



A Fifty-Year Journey

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When a critic offered praise for one of his performances, pianist Rudolf Serkin had a simple response: “It took me fifty years.” This exchange 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.

While the subtitle of Torosian’s newest book, *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant & Other Stories*, is “Three Decades of Fine Press Book Publishing on the Art of Photography,” in fact, 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. It was his passion for photography that led him to bookmaking, so in the larger sense, five decades is a more accurate time frame.

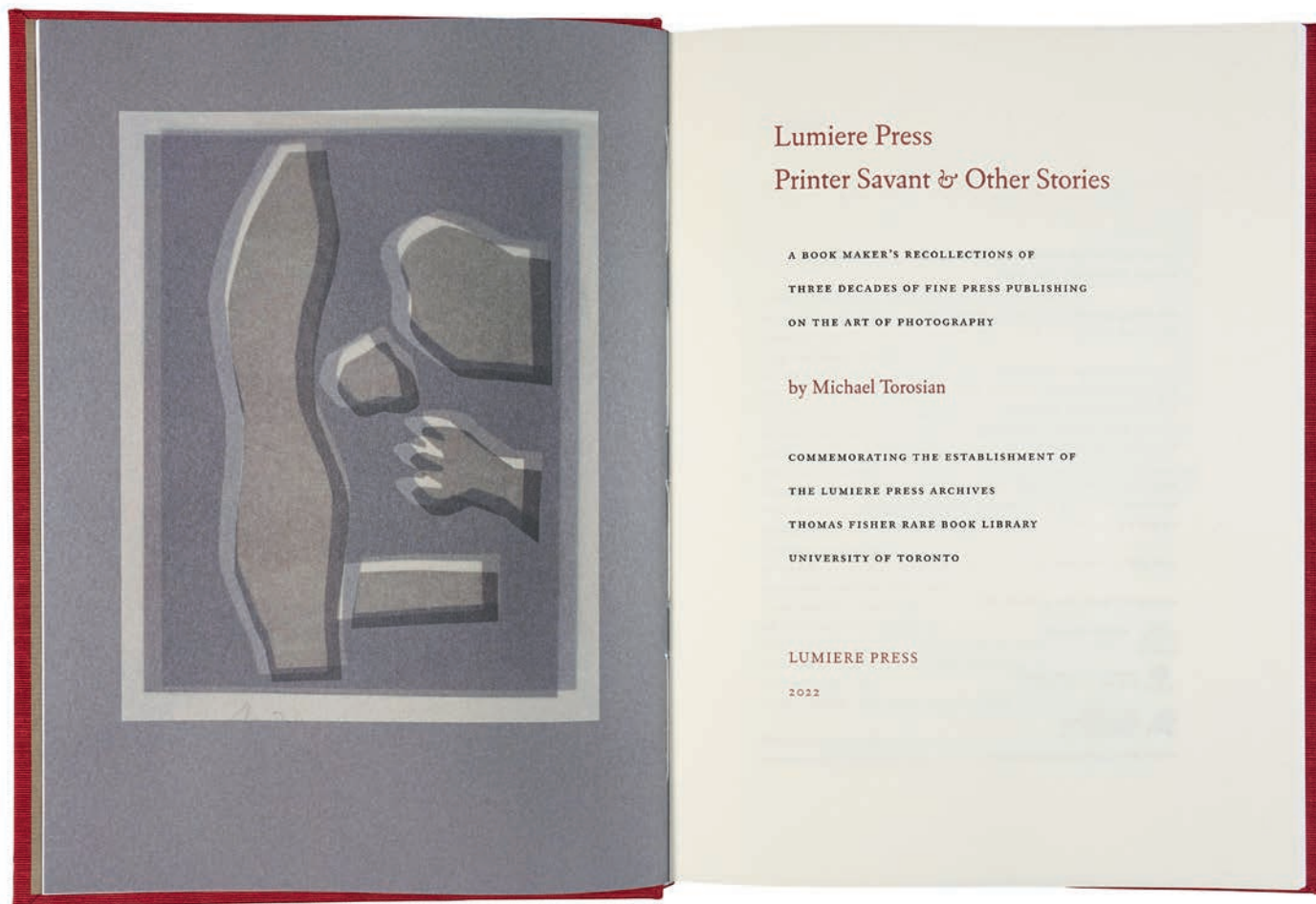
The history of Lumiere Press, established in the basement of Torosian’s house and later extended to a workspace in his back yard, is effectively outlined on the press’s website, easy to access at lumierepress.com. Visiting the site opens a well-referenced index of all Lumiere Press activities: publication 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* that 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 the establishment of the Lumiere Press Archives at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, it lists twenty-two titles, from *Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity* (1986) to *Saul Leiter: The Ballad of Soames*

