

ilfochrome classic

DARKROOM

Iford Photo gave up the Cibachrome name - but they've also lost the contrast problems and acrid process smell. David Kilpatrick reports

Ifochrome Classic is the current retail version of the original Cibachrome paper and process, renamed Ilfochrome after Ilford Photo became part of the US-based Anitec empire rather than of Swiss Ciba-Geigy. In other markets such as graphic arts films, the Anitec name is paired equally with Ilford. For the British photographic market, the Anitec part is low-key as we all know the Ilford brand far better. Many British photographers, if asked to name two manufacturers of film and paper, would still reply 'Ilford and Kodak' rather than 'Kodak and Fuji' or 'Kodak and Agfa'.

We have to presume that renaming Cibachrome as Ilfochrome has not cost Ilford any sales. It's a bold assumption. Agencies and exhibition contractors were educated over a long period to ask for Cibachrome and still do. Many labs still call the product Cibachrome and ignore the name on the box. Ilfochrome was, after all, the name of various attempts by Ilford to introduce colour films over the years.

The threat to Ilfochrome as a routine product for small reprints and layout visuals comes from the ubiquitous R-type, or reversal print. It is common for an art director to select some trannies and ask an assistant to get 10x8 R-types without specifying whether these should be Fuji, Kodak or Agfa reversal prints, machine, hand, straight or contrast-controlled. When Ilfochrome is specified, it is generally assumed that the high gloss Melinex polyester based material is required, not the RC-based pearl finish. Very few buyers specify whether medium contrast (read 'high' for medium...) or low contrast (read 'medium') is to be used.

As photo labs are not going to educate the commercial buyer at this level, and as Ilford themselves can not be expected to, it comes down to the individual photographer informing the client about the nature and quality of possible results. The photographer can also, given the ready availability of Ilfochrome Classic in smaller sheet sizes and chemical packs, offer a profitable and controllable hand printing service.

I tested Ilfochrome Classic in three paper types - super glossy medium contrast, super glossy low contrast, and RC pearl medium contrast. This is an odd mixture, as the last product would normally be specified in low contrast. The pearl finish is principally used for portrait, beauty and PR prints where lower contrast is essential. The process used was Ilfochrome Classic P 30P, a clean and friendly kit which makes two litres in separate one-litre batches.

P 30 P chemicals

The chemical kit is expensively boxed, in the usual Ilford manner, and has clear multilingual instructions. The internal packaging is of the highest quality and should preserve the chemicals for the maximum shelf life. There are three packets of powder per litre mix, and one bottle of fixer concentrate. The powders are in impervious foil pouches; the fixer is bottled, but without a hermetic seal, so you just unscrew the cap and pour.

The developer is made up using a single pouch of powder, which is not homogenous. Some constituents have been pelletized using a drum mixer - this is a method which forms small balls, rather like seeds, of powdered chemicals. The remaining com-



ilfochrome ↑ VS

From an original Fujichrome 100 RDP 6 x 6cm transparency shot on a Hasselblad SWC, the Algarve fishing boats have a full range of tones from sunlit white (top of the cabin, rear boat) to deep shadow (foreground). The Ilfochrome Classic print has more detail across the entire range, and is a fraction warmer with lower saturation. The Fujichrome R-type by Graham Nash of London, below, is very accurate with brighter midtone contrast and more saturation, but much less shadow and highlight detail. Both prints scanned and corrected identically using an Agfa colour scanner.

r-type MCP ↓





Laid out - the three foil pouches and one bottle make up one litre of the three process chemicals. A kit contains two of everything, to make two litres total

ponents are crystalline. This simple answer to storing a complete developer in powder form in one pouch also regulates the dissolving times of the components. It means, however, that you must never attempt to mix a half-litre by splitting the weight. Solution, in an initial 800ml of water at the working temperature of 25-30°C, is rapid and free from residue. You can mix a litre in under one minute.

The bleach consists of two pouches, and has fewer respiratory vices than the original Cibachrome chemicals. It is not necessary to work outdoors with a face-mask! Once again, sequential solution of the components is very rapid and total at 25-30°C so that a litre very close to final required temperature can be prepared in a minute or two.

The fixer is simply diluted from concentrate, being careful to note that you add it to 600ml of water not 800ml as for the powders - it's all too easy to measure out a third 800ml, which would be too much. If anything, the fixer has a slightly stronger smell than the bleach.

