

Artist experiments with 150-year-old style of photography



By Harold Eastman

In a world obsessed with making cellphone photos instantly, then duplicating them endlessly over the Internet, Don Wilson's photography is an anomaly.

Wilson makes photographs that need to be patiently coaxed, wheedled and persuaded into existence over a five- to 10-minute period. And the results are one-of-a-kind physical objects that can't truly be duplicated.

The Coe Hill-based photographer began working with the 150-year-old wet-plate collodion process two years ago, when he decided to launch a photography business in the area.

He searched for a unique service to offer, and found it in collodion. "There are a lot of photographers in the United States using it," he explains, "but as far as I know, no one else is offering it professionally in Ontario."

That's not surprising. Making the photos is a complex, multi-step process that starts with pouring the syrupy collodion solution over a metal plate and ends with several minutes in a chemical bath to make the image permanent. In between there are two visits to a darkroom. Don uses a portable version of his own design and an exposure that can last from a few seconds to a few minutes.

The result, however, is mesmerizing. Highlights glow on the metal base, dark areas suggest an almost physical depth. And the texture of skin, hair, metal and cloth is reproduced in exquisite detail. Even unintended "defects" produced by the sometimes unruly process give the images a one-of-a-kind appearance. And because the photos are on a metal plate, they're truly unique.

You can buy Don's collodion still-lives locally, and he'll be offering wet-plate portraits soon as part of a more comprehensive photography business. He admits there are easier ways to make a living than in photography, especially working with collodion. "But the results are truly unique and truly beautiful. And that makes all the work worth it."