

Collodion Platinum/Palladium Portfolio

by Tom Baril



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #72

Commentary

By last count, there are 1.6 billion fine art photographs of tulips. At least. Of course, I may be prejudiced because I live in the heart of a tulip region famous for its annual tulip festival. Maybe there are only 1.5 billion fine art photographs of tulips and my first estimate was an exaggeration.

You would think we have enough, but I contend there is *always* room for more. Just because something (or some place) has been photographed to death, does not mean that it is dead photographically. Such an attitude would seem to insist that the magic of a photograph comes from the thing or the place. I simply do not agree with that premise. The magic of a photograph comes from the *mind and heart of the photographer* — always. Because every photographer is a unique individual, every photograph has the potential to express a unique point of view.

Even if you make a tulip photograph that is just like someone else's photograph of a tulip, yours is still a reflection of your mind/heart and is therefore worth making. Besides, I'm not sure it is even possible to make a photograph that's exactly like another's. I've tried. Years ago a photo buddy and I set out to make the same image from the same place and, try as we might, we simply couldn't do it. Similar, yes, but exactly — not a chance. Too many variables.

That said, I think there is something to be said for the pursuit of a new or unique way of seeing,

Baril accomplishes this beautifully by choosing a medium that he wanted to explore — collodion wet plates printed in platinum/palladium. They are stunning and any reproductions (here or as we did in *LensWork* in print) simply cannot do justice to his originals. Even so, the treatment he gives all the images in this portfolio present the work in a style that pulls the body of work together into a unity. Because his tulip photograph is part of this larger project, it succeeds on another level beyond the individual image; it contributes to the body of work as a whole. It would be a shame for him to have eliminated this image just because its subject is the often photographed genus *Tulipa*.

Speaking of his process, this brings up a point that is beginning to worry me a bit in the current trend in photography. The digital world has put so much emphasis on *image* that we are starting to see an erosion in the value of the *artifact*. As a long time print maker, I worry about this. I don't believe the artifact of a photograph will entirely disappear from the scene — no way — but in some circles its importance is already starting to diminish. Photography has been a physical thing since its inception. I sincerely hope it remains so forever. There is a place for the non-corporeal image, but the world would be lessened if the physical photograph fades into



history as a product of its time. I may not be doing yeoman's work with wet plate collodion platinum/palladium prints, but alternative processes are not the only way to bring physicality into photography. Folios and chapbooks are my chosen physical form because I love paper and the hand-held

image. The alternatives available to us today are breathtaking. There are so many ways to bring one's photographic vision to molecular reality — and we should — there is almost no excuse not to. God save the physical print!