Bantry (2017). The 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 his recollections on Edward Weston and Saul Leiter, 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, and Edward Burtynsky, as well as stories on projects of Torosian’s own photographic work. 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, in keeping with the elegance and craftsmanship that has brought the press acclaim over the years, culminating in Torosian receiving the Alcuin Society Robert R. Reid Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts in Canada.

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



Title page to Torosian's book, *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant and Other Stories*. PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOROSIAN

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 well-known writer for a ten-word adjustment in the middle of a paragraph. And a by-product 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 forty-five 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."



Detail of cover, *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant and Other Stories*. PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOROSIAN

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—*David Heath: Extempore* (1988), *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.

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 that lay at the heart of their 1989 book, *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* (2013), *The Ballad of Soames Bantry* (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.

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.

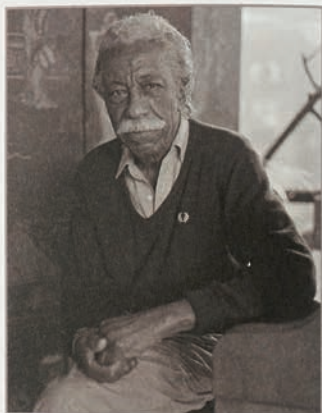
Far more elusive is the task of marrying up the emotional, psychological and narrative elements. It’s part of a language that can’t be codified and must emerge from a deep understanding of the work, a coherent feel for the book’s pulse, and an intuitive responsiveness to how pictures reverberate in relationship 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... In 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



Gordon Parks at home in his apartment at United Nations Plaza, photographed by the author, May 16, 1997.

BOOK NUMBER FOURTEEN

Gordon Parks: Harlem

A City Revisited in Two Classic Photo Essays
Interview by Michael Torosian
1997

An antiquarian book dealer, who I often did business with, phoned one day to see what ideas I had for future projects. I told him that I wanted to do a book on Gordon Parks. His reaction almost derailed me.

"You've done books on famous photographers," he told me, "but Gordon Parks is in a class by himself. He is a celebrity. You'll probably have to go through his agent just to get an appointment."

It had never occurred to me that I had to do anything more than write or phone an artist and introduce myself. I had always been well-received. But now, for the first time, I felt intimidated. For three months I dragged my feet. Finally, one afternoon in New York City, I told myself to snap out of it.

I found a phone booth and dialed the number I'd been carrying around with me on a scrap of paper. "Mr. Parks," I said, "I'm on the Upper East Side not far from your apartment building and I was wondering if I could drop by." The melodic voice on the other end of the line said, "OK."

A moment later I arrived at the United Nations Plaza apartment complex. The lobby was a triumph of International Style grandeur. In hushed tones I was announced, ushered to the elevators, and piloted to the tenth floor.

Gordon Parks, one of the heroes of my youth, opened the door dressed in a bathrobe over a T-shirt and gym shorts and wearing a baseball cap bearing a graphic from a "No Black on Black Violence" campaign.

"Would you like to see my latest work?" he asked. He had been shooting tabletop assemblages in color and the only room dark enough to project the 35 mm slides was his bedroom. Within minutes of arriving at UN Plaza I was sitting on Gordon Parks's bed, in the dark, talking about photography.

I had rarely met a person so gracious and so at ease with himself. His response to the arrival of a stranger was to treat me like an old friend. Over the next three hours he told me about an upcoming retrospective exhibition, a

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One of the *Printer Savant* stories: Torosian describes meeting one of his heroes, Gordon Parks, for the first time. PHOTO BY MICHAEL TOROSIAN

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?