Paul Carter Skype chat 30 July 2015, Paul at home in Southampton, Cat at home on Valhalla (Thorne)

recorded using my zoom recorder (which turned out badly) and a call recorder for Skype which was much better at getting both sides of the conversation equally. We started talking slightly before I remembered to press record on this one aswell…

CR: [wondered if you could speak a little about the physicality of working with chemicals]

PC: I was lucky in that I was not allergic or affected by any of the chemicals, and I started working with photography chemicals from about the age of 10 . You could tell who used to work in darkrooms as there’d be holes in some of their clothes that they used in the dark room, you’d get the chemicals on you and you’d wipe yourself and over time it would build up and eat the material. [I didn’t know that] yeah, at some point I had a white coat, a lab coat, they’d just disintegrate. But certainly when we were working with the children in the 70s, there were no, we didn’t use anything really, we didn’t use aprons or anything we just got on with it because none of any of us as adults had experienced anything. We were very lucky. What I did do was encourage people not to get chemistry on their fingers, but not from a H&S point of view but from a photographic point of view because if you pick up a piece of paper you stain it. So it’s about spoiling the photograph so if you don’t want to to spoil the photograph, use tongs. The children found the tongs awkward, they needed a certain amount of dexterity and we complicated it by some of the tongs were ones you squeezed to hold the paper and other ones released to hold the paper. We were just using whatever I happened to have. In terms of inhalation or anticipating skin issues or whatever, it was never an issue. Later on, we had an effect: I was doing some huge prints for a theatre company and because the play was set in the 20s they wanted all the prints sepia toned and my wife helped me. We put the toner in the bath because they were huge prints we were rolling them through the bath and my wife’s nails essentially fell off from the effect of this sepia toner. It was the old fashioned sepia toner that smelt of rotten eggs, it was two o’clock in the morning trying to meet this deadline to get them to London the following day and all her nails completely shrivelled. One of my photographic assistants Julie was sensitive to photographic chemicals, Rachel wasn’t. I had two photographic assistants, Julie was with me a long time, 20 years and had to wear gloves. But then we moved in the darkroom here from mainly b&w to colour and there was an intermediate step where we went from tray processing to machine processing. We had a b&w machine that you fed the paper in at one end and it came out dry the other end in four minutes, so the only contact you had with chemicals then was when you mixed up the chemistry and poured it into a bottle which was fed in increments into the trays inside the machine. When we did colour chemistry, that was the same, using machines. We were more aware of h&s then because the chemistry for Cibachrome, high quality printing material from transparencies, Ilford were involved for a while then it went back to the original Swiss firm, and it was known that some of those chemicals were carcinogenic.

CR: 0537 to get information about chemicals…

PC: The packs would tell you a lot and in the end needs must, you just carried on and did it. We became a little more h&s conscious when I had employees because they weren’t choosing in the same way that I was choosing to be around all this stuff, particularly when we found out that Julie was allergic to the developer, b&w print developer and at some point, I can’t remember why we had to make a h&s statement. I think it was part of our insurance. Through the 80s and into the 90s partly because it was in the acts, partly because I had responsibilities for employees and partly because of using colour chemicals which were more dangerous than b&w we became more aware of it and so we were as careful as we could be. But always always always from when I was a child, you wash your hands as soon as you get anything on. So this wiping of our hands on our clothes, was after washing usually, so you’d wash then wipe but after time they’d still stain, and splashes from open trays would get on your clothes, particularly in fix, that was the one that did it. CR: [What was in that?] PC: Sodium thiosulphate CR: [Trying to identify some chems to home in on] PC: Think the main active chemical in print developer is sodium sulphite, and the fix was sodium thiosulphate. Then of course we had acetic acid which was heavily diluted from the stock for b&w tray process but of course what you diluted it from was very strong. CR: [Was that the glacial acetic acid?] PC: That’s right CR: [Hate the smell of that] PC: Do you have a chemistry background? CR: [I did biochemistry, so not a proper chemistry background. I spent a year in industry doing a lot of rinsing of glassware, in various solvents with my gloves dissolving around my fingers] PR: You should talk to my brother, he’s a chemist and he runs a chemical analysis business. He only has one eye because of lack of health and safety. CR: [Really?! I guess it brings it home to you how accidents can happen.] PC: Absolutely. Sometimes its just bad luck. A very similar accident happened when he was a teenager, he had a chemistry lab in his bedroom and he mixed tow of the wrong chemicals at the wrong point in the wrong amount and a glass vial blew up in his face, not a bit touched him. Then a similar thing happened when he was at work, in the days before safety glasses were standard and he got a piece in his eye, they couldn’t save the eye. A combination of lack of care and bad luck.

