A tour of Mac Holbert's world-renowned studio

Inside Nash Editions

When it comes to color printing, Mac Holbert of Nash Editions demands excellence. His clients are some of the best known, and pickiest, artists in the world. Nash Editions is synonymous with fine art inkjet printing. Holbert and Graham Nash—yes Nash of rock music fame—invented, or at the least are associated with the introduction of giclée fine art digital printing back in the early 1990s. Originally, the work was output on expensive Iris inkjet printers, which were designed to make quick prepress color proofs. Those Iris beasts are long gone, replaced by wide-format Epson K3 printers.

I've known Holbert for years, and I wanted to talk with him about the challenges he faces daily in producing high-caliber work, especially with respect to color management. We spent a few hours talking at Nash Editions in Manhattan Beach, Calif., on a cool, overcast day. Walking to the back of the shop, I realized that I'd never seen so many large-format Epson printers in one location. One large print room is crammed with multiple Epson Stylus Pro 9800s, 7800s and 4800s. The walls of Nash Editions are covered with exquisite prints showcasing the capabilities of the both the staff and their customers.

Upstairs is Holbert's main workstation, fitted with an Apple Power Mac G5 and a Sony Artisan display, possibly the best high-end calibrated display ever produced. Here Holbert works with his clients whenever possible, and collaborates on image output. This is just one key to Nash Editions' success, the enormous amount of time spent conferring with clients to ensure their artistic vision is reproduced in ink on paper. Holbert is a master Photoshop user, but it's his sensitivity to the images and the needs of his clients that separate this shop from so many fine art print houses.

That day Holbert was working with a photographer on converting images shot on color film and scanned to black and white for the output of a number of enormous prints. The shop uses a Scitex EverSmart Pro for film scans. Some clients supply files they feel are output-ready, while others seek Holbert's extraordinary Photoshop skills to finesse the images. "If I had my choice, I'd prefer RAW files over film or existing images," Holbert told me. The client supplies a file or print with a RAW file and Holbert carefully renders the image to the client's needs, then outputs a small test-print for approval.

From the vantage of color management, the big challenge is producing custom ICC printer profiles for the various papers used with the Epson large-format printers. Holbert showed me a paper sample from a client in China, who had sent in a large job. It looked like thin tissue paper with thousands of embedded sparkles. "It's mica," Holbert explained. Obviously they'd need to generate a custom paper profile to produce the best color possible.

Holbert output a 918-patch color target from ProfileMaker Pro software from X-Rite (formerly GretagMacbeth) and read it in about two minutes on an Eye-One iO automated spectrophotometer. The electrostatic base of the iO held the thin and fragile paper while each patch was scanned. The height of the Eye-One Pro spectrophotometer can be adjusted, which is ideal for handling a wide

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Mac Holbert sets up the Eye-One iO to measure a target for building a custom ICC paper profile.

variety of substrates. Selecting the best paper setting in the Epson driver was the next biggest challenge. Holbert selected Plain Paper.

"Having the ability to build a custom profile in minutes is a huge advantage for us, since we have so many variables when printing our work," Holbert told me. "While the Epson large-format printers are very consistent in their output, sometimes it's necessary to start from scratch and generate a custom printer profile at a moment's notice. The speed, accuracy and ease of use of the iO can be a lifesaver for us," Holbert said. "Then we do our local corrections and output a small sample print for the client to approve. I would say a good 80 percent of our clients approve the first proof print, after which we output the full-size prints." For the rest, he usually does a minor selective color adjustment and nails it on the second proof.

Holbert has developed a formula for adding contrast and saturation in each file to adjust for print size. "Some contrast and saturation compensation is needed to account for the differences in print size, so the prints appear to match. Clients may need multiple prints of different sizes that they will sell, and of course, they all have to look the same as far as color and tone are concerned."

Once the proof is accepted, it's marked as BAT (*bon à tiré*—French for a "good pull"), a term leftover from the days of litho printing when the print pulled from the press was accepted and approved. Those proofs are stored in a dark room at Nash Editions called the Bat Cave. Holbert and company can retrieve the BAT prints for visual reference when necessary for reprints. Nash Editions also archives all the final image files. Reprint orders are the norm, and Holbert's clients

expect them to exactly match previous print orders. Implementing good color management practices and using devices that are consistent over time is key to ensuring this goal.

Both upstairs and down, Holbert has Solux lighting for viewing prints under a stable color environment. The computer room where he works on the Artisan is dark as a cave but can be illuminated with Solux bulbs whenever necessary.

Meanwhile, the profile for the mica paper is done, and looks good on the test image Holbert uses to evaluate color output. Now he's ready for the files to arrive and to begin testing printed output. The color management part of the job is completed, but the work that makes Nash Editions the premier print house hasn't even begun—that is, massaging the files to produce the color and tone each artist seeks. Here's where the path splits between art and science, where instruments, ICC profiles and computers alone could never produce what skilled artisans can, a fine-art inkjet print that pleases the creator and dazzles the viewer. ∎

For more information about Nash Editions, visit www.nasheditions.com.

For more information about the iO, go to www.gretagmacbeth.com/home/communities/i1color.htm.