

Darkroom Tour

Stephen Johnson's Digital Darkroom

by Steve Simmons



Author's Note: The purpose of the *Darkroom Tour* is to give readers a view into another photographer's darkroom and darkroom practices. The use of brand names or the description of a photographer's working methods are not intended as recommendations, but simply as information.

Stephen Johnson's darkroom is different than the ones used by most of us. It is always dry, and it travels with him. Steve uses a digital capture back on his cameras in place of exposing and processing film in a wet darkroom back home. His conversion to digital capture came in 1994 after meeting Michael Collette, the inventor of the Dicomed and Better Light digital capture backs.

"When I first went out ...with Michael Collette in January 1994, we shot a bunch of film and we shot with his digital camera. That was the last day I bothered to shoot film. What I saw at the end of the day so completely amazed me in terms of color accuracy, resolution, details, and dynamic range, that I never wanted to shoot film again."

Johnson's traveling darkroom consists of a Macintosh PowerBook computer, a Better Light or Dicomed digital capture back, and a 4x5 camera. He also frequently travels with a small digital printer in his van, although his finished digital prints are made in his studio. For the last three years, Johnson has been photographing the National Parks with the ultimate goal of producing a book. The title of his project is "With a New Eye: The Digital National Parks Project."

Johnson has also worked with film. His previous books were about Mono Lake and California's Central Valley. "I've been a photographer for more than twenty-five years, and I did not fully realize how much time and energy I had spent trying to cope with the failings of

silver as a means of recording light."

The historical ironies of his work do not escape Johnson's consciousness. He is working with a traveling darkroom in areas where photographers such as Carleton Watkins and others traveled with *their* darkrooms in the mid and late 1800s.

"In this very valley (Yosemite), Carleton Watkins was making photographs in 1863 and 1864. He saw his results on the spot. He was able to do something I didn't get to do anymore because I was using film that had to be processed, sometime later, some place separate from the experience of making the photograph. So, when this digital process came along, suddenly I could see my photograph as I was making it, wherever I happened to be; there was this inevitable reach back through time, to remember what all of the early landscape photographers had been able to do."

The process for Johnson is that, after setting up the camera, he does a quick scan and sees the image on the screen of his computer. He can then check the dynamic range, color balance, sharpness, etc., and make whatever adjustments he desires before making the final scan. The image is then stored in the computer for later use back in his studio and darkroom.

"The act of printing is now done in the light, not in the dark. I like that, because the whole subject matter of photography is light. I am in the light when I am printing now. That's the way it should be." ▲



Top left: A view of Stephen Johnson's camera and darkroom equipment. Bottom: Johnson is shown removing a finished print from the Iris printer in his home studio.