In use, the working solutions have absolutely none of the unpleasant effects of former Cibachrome chemistry. If you were put off the process a few years ago by the acrid fumes, try again. That side of it has gone for good. No COSHH chemicals worksheets are provided with the kit, and it is assumed that this is for amateur use. No neutralizer or special instructions for chemical disposal are included, and in the small quantities involved disposal through the domestic waste system with plenty of water should not damage the ecosystem. A

slug of Domestos almost certainly has more effect, and washing paint stripper off brushes - well, I think photographers are pretty clean-living compared to D-I-Y enthusiasts.

THE PAPERS

The three paper packs provided all had colour filter corrections (relative, naturally) for yellow and magenta, and no speed correction. As the colour filter figures bore no relationship to each other or to the actual filter values needed whatsoever, they proved redundant. That's weaselspeak for useless.

However, the standard Cibachrome method of sticking a slide in the carrier, guessing the time and dialling 20 yellow on the Fujimoto enlarger (diffusion illumination) worked fine for Kodachrome. Using the low-contrast gloss paper, I had a decent print out first time, needing only a little fine-tuning. The process was carried out at 25°C using a Jobo CPA-2 processor and 12 x 16 drum to accept two 10x8 prints, with 120ml of chemistry. With a good rate of agitation, 60ml per print proved fine. At this temperature each main process step takes exactly three minutes, so the simplicity of the original Cibachrome process timing has not been lost. There is a thirty-second water rinse between dev and bleach, and the final wash is two minutes.

You can cut the times to two minutes per bath by working at 29°C, or cut the temperature to 20°C and give four minutes. The optimum would seem to be higher temperatures and shorter times where possible. When I got the Jobo out of lumber and set it up,

the pump motor had given up (it's an old machine) and I must record that Introphoto were able to ship a new one out for £25 same day - it took half an hour to fit, and worked perfectly.

The Jobo is not, however, the ideal processor for Ilfochrome unless you can afford two or more drums. The developer is extremely sensitive to trace residues of fixer and very, very thorough washing of the drum is needed. I would recommend a five-minute wash for the drum while the prints wash.

After getting a decent print off a Kodachrome slide, the proper test involved making an 8 x 8 print off a 6 x 6cm Fujichrome RDP to match a Graham Nash Fujichrome reversal print, which is as far I'm concerned the 'media' industry standard for a decent, low-cost machine R-type.

I'm used to scanning pix for computer input, and in this context little correction is needed to move from any one make of slide to another. Ilfochrome is very different. Printing Fujichrome needed a filtration of 50 cyan, while Kodachrome had needed 20Y. The material is very sensitive to film type, and you really have to set up and test for each film make you use.

The 'medium' contrast paper was out. Forget it, except for 20 x 16" or larger prints where the extra contrast will be beneficial. The shadows really block up or the highlights go on leave. The 'low' contrast paper was infinitely preferable. The final print is not identical to the Fujichrome R-type, as the dyes are different. The saturation is slightly lower, but in exchange there is much more detail at both ends of the

scale and the midtones are especially open. Greens are brighter and sharpness is naturally higher, as you expect from a hand print. The d-max was about 2% less than the Fujichrome but the whites were a similar amount brighter, making for a nearly identical overall tonal range.

This result was obtained on the third sheet of paper - one totally wrong at the 20Y setting, one not fully corrected at 20C, and the final print perfect at 50C - using drum processing and no kind of colour analyser or exposure meter. With a benchtop roller processor, a few advance tests and setting-up the exposure probe of the Fujimoto, high levels of productivity with results better than commercial machine R-types can easily be achieved using Ilfochrome Classic.

Drying the Melinex-based paper in a Durst FRC400 rack-type machine called for the high temperature setting and a long wait, but gave perfect results. The RC pearl paper dried with difficulty and far from flat. It really needs a feed-through roller dryer.

My only caveat is this. The Ilfochrome dyes respond to different light sources far more than the Fujichrome colours. Viewing the prints side-by-side under fluorescent light, tungsten light and daylight showed considerable degrees of difference. They look nearly identical by daylight, but not by fluorescent. If making Ilfochromes, set up viewing conditions to match the final use, or work with a northlight blue bulb.

CONCLUSION

With the availability of a first-rate small chemical kit mixable in minutes, and the low contrast paper in convenient sheet sizes and packs, Ilfochrome Classic offers the darkroom worker a direct route to very high quality reversal prints without special contrast reduction techniques.

The process calls for clean working, and the super gloss surface is fragile and easily finger-marked. Use cotton gloves when handling the dry prints, and put them in glassine bags - no process produces a better-looking print, so keep them that way.