

Lumiere Press: *Printer Savant & Other Stories*



When a critic once offered praise for his Beethoven playing, pianist Rudolf Serkin had a simple response: “It took me fifty years.” This conversation came vividly to mind as I was walking to the streetcar following a visit to Michael Torosian’s workshop, and I’ve been considering it ever since; maybe we all like to think of time in terms of numbers. Ten thousand hours to master a discipline, ten thousand steps a day for longevity, a seven-minute workout for endurance--the list goes on. But fifty years? That’s something different. ⁱ

While the subtitle of *Printer Savant*, Torosian’s newest book, is “Three Decades of Fine Book Publishing on the Art of Photography,” Torosian enrolled in the photography program at what was then Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in 1970, and his first solo exhibition, at the National Film Board Gallery in Ottawa, took place in 1974. And it was his passion for photography that led him to bookmaking, so in the larger sense, five decades is a more accurate time frame.

The history of Lumiere Press, established in the basement of Torosian’s house and later extended to a workspace in his back yard, is effectively outlined on the press’s website, easy to access at www.lumierepress.com. This link opens a well-referenced index of all Lumiere Press activities: publication titles, dates, reviews, archives, photographs, a slideshow on the art of hand bookmaking, and notes of appreciation from collectors are all there. But it is really *Printer Savant* which best brings to life the scale and scope of Torosian’s work.

Ostensibly, *Printer Savant* serves as an anthology of Lumiere Press publications. Issued to celebrate establishment of the Lumiere Press Archives in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, it lists twenty-two titles, from *Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity* (1986) to *Saul Leiter: The Ballad of Soames Bantry*, released in 2017. Its format is chronological: Torosian’s introduction is followed by separate illustrated narratives about the making of each volume, with a bibliography and an acknowledgments section at the end. Along with Torosian’s writing about the Edward Weston and Saul Leiter monographs, you can find essays on Michel Lambeth, David Heath, Aaron Siskind, Paul Strand, Frederick Sommer, Lewis Hine, Gordon Parks, Paul Caponigro, Edward Steichen, Rafael Goldchain, Edward Burtynsky, and Torosian himself; there is also a commentary on his book about the Black Star Collection, which is now in the collection of The Image Centre in Toronto. Gallerists and art dealers profiled include Leo Castelli, Avrom Isaacs, Lee Witkin, Marcuse Pfeifer and Howard Greenberg. It’s quite a list. And the book itself is a remarkable object: it’s easy to forget just how beautiful a hand-made book can be.

That said, some especially interesting aspects of *Printer Savant* derive as much from the currents of creative and critical energy that run through the entire volume as they do from the details offered about each of Torosian's projects. These currents, which initially appear in reference to the challenges and circumstances of individual books, eventually come together, transcending the specifics of any particular discussion: gradually, you realize that what is being presented is not simply a series of distinct commentaries and richly detailed reflections, but rather a complete world view, formed and developed as part of a life's work.

The fuel for Torosian's fire is a native, self-reliant intellectual curiosity: it drove him to learn photography and then bookmaking, to teach himself one skill after another, to approach people with ideas and turn ideas into books, to learn interview techniques, to develop editing skills, to understand the larger context in which photography has always operated, to work out the best design strategy and choose the ideal typeface; even to find the right paper stock, or to ask a writer for a ten-word adjustment in the middle of a paragraph. A byproduct of this curiosity is a respect for learning and a commitment to mentorship: Torosian is careful to acknowledge those who have taught him, or from whom he has learned in non-teaching contexts. In turn, he has established and maintained an internship program at Lumiere Press, describing the contributions of its thirty-one participants as indispensable to his work.

Two individuals played key roles in Torosian's undergraduate education: Michel Lambeth and David Heath. He credits Lambeth, the subject of Lumiere Press's second book, with giving him "three pieces of advice. One: Always put your best foot forward. Two: Never give away your art. Three: Do something every day." Describing their relationship in more detail, he later added: "Schools, presumably, can teach a student how to make art. In a run-down pub with a regal name, Michel offered lessons on how to be an artist."

Lambeth died in 1977 and Torosian became the caretaker of his creative work. *Michel Lambeth: Photographer*, shown in Ottawa in 1986 under the auspices of Library and Archives Canada, was Torosian's first tribute to Lambeth; it was followed by *Michel Lambeth: The Confessions of a Tree Taster*, published the following year.

Torosian also met David Heath in the Photographic Arts program at Ryerson; in fact, he described Heath as "one of the first teachers I encountered." His comments on Heath, with whom he produced three books between 1988 and 2004--*David Heath: Extempore* (1988), a new printing of *A Dialogue With Solitude* (2000), and *Dave Heath: Korea* (2004)—are worth quoting at length. Heath was a difficult figure, but it's likely that Torosian understood what he was trying to do as well as any of his students ever did:

His method for our weekly critique classes was to conduct "readings." In a stream-of-consciousness mode he would deconstruct a student's picture, delving into the multiplicity of embedded meanings. It was an inspiring performance as he delineated art historical antecedents or divined a student's personal iconography. For me, the enduring lesson of these immersive sessions was that by giving weight to the emotional and graphic resonances of every aspect of an image, one discovered that *everything is important* and *nothing is arbitrary*.