CR: [10:09 When I was asking about the safety info on the packs, was there a point when there was more information available to consumers, or was it always there you just had to look for it?]

PC: To begin with, I just didn’t read it. I think it became more noticeable, it certainly became more noticeable through the 70s into the 80s. CR: [I’ve been looking at packaging and its one thing for me as an outsider who doesn’t use the stuff to say yes it is there, but when you’re already used to using those kinds of things why would you read it anyway. ] Yes, exactly. You use your own experience and getting on with the job, you just don’t think about it.

CR:[11:13 Did you prefer to use concentrated solutions and dilute them, or did you make up things from powders?]

PC: Most of the early chemicals printing and developing film were pretty straight forward, there were the formulas there so you could make them up, but in the end I became reasonably busy reasonably quickly and mixing up from scratch wasn’t cost effective. You’d have to mix them up in such large quantities and take the risk of it being inconsistent. So either they were prepackaged powders in the case of film developer, and fix, and liquids, increasingly using liquids because they’re easier to use. Then for the machines those were all liquid. The chemistry was such an important part of it, one of the things that happened when we went digital was a feeling of loss, of dealing with the chemicals. [12:58] Always a feeling of taking care, because of spilling and all those kinds of things, but partly because of exactness because you needed to them to be diluted correctly, particularly with film because you only get one chance. Every photographer at some point in their career has poured their fix in first and completely wiped the film, so you know there’s always a danger. There was always that kind of area of tension and taking care, both in terms of the mixing and getting and keeping the temperature right, no matter how cool or warm the room was that you’re in, there was always an element of chance there. When you actually pulled the film off the reel and looked at it, there was just that thrill, that wonder that you got anything at all, that you didn’t open the back of the camera at the wrong time, that you didn’t put the fix in first and so on. There’s no equivalent in that in digital really, yes you throw them up on screen the first time, but no equivalent.

CR: [Even with the fear of digital loss?] Yes, well I’ve lost things, done a couple of stupid things and lost a few digital images, but there’s always plenty of fallback, assuming you don’t overwrite a disc or card you can usually recover.

CR: [I hadn’t thought of that aspect. ]

PC: [1500] It’s the smell and the physicality, that for decades I’d had that smell and physicality and working in complete darkness at times, particularly with colour not even a safe light. So the whole business of standing up all the time, walking around the darkroom, you’re finding things, there’s the whole process of now then “are my fingers chemical free?” so I that can go into the box of photographic paper and pull it out without getting a mark on it, and handling it in a certain kind of way so your’e minimising the contact with your fingers and putting it into the easel, the paper holder, bending over the enlarger to focus it, there’s all these physical movement that just come part and parcel of who you are. I still to this day feel a loss of that physical aspect and the smells.

CR: [Yesterday I was talking to a chap about how people are becoming interested in this because they’re spending more time at computers. One of the things I ’m thinking about through this project is whether chemicals become harder to get hold of and what you as a user what you thought of your relationship with the manufacturer. Were they taking things away from you without asking or were they giving you things you’d never asked for, how did you think about the delivery of products to you as a user. ] 17:00

PC: You were aware that behind a lot of it, there was the interrelationship between technology and improvement versus size of market and costs. So on the b&w side for example, a lot of photographers complained that the new papers didn’t have the amount of silver in them that they used to, you just couldn’t get the range of tone and subtlety that you could do in very early papers. Then the papers were shifting to were they could be used in the machine, you couldn’t use traditional fibre based papers in the machine, you had to have resin coated papers and that had all kinds of tonality issues and texture issues. So b&w side you felt that you were losing something and through the 70s there was a period of nostalgia and people getting more involved in rediscovering and doing things form scratch and doing things in the old way. Have you come across Jo Spence? [Yes] Well her partner Terry Dennett, that name will certainly come up, he was doing a lot of work reminding people of how to do all the bromo-process and the old processes.

CR: [19:00 I went through his Vade Mecus box files at Birkbeck looking for everyday chemicals. I guess it was a minority view? ]

PC: Very much a minority and stayed a minority thing, but it s interesting that Silverprint partly survives on that small community, so that’s one of the things that happens. It hasn’t died and I don’t think it will grow hugely but I think you’ll find it will continue to be a significant group of people who want to be involved with alternative ways of making photographic images, using experimental work or traditional things. Most of the ingredients of those old formula are relatively available, they weren’t particularly special chemicals they just had to be combined in the right kind of way. There should be various ways of getting hold of that, Silverpoint have been important in that. In b&w the economics of means it is doable, you can make relatively small batches of b&w film and b&w paper. So if you’re making a colour film you have 3 or 4 or more layers coated on the film and those layers have to be absolutely precisely together, so you have to run huge amounts of waste at the beginning to fine tune that, then you get a period of time where everything stays in sync then they start going out of sync and then you lose it, so you only have this middle chunk that you can sell. It’s not going to be possible for anyone to justify the costs of doing that kind of thing, if there’s going to be any work on colour, its going to have to go back to the original colour processes. I wouldn’t be surprised if, coz everyone is spending all their time on computers at work, do you really want to come back and be playing with your images on the computer? So having the opportunity to set up a darkroom, physically mix up chemicals or whatever, I think you will find a significant group of people who will want to do that. And it’s just fun. There’s nothing to beat seeing an image come up in a tray, just absolutely nothing at all, it is just magic, even if yo understand the chemistry of it, it’s utterly magic. How many people do you think do understand the chemistry or does it not matter? [22:56 ] I don’t think many photographers understood chemistry, you just got a packet, of Ilford chemicals, Kodak chemicals and instructions. You would have the equivalent of the nerds who would want to do it from scratch, or because of costs. There was a wonderful, very cheap place in East London, they advertised every week in the photographic press and you could get everything there, all the basic chemicals. Why can’t I remember the name of it? They were so so part of photography in those days.

CR: [Can I ask you about that shop, was it the kind of place you could walk in and pick stuff up or did you have to ask for it? 24:00 ]

PC: A bit of both, there was lots of things you could see but lots you had to ask for. I’ve still got one piece of equipment that I bought from them that I bought in the 70s. CR: [What kind of things could you select yourself] PC: Things like print tongs, or trays or things like that, and what did you have to ask behind the counter for? Never for health and safety, just where they kept them. That’s right, my first exit with colour was to go there and buy separate chemicals, and mix them together so mix the developer, there’s about 6 or 7 stages of colour development, so I did it because it was cheap. I didn’t carry on with it, I only did it once because I realised it was going to be just too complicated to get the amounts the same and keep the temperature. Went to the bank and got a loan, one of my first loans, and bought this stuff.

CR: retailers - advertising in the magazine you worked on?

PC: 2618 Photonews weekly was a magazine, well a tabloid newspaper really. On the chemistry side, we didn’t, we weren’t invited as the editor I was not invited to get involved in that, but we were invited to lunch time parties more on the equipment side. There was a kind of a tension between the manufacturers through the 70s were already trying to get more people to take more pictures, rather than involve them in the process, they were trying to make it simpler. In the days of early digital, it involved big compromises on quality, so you went from the box brownie camera , which was a big negative. Even though it was a plastic lens because you had a big negative it meant you had a certain amount of quality in the final image. When they shrunk that down to the 126 the instamatic and a few years later to the smaller one, and not fundamentally changing the quality of the lens even though the film was good quality, the results were pretty appalling. They were completely depending on the market, on people using them being happy to have something rather than nothing even though there’d been a drop in quality in many respects. And of course the push to colour, in the early days they completely depended on people saying “Oh it’s in colour!” and not them saying “This is awful colour”, the quality of colour only became an issue later. The time of the 116 and the 110 after was a very bad period for day to day photography because the quality of the results was just appalling. I shouldn’t think that there are many prints around from that time, a lot of them will have faded. Then eventually that reversed, they started bringing back better quality lenses, and films and stressing quality again, then it all went down hill again with digital which compromised quality. So to market digital they had to focus on the fact that it was so instantaneous and so easy and you could do it yourself haha . Again everyone accepted a lower standard. It was very strange, they spent the whole of the 80s and early 90s getting better and better quality easy to use cameras with colour film getting better better and better, particularly colour negative film, the improvements of colour neg film was vast. We switched at one time, as a professional photographer you would never consider using colour neg film, but it was my medium of choice at the end. It tends to be, the agenda is set really by the big guys. It’s interesting to see that Ilford, where are they? Kodak, where are they? Even with making all those big decisions they still didn’t get it all right. [Ilford’s reverse engineering project for polaroid film] 31:35 instant cameras, fuju still involved with them and there is a camera you can buy .

CR: When you were younger and getting into photography , you used the air force base?

PC: My dad was in the Canadian airforce and he learned photography when he went into plain clothes, he was an airforce policeman doing uniformed work. They have a military equivalent of CID where they’re doing more traditional police work rather than security work. He had to learn photography for investigations, taking photographs for evidence. He and a scottish mate set up a minibuses, taking portraits and doing weddings, using the police darkroom at evenings and weekends. I would go and help them. So that was my first introduction to the darkroom, although we were developing films at home. I can still remember waiting for my dad to come home one day to teach me to develop my first film. I’d been out with the father of some friends out to take photographs of migration of birds in Canade and I had this film. I was so eager to get it processed. I think I jumped the gun and tried to do it myself and made a mess of it. I couldn’t wait for him to come home. It just captured my imagination immediately when I saw my dad doing it.

CR: [34:00 Did you teach yourself from books or did you mainly learn form your him?]

PC: To begin with I learned from him, he explained film speed aperture, those sorts of things. At that time my parents thought I was a scientist, and I assumed I was too so it was the science side of things that made the connection. Art was never part of our family, if you look back into my early life there are lots of indication that I was perhaps interested in the arts rather than than the sciences but there was no space for it to grow and I think that’s one reason it was photography rather than painting or drawing, because it had the respect of the family. It allowed both sides the since an the art to flourish. Of course it repeated itself when I was teaching children in London. If they had taken a drawing home from school or whatever, it might have got a few niceties or whatever, but when they took their own prints of perhaps of their parents and friends, particularly in the 70s when making your own photographs was such an unusual thing to do it generated huge respect within the family.

CR: That’s really nice

PC: Then of course we took that on and put together a few exhibitions of their work and put them on public display both locally and in a couple of art galleries. The first one was at the Half Moon gallery, which you may have come across in the history of things.

CR: Do you reckon any carried on an interest?

PC: I don’t think many of them did, and judging from an even more developed project here in Southampton , Judy Harrison’s Mount Pleasant Media Workshop, which was Photography workshop, there’s a book. That’s one of the longest running projects, it only closed about 5 years ago, the longest running and most deeply committed projects in the country, based on an Asian community. Judging from that, not many go int the arts afterwards, but that’s not the point, its about process, transferable skills, self image. Judy’s done interviewing, because it was so long the children became teenagers then parents themselves and when we had the launch for her book the atmosphere was electric. Three generations of people who’d been through her workshop, very very special, they just loved her and what she did. They felt it an incredible addition to their lives and I expect most of the youngsters I worked with would be the same. We’re going to try and have a go at picking up some of these pieces, 3817, the community worker who supported me in my early days 1971–72 Jenny Styles, is still a community worker, in her 70s, still a community worker in the area. Largely one of the facilitators of the Waterloo action centre, behind Waterloo station, very involved in the Coin Street housing cooperative aswell. We’re beginning to talk about whether I might go back and try find some of the youngsters and do a small, mini documentation and perhaps do the same thing of encouraging people to do a bit of their own photography.

CR: there does seem to be enthusiasm for that kind of thing, Daniel Meadows.

PC: Probably an indication of that generation of photographer getting older. It’s a hard decision to make. Both my partner and myself are engaged in looking back quite a lot at the moment. My wife died 16 years ago and she was a children’s writer, so there a legacy project around that and its important to keep Henrietta’s name alive, there’s a children’s competition and an adults writing compettion [Henrietta Branford] and I get involved in that which is looking backwards. My partner’s father was a fairly well known painter and there’s a book coming out in a couple of years time and we’re engaged in pulling together images of all his paintings it’s over taken our lives! We’re thinking, we’re looking back, but there’s pleasure in both of those things. There’s a party every year to award the children, they don’t know who Henrietta was but the concept, the ideas behind it, its such a fantastic evening of adult writers and children writers being together, its just really special. It celebrates Henrietta’s editor who died at a similar time, so you have editors, authors all in one place with their hero Jacqueline Wilson who gives all the awards. You’ve got this looking back, we’ve been looking back at over 900 images of Richard Eurich paintings and it kind of feeds us and exhausts us. CR: Who’s going to look back at yours? PC: Well not that, who are we, what can we do now? There’s always that tension of how much do you look backwards . it reinforces all of that. One thing I’m finding as I get older is that I’m reconnecting with people from further and further back. CR: so even from early travels, canada? PC: Yeah, particularly from teenage times. People I went to school with in France and Germany on airforce bases, that I’m still in fairly regular contact now with, from the mid 60s. But also a bit in the family, we’ve actually been picking up some threads of family from the 50s before we went to Canada, all part of growing older. Just need to keep it in control so you remember that yes, there’s new things to do.

CR: Do you think you’ll go back to any chemical processing? 43:00

PC: Yes. I’m in a particularly busy patch at the moment because of still partly working, still me and my newish partner merging our lives together and having a quite a big building project here at the house next year, but from the end of next year on I’ll be more properly retired and I’m really looking forward to setting up a darkroom, probably in the same way as we did at home when I was 11, 12, 13 in the bathroom. You just use the bathrooms as the place. You put a board over the bath, and find a way to temporarily close out all the light, you have water so you can wash the prints easily and just doing it with the grandchildren. I will do that one day. I kept all my enlargers and all my trays. Everything for b&w photography I kept, thrown out everything for colour processes. The B&W is there, hoping that one day I’ll have a play [lovely] and be myself again.

CR: Well I think that’s a good place to stop. Thank you.