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A Brief History of My Darkrooms

By Lina Bessonova

SGC thanks Lina Bessonova for jumping in at the last second for the Japan Camera Hunter, who was unfortunately unable to contribute this issue due to an injury. Although currently unable to access all of her image files due to her location during Corona lockdown, she was able to find snapshot illustrations, for which we are very grateful!



Florence, first darkroom

"...Mississippi four, Mississippi five!" I click a button, and the enlarger light goes off. I lift a mat board that serves as an easel, and the print goes into the developer. Overexposed, again—my five "Mississippis" aren't extremely precise, but they are the only timer I have in the university darkroom.

Fast forward five years, and I'm choosing a school for my Master's in Photography based on the availability of a well-equipped printing space. I'm spending the next two years in Florence, Italy with the best setup imaginable: well-maintained 4x5" enlargers with nice easels and timers. Even the developer, stop, fixer, and hypo clear are pre-mixed, standing in huge canisters.

Needless to say, I graduated thinking of myself as a super printer and a darkroom master—an illusion which didn't last long; the very first small darkroom I set up turned out to be a challenge, even with substantial help. Ventilation broke, pipes leaked, humidity levels reached 80%, and the chemicals almost boiled in the Tuscan summer heat. For at least a few months I was barely printing, busy discovering new technical surprises and creative fixes.

Just as the workflow stabilized, a possibility to rent a bigger space next door presented itself. So, the challenge of setting up another darkroom arose again. Thermostatted sinks were one stupid investment—it's never really cold enough to need heating in Florence, and the sinks weren't designed to cool. They ended up being a swimming pool for a family of rubber ducks. LED light sources for enlargers were another not very well thought-through idea, as most white LED light spectrums are so different from tungsten light that it is impossible to get the right contrast on multigrade papers. All of this took months of experimentation,

and during that time I could only do the most necessary printing. Anything remotely personal and artistic was postponed until better times.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, my mom moved to a house with a big spare room in the attic. To make the motherland more attractive for me to visit, she offered to set up a darkroom. My friend found a beautiful 4x5" Durst enlarger in perfect shape, and the rest of the setup was easy. No overheating issues, freshly laid pipes, a big space for perfect separation of "dry" and "wet" surfaces, and huge drying racks made from mosquito nets. It is an excellent workspace with one downside: I barely ever visit Russia.



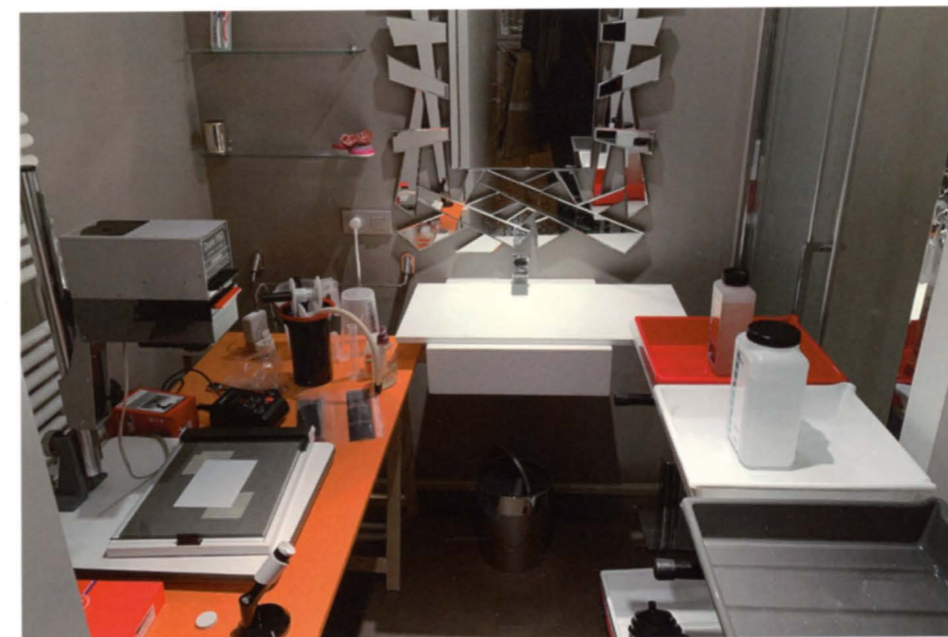
Moscow darkroom



Florence, second darkroom

Very soon after the bigger darkroom in Florence was finished, I realized it was cheaper and better to buy a space rather than pay rent, especially since all the issues of the rented space (no heat insulation, high humidity and water pipes from the 80s) were impossible to change. I had the illusion (again) of being capable of designing and doing everything perfectly from scratch. And (you guessed it) I was wrong.

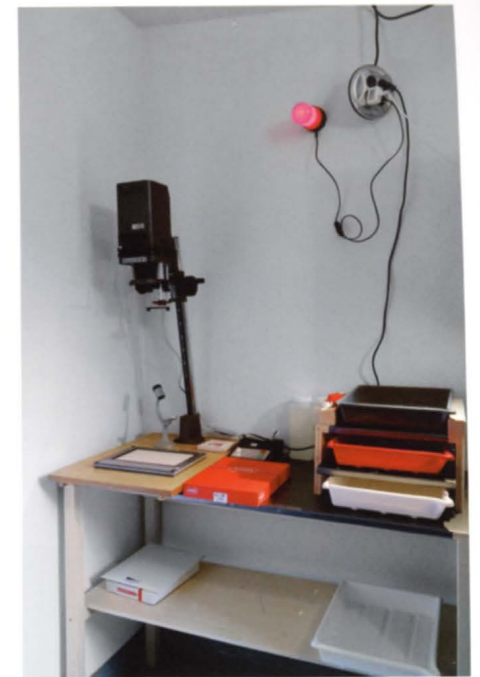
The new place was completely broken down, abandoned for years, and without water. (It took five months to get that fixed). Many tiny details were overlooked or "forgotten" by the workers, because they had no idea what a darkroom was and how it had to function. The custom-made sinks arrived perfectly flat, even though I had specified a 1cm incline. The paper and film washing station got hot water only. And don't get me started on ventilation and climate control.



France darkroom

Miraculously, it all came together—my perfect, beautiful darkroom. A 30x40 cm monster enlarger, two 5x7" custom-made LED enlargers and one medium format IFF with regular light, which has been with me since the first small place with leaking pipes. New timers, easels of my own design, a separate darkroom for processing film and toning prints, and a huge Ansel Adams mural. Plus, a nice office and my students' works on the walls. I was living a dream. But not for long.

Because of a big project, I was spending more and more time in the South of France, staying at my dad's place. I had a whole spare bathroom, but making a darkroom there felt like such a terrible downgrade. But it eventually happened, anyway, because not printing for weeks felt unnatural to me. Setting up was fast and painless: a few clicks online for trays, canisters, and chemicals, a small



Berlin darkroom

6x6 Durst from my basement, and a basic table from a building supply store. Done. It turned out to be very cute, and I enjoyed going straight to bed after a printing session. But even this setup wasn't destined to be the end of the story.

Now, in Berlin, my darkroom is a corner in a storage room with no running water. I was (and still am) stuck here because of COVID-19. Time went by with hopes of planes flying again and me getting back to Florence. And still, I think of the words I have often repeated during workshops and interviews: "If you want to print, you will find a way. It is totally possible to set up a darkroom with barely anything."

Having a storage room corner for printing might not be exactly glamorous, but it is certainly refreshing. To quote my first photography professor's response to the complaints about the lack of easels and timers, "If you manage to print in those conditions, you will be able to print anywhere."