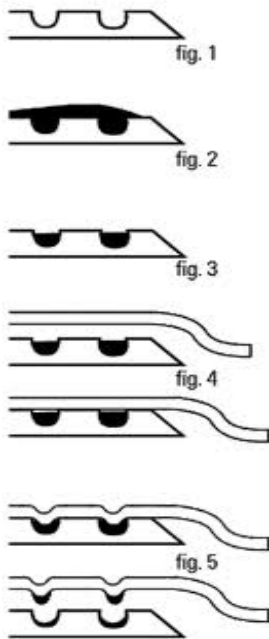


Illustration of inking and printing a plate,  
showing how ink fills deeper holes to create  
darker values.



Strand, Paul, *The Mexican Portfolio*, 1933  
5 x 6.25 in, Photogravure

Photogravure is an intaglio printmaking process whereby an etched plate is inked and printed on paper, resulting in a high quality intaglio print that can reproduce the detail and continuous tones of a photograph.

The earliest forms of photogravure were developed in the 1830s by the original pioneers of photography itself, Henry Fox Talbot in England and Nicéphore Niépce in France. They were seeking a means to make prints that would not fade, by creating photographic images on plates that could then be etched. The etched plates could then be printed using a traditional printing press. These early images were among the first photographs, pre-dating daguerreotypes and the later wet-collodion photographic processes. Fox Talbot worked on extending the process in the 1850s and patented it in 1852 ('photographic engraving') and 1858 ('photoglyphic engraving'). Photogravure in its mature form was developed in 1878 by Czech painter Karel Klíč, who built on Talbot's research.

Photogravure registers a wide variety of tones, through the transfer of etching ink from an etched plate to special dampened paper run through an etching press. The unique tonal range comes from photogravure's variable depth of etch, that is, the shadows are etched many times deeper than the highlights. Unlike half-tone processes which merely vary the size of dots, the actual quantity and depth of ink wells are varied in a photogravure plate and are often blended into a smooth tone by the printing process.

Photogravure practitioners such as Peter Henry Emerson and others brought the art to a high standard in the late 19th century. This continued with the work of Alfred Stieglitz in the early 20th century, especially in relation to his publication *Camera Work* (whose photogravures were mass-printed by machine). This publication also featured the photogravures of Alvin Langdon Coburn who was a fine gravure printer and envisioned his photographic work as gravures rather than other photo-based processes.

The speed and convenience of silver-gelatin photography eventually displaced photogravure, which fell into disuse after the Edward S. Curtis gravures in the 1920s. One of the last major portfolios of fine art photogravures was Paul Strand's *Photographs from Mexico* from 1940, reissued as *The Mexican Portfolio* in 1967 by DeCapo Press. Photogravure is now actively practiced in only several dozen workshops around the world.

View more of *Astra Velum*, at [www.fritzluedtke.com](http://www.fritzluedtke.com).