

Distressing Negatives

Excerpt from The Experimental Photography Workbook, 4th Edition.

Christina Anderson describes four ways to creatively destroy your negatives, giving them a little extra "bite".

BURNING

Negatives, being plastic, melt and stretch and scratch very nicely. Practice the technique on some throwaway negatives first before you chance your good ones. You could start with a strip of 35mm negatives. Heat it over an open flame (carefully) or the stove, keeping the strip far enough away from the heat source to prevent burning and bubbling of the plastic - not that this would be a bad thing in some cases! While the strip is heating, you can pull on each end with pliers to stretch it. The final product will warp and may need to be printed in a glass negative carrier, or, at least, with a smaller aperture for greater depth of field.



Image above: Distressed negative by Christina Anderson's student Claire Calhoun 2001.

Image below: Distressed negative by Christina Anderson's student Brent Losing 2002.



SCRATCHING

Use the tiniest scratching tool possible for 35mm negatives, because with enlargement, the scratches will be huge and dominate your image. A quilting "between" needle embedded in a pencil eraser might do the trick. They are smaller, stubbier, needles and thus are less bendable. Watch your scratching process so you make smooth, fine marks, or the lines will appear jagged and distracting. When you scratch on the top/non-emulsion side of the negative, refraction will produce white lines on your print. When you scratch on the bottom/emulsion side of the negative, the scratches will remove emulsion and produce black lines in the print. If you are using a color negative, the scratches will produce black and whitish lines and also different colors. These are general rules of thumb, anyway.

Scratch words into the top of the negative. Write with a pencil on top of the image, and the graphite will act as density and print lighter. Scratch an empty space in one negative and sandwich another negative with it when printing, so the second negative will print through the cleared area. Scratch and burn at the same time, manipulating the plastic while it is warm.

TYOE 55 POLAROID

There are other ways of wreaking havoc with a negative. For instance, if you are using Polaroid Type 55 P/N that needs clearing in sodium sulfite solution after development, you can delay clearing or never clear the negative. The chemicals left on the negative will eat the emulsion a bit and bond to it. If you leave it in the sun and let the sun heat it up with the chemicals on it, this aging process will hasten.

James Fee distresses his P/N negatives this way by leaving them in the sun for 2 weeks to 2 months or longer! More obvious ways of distressing a negative are to step on it, squish it around in the dirt, carry it around in your backpack for a while to get creases in it, take a piece of sandpaper to it... just think, now instead of worrying about keeping your negative scratch free and dust free, you have permission to screw it up!



Image above: Distressed negative by Christina Anderson's student Kim Tallent, 2001.

BLEACHING TO DISTRESS A NEGATIVE

You can eat away parts of the emulsion chemically. The best way to do this is with potassium ferricyanide - photographic bleach. The easiest way is to mix up a little bit of it into a little bit of water until it resembles Mountain Dew (a lemon yellow) and use that. The bleach removes silver, and requires fixing afterwards, so rinse the negative in water until the yellow stain disappears, and then fix in film strength fixer for 2-4 minutes. If you accidentally over-bleached, you can redevelop the negative before fixing. In fact, you can bleach and redevelop the negative multiple times to mess with its contrast and grain. The more you bleach and redevelop, the grainier and higher contrast it becomes.

Use Dektol for your developer. Once you have bleached one negative, your mind will start working on the possibilities. If you think this is silly, think again: at a prestigious gallery this summer I saw a large image in the multi-thousands of dollars treated just this way. So splatter and drip and scratch away. You can also cut a stencil design, and lay it over the negative when bleaching to bleach a particular pattern.

POTASSIUM FERRICYANIDE (keep away from acids! eg stop bath)

IODINE SOLUTION Buy from the drugstore

RETICULATION DURING FILM DEVELOPING

Reticulation is a tricky effect to achieve. The emulsion reacts to extremes in temperature, shrinking and expanding, and can make a splotchy pattern. Sometimes, when you try to do this on purpose, nothing happens, and when you don't want it, there it is. The film is bathed in hot water and then cold, such that the emulsion crinkles up into the reticulated pattern. The pattern can be very uneven. A good way to make reticulated images is to first make several copy negatives or take some test pictures that you don't care about ruining, and then try different combinations of hot and cold water on them; taking notes so that you might be able to repeat the best results. I have had good results with Tri-X, and have been told that adding sodium carbonate to the water softens the emulsion and aids in reticulation, but I haven't tried that yet.



“With today's modern film emulsions it is very difficult to create reticulation, because manufacturers have gone to great lengths to produce better quality emulsions that can withstand sudden changes in temperature. When using a hardening fixer the emulsion is made more resistant to scratching which again will prevent reticulation on the final wash. I found the best film to produce reticulation is the old Adox film Efke. Its emulsion is very soft and cant cope with sudden temperature changes. I developed the film as normal and used Ilford Hypam to fix it, but at the washing stage I increased the temperature from the usual 20 degrees to 40 degrees. My first attempt was ruined when I used film squeegees to help remove excess water, the emulsion was so soft it came away with the water. I was left with a beautiful peace of clear film! I now handle the film with extreme care to avoid catching the surface, which can easily remove chunks of emulsion.” Peter Bargh



RETICULATION IN PHOTOSHOP

To funk up your pictures with faux reticulation, look to **Photoshop's Reticulation filter**. Don't let the name fool you, though: sure you could run it straight and get a good effect, but by combining the filter with some other powerful features like layers and layer properties you can make the look as dramatic or subtle as you'd like.

Start with any old shot you'd like. You can convert it to black-and-white before you begin, since the most common reticulation effect was seen in home B&W film processing, but there's no rule that says you can't do it to color photos too. (If you do choose to reticulate a color photo, consider desaturating it a bit before you begin. Bold colors can certainly work well, but a little faded, antiqued appearance often lends itself to the added texture of the reticulation.) Regardless, if you ran the filter alone, it would convert the shot to black-and-white automatically.

Duplicate your photo onto a new layer; this will become the reticulation layer. In the Reticulation dialog box (found under Filter > Sketch > Reticulation), adjust the density slider for more or less distribution of those reticulated dots throughout the frame. For a subtle look, go for a higher density number; a lower number means a more reticulated, harder-to-read, photograph.

The foreground level and background level sliders, for all practical purposes, adjust the brightness of the scene. Foreground means the black reticulated dots, and a higher number here means larger dots, more connections, and ultimately a darker overall look. Background represents the lighter area behind the dots, so a larger figure here means less reticulation in highlights, and greater blooming of the scene highlights into other detailed parts of the shot. Strike a pleasing balance between drama and detail. Keep in mind, too, that we'll be adjusting this reticulation additionally in the next step, so a slightly heavy hand isn't a bad idea.

Back in the layers menu, turn your totally reticulated image into a shot that balances nicely between useful detail and special effect. To do this, select the reticulated layer and, in the layer properties drop-down menu, set the layer to Overlay. This makes the overall shot a bit more contrasty, but it allows the original color and detail to show through, adding the darkest reticulated parts to the scene without obliterating everything in its path.

Adjust the layer opacity to fine-tune the amount of reticulation and detail in the image. To further fine-tune the detail, work with a layer mask or simple eraser. With the mask, just paint (at a low opacity and soft brush) on the layer in areas where you want more detail to show through. Continue building the mask until you've put back all the detail where you want it. With an eraser, the same process applies-removing reticulated density to reveal the original image on the layer below.

For a last little tweak, consider adjusting the sharpness of the reticulated layer. This added definition to the reticulated edges can provide just the kick this newly softer shot may need. I like Smart Sharpen, but even functions like Find Edges and Threshold can give the reticulation a further funky feel.