...Dave really understood, and could communicate, how a photograph was put together as an amalgam of intuition and intellectual rigor. And he advanced the core precept of modernism, that the photograph should be liberated from literal interpretation: it should be read metaphorically.

It's clear what Torosian absorbed from these encounters: artistic commitment, high standards, rigorous critical thinking, and a deep understanding of the interrelationships between representation and metaphor. But there is something else at work here, perhaps less obvious. Lambeth and Heath were both humanists who saw photography as fundamentally a humanistic discipline. Their teaching was grounded in the traditions of engagement and reportage that had been so critical during the era of the photo-essay and magazine journalism, an era which Cornell Capa had worked to define with his two-volume series *The Concerned Photographer*, released in 1968 and 1972.ⁱⁱ

Unsurprising, then, is the emphasis on humanism in the Lumiere Press bibliography: one book on Lambeth, three on Heath; one each on Paul Strand, Lewis Hine and Gordon Parks. In addition, Torosian's account of his conversations with Aaron Siskind stressed Siskind's generosity of spirit and his commitment to teaching. He also noted that Paul Caponigro spoke of "the language of emotion," and took care to mention his "reverence for the ineffable;" and with Rafael Goldchain, Torosian immediately understood that it was a search for identity which lay at the heart of *Nostalgia for an Unknown Land*.

The list above includes ten of the twenty-two Lumiere Press titles, and there are three that still need to be added: *Black Star*, from 2013, *The Ballad of Soames Bantry*, from 2017, and of course, *Printer Savant* itself, which is, at its core, an essentially humanist document. So that's thirteen titles out of twenty-three, all animated by an orientation to humanism as a key element of expressive picture-making.ⁱⁱⁱ

In many ways, *Black Star* is a particularly fine example. About this project, Torosian wrote:

Weighing in at almost three hundred thousand prints, the collection represents the complete black and white print archive of the Black Star photo agency of New York....

Photojournalism does not automatically equate to art, but when Peter [Higdon] lifted the lid on the first box, what I saw could not be constrained by any limited definition. The Black Star agency had dedicated itself to chronicling world events and now, the power of history, captured by photographers of surpassing perceptivity, was revealed to me. That morning, in that bleak space, I found myself deeply moved by the images and the presence of the artifacts.

He continues with an intriguing discussion of the challenges posed by selecting and editing work from a collection of such size:

With a critical mass of pictures in hand, the next dimension of complexity was the editing and sequencing of the images.... It is a matter of finding the harmony that stabilizes and the syncopation that animates.

Far more elusive is the task of marrying up the emotional, psychological and narrative elements. It's part of a language that can't be codified and must emerge from a deep understanding of the work, a coherent feel for the book's pulse, and an intuitive responsiveness to how pictures reverberate in relationship to each other. In the way that the intersection of two pigments creates a new color, the juxtaposition of two images creates a new emotional subtext, a phenomenon in photojournalism that has been termed the "third effect."

And once the sequencing issues were resolved, Torosian concluded with this brief description:

The book begins with an image of a man offering tours of First World War battlefields. The final picture portrays Jacqueline Kennedy, head turned. Metaphorically and historically, the portfolio is a look back, a retrospective of the twentieth century's tragedy and gaiety, momentousness and ephemerality....

As I surveyed my layout I saw the distillation of a mountain of prints into a new object. ... [I]n my line of work there is one confirmation of a job well done, and that is when the final choice of images and their arrangement can't be second guessed, when it all snaps into place as though it was meant to be, or simply looks—and this is my favorite word—*inevitable*.

The entirety of *Printer Savant* appears as though it, too, was meant to be. It's a wonderful read, loaded with detail in every paragraph and providing an open portal into the world of making books by hand. And it comes with the added benefit of Torosian's insightful descriptions of the many characters who inhabit this world, and the interconnecting worlds of the artists and curators with whom they sometimes jostle but often collaborate.

This book can easily be taken as a retrospective, in the same vein as *Black Star*, but I think that is a limiting view. To me, it reads as an affirmation—of photography, humanism, and the making of worthwhile, lasting objects--even in the twenty-first century, even in the digital age.

Some express regret for the passing of the analog era, but Torosian sees it differently:

What I find interesting is that if we jump ahead to the twenty-first century, we discover that many photographers are taking pictures with digital cameras; those digital cameras create digital files; the photographers use the digital files to make prints for galleries employing an ink-on-paper process; they then take those same digital files and make a book; again an ink-on-paper process. There's a blurring of the lines.... I think the convergence of photography and the book has never been greater.

