

FEATURES

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Syko (second from left) shows students how to prepare watercolor paper for cyanotype processing. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

A piece of paper, coated in a wash of yellow, is slipped into a tub of water. As it is gently swished back and forth, an image slowly begins to emerge, entirely in shades of indigo blue, but just as rich in detail as any photo.

The founder of Por Que Base, Syko (full name Steven Syko Song) has taught cyanotype workshops for two years at his studio on Heping East Road (和平東路), as well as at Booday (磨坊) and the Museum of Contemporary Art (台北當代藝術館).

But Syko's workshops aren't just about learning the steps behind making a cyanotype, which is processed with only two chemicals and ultraviolet light. His teaching trademark is asking students to think about the ideas and emotions behind each image they create. In Spanish, *por que* means "why" — but when the two words are joined together, the meaning is "because."

Syko, who taught at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California before moving to Taiwan four years ago, works in cyanotype because it is an approachable and inexpensive way for students to experience the process of printing their own photos.

"You don't need to have a photography background, you can just have your little pocket digital camera or even take photos with your cellphone and create the film needed to make the prints," says Syko. "It's convenient and very hands on. You don't need any special equipment and the experience of these images being developed before your eyes is what really gets the students."

The process for making a cyanotype is simple: images are turned into black and white negatives using photo editing software and printed onto clear transparency film. They are placed on paper that has been coated with a mixture of potassium ferricyanide and ferric ammonium citrate and left to sit in the sun for a few hours (at Por Que Base, the process is sped up with a UV light box).

Syko also teaches other alternative photographic processes (or printing methods other than traditional darkroom techniques). Images can be created on a clothing tag, as one student did during an open studio session last month, or even by placing a negative on a large leaf and leaving it in the sun.

Its unusual focus has already gained Por Que Base a certain amount of notice; Taiwan's edition of *GQ*, for example, featured Syko in a write-up two months ago. The studio, however, has traveled a rocky road. Syko and his Taiwanese-American wife moved to Taipei four years ago and launched a gallery in Tianmu. Their first show was called *It's Okay to Take Pictures*.

"We had phrases along with the photos like 'it's okay to photograph sound,' 'it's okay to photograph yourself when you are angry,'" Syko says. "We wanted to give people an idea, that you don't have to just take photos of cute thing or fun things or look for beautiful things, but that you can do something with your camera that is a bit more personal and creative."

But the gallery folded after little more than half a year because of their lack of marketing experience, says Syko.

After two years of soul-searching, the couple decided to relaunch Por Que Base — but with a focus on workshops.

Evan Lin (林崇偉), Syko's assistant, says that Syko's teaching method differs from what many Taiwanese people are used to in this country's educational system.

"He doesn't force a concept on everyone. He just gives someone a new way of thinking and lets them figure out things for themselves. It's not like