

A matter of size

Written by Pedro Meyer



It used to be (up until the late eighties) that in most parts of the world we would make our prints for exhibitions, in the 11 x 14 inch range. The reasons were many, but one of the more important ones was the high cost of photographic paper, as well as the scarce availability of

papers.

I have to confess, I had a degree of envy combined with admiration for those photographers in the so called "first world" who could without too much thought, produce beautiful images that were "much larger", such as 17 x 22 in. You would of course need to also have a darkroom large enough to handle such large formats. An enlarger and easel to allow for those sizes, as well as all the corresponding trays, for developing the prints. **In other words, the production of large prints required not only the papers but also the facility that enabled the handling of larger sizes.**

As time moved on and we entered the digital era, all these issues started to take on an all together new direction. It all started very slowly, the first printers with ink jet technology that would enable larger prints to be made, were the Iris printers. But these printers were very expensive and the stability of the inks used was not very good.

In tandem to this we started to see images on monitors that were published over the internet. We also had the problem of slow connections to the internet because the bandwidth available was modest. This required the publication of rather small images. Monitors were also small, and quite unstable in their color representation. So it was anyone's guess what the other person saw when an image was published over the internet. **One of the most visited pages we had in ZoneZero, was a page to calibrate your monitor.**

However in a matter of a decade, all these issues were successfully addressed at an incredible pace. **Technology burst out in every direction and found new solutions for such problems. Epson was one the first ones I found that came out with printers that really had a level of quality to match an analog photographic print.** Although the size of their first printers only allowed for prints up to 17 x 22 inch. That was already a huge difference in what one was able to produce in those small darkrooms, of yesteryear. The cost of the printers had come down immensely, the pending problem to resolve was the longevity of an image. The prints looked beautiful, but their stability was questionable.

Another item worthy of mention was the introduction of literally hundreds of new papers one could print on, with a huge diversity of surface textures. But not only that, the speed to make a print was incomparable to the darkroom days, and one could print from a small space quite large prints. The costs had come down and were now very competitive with chemically based solutions.

Monitors started to grow in size and quality, flat screen monitors started to displace the bulky and mostly unreliable CRT monitors (Cathode Ray Tubes). Bandwidth connection to the internet became increasingly prevalent throughout the world, growing alongside ever larger screens that could display images published over the internet, pictures that all of a sudden competed favorably with the 8 x 10 inch or the 11 x 14 inch images we printed earlier in the darkroom. Such images, not only had the same size but were even more luminous than their paper counterparts, as the back lit quality of such photographs allowed for a wider tonal range on the new flat screen monitors which started to become prevalent all over.

So photographers that could publish their work over the internet, at the size of 8 x 10 or 11 x 14, could hardly make a big impression if the size of a print for an exhibition corresponded to the same sizes one could have either in a book or on a monitor. But such a logic was also accompanied by some incredible technological breakthrough that would make it possible to print

very large scale prints, within the budgetary limitations of a photographer.

EPSON, started to introduce the first large scale printers that had the right combination of price and quality. Not that they were the first printers on the market that could make large scale images, but they were the first ones that could actually offer reliability, quality and at reasonable cost. The investment required for a digital set up, became more and more the equivalent of what we used to spend to set up a darkroom. The speed at which digital technology has been adopted, is a result of the convenience factor combined with relatively attractive prices.

Prints today, depending on the inks used and the papers on which the image is printed, have started to surpass the life expectancy of a good silver gelatin print. The variety of papers available to make images on, far surpasses anything that was available before. With that, the technical nature of making a large prints, is I believe settled. Now, why do we need large prints?

I think that with the technology practically solved, the attention has to now be centered on content. What is the purpose in making small prints for exhibition purposes, when the image can be seen on a monitor with even better quality, and the relation between the image and the viewer is, I believe, a new and enhanced one, that is how I see the issue of making large prints today.

A matter of size

Written by Pedro Meyer

Interestingly enough, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, as you probably know, has a completely remodeled new building. Their photography department, now has gallery spaces that vary in height. The first rooms which show work that was done in those earlier years I mentioned before, with all the smaller prints, has a roof height like they always had in that same museum, but then as the images start to grow in size, the Museum had to acknowledge such a new reality by having additional galleries with a much higher roof to accommodate the increasingly larger prints that were both being collected or exhibited.

Oh! one last thing, as the size of prints grew, so did the needed space for tables on which to place the prints in order to review them, and of course, so much more space in which to store all those large prints, in case they are framed. As the saying goes, "there is never a free lunch". Together with all the good things I wrote about having large prints, I can also list a number of problems, such as the need for more space, now instead of the darkroom we need more space in what is called the "light room". More complications in transportation, small prints travel with greater ease than large prints. If a print goes bad, you waste a lot more material (paper and ink) than when you create small prints. **But the pleasure derived from seeing your images displayed in a large format, will probably outweigh all those inconveniences along the way, and probably your audience will also respond favorably to seeing those bigger prints in the context of an exhibition on the wall.**

Pedro Meyer
April 2006
Coyoacán, Mexico

As always please joins us with your comments in our [forums](#).

A matter of size

Written by Pedro Meyer

<http://zonezero.com/editorial/abril06/april06.html>

Coyoacan,