But over and above the physical symbiosis of image and artifact, there is the cultural phenomenon of the photographic book... [Certain books] ...influenced generations of photographers, not only in terms of image-making, but by advancing an understanding of the photographic book as a unique genre, whose language of picture selection and sequential arrangement was a form of artistic expression.

I believe *the book is the medium of photography*. It is, indisputably, the form of presentation photographic artists aspire to above all else. Exhibitions are ephemeral—books live on.

Given this, I don't see Torosian stopping what he is doing anytime soon; and the implicit narrative of *Printer Savant* is fully as much about future possibilities as it is about what has already been accomplished. Why would an artist compelled to "Do something every day" bring things to a halt simply because of a numerical milestone? And finally, what retrospective ever ended with a question mark?

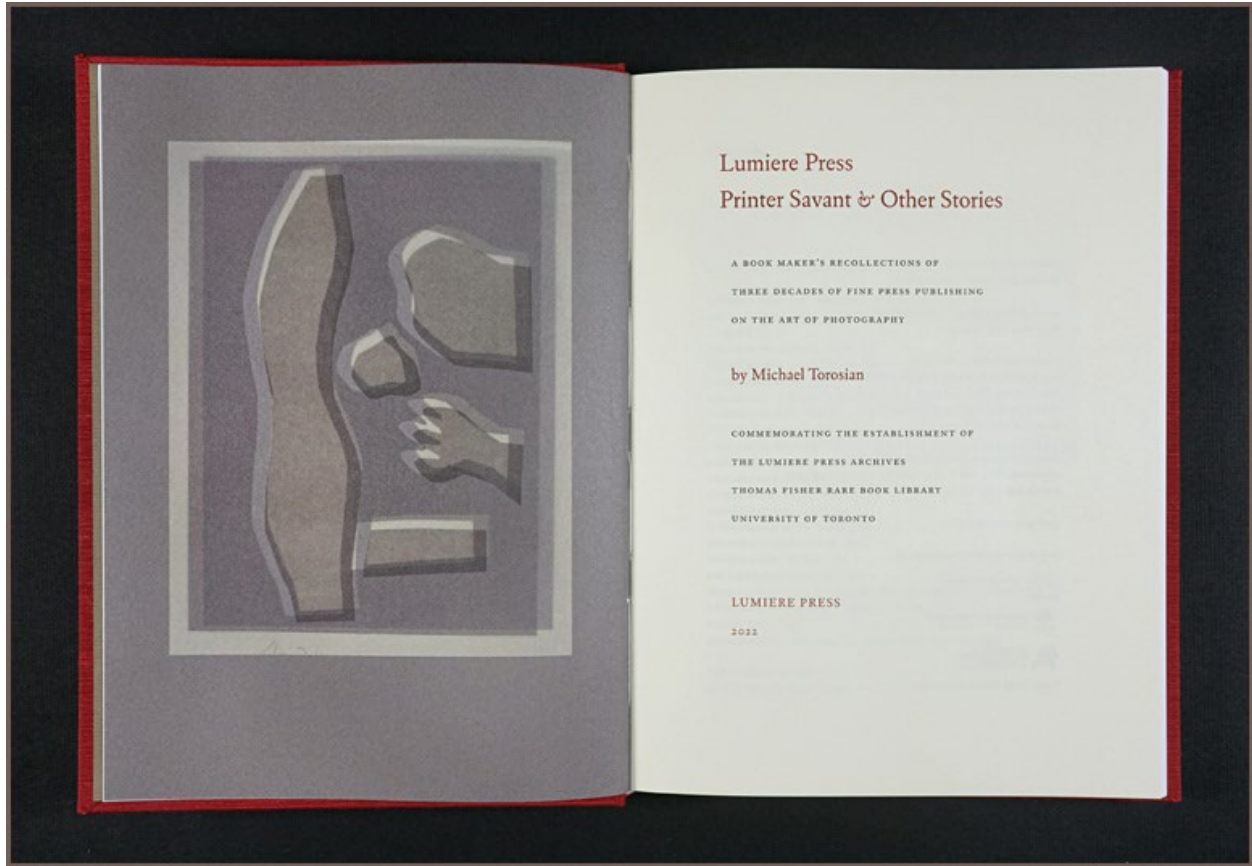


Image: Lumiere Press

Notes:

ⁱ For an account of this conversation, see Anthony Tommasini's article, *Playing Beethoven Piano Sonatas Changed How I Hear Them*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/arts/music/beethoven-piano-sonatas.html>

ⁱⁱ For more on Cornell Capa, and his commitment to the idea of "The Concerned Photographer," see: <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/collections/cornell-capa-concerned-photographer>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Photography Within the Humanities*, published by Addison House in 1977, documents a fascinating set of discussions on the relationship between photography and other disciplines more traditionally associated with humanism: <https://archive.org/details/photographywithi00well/page/n3/mode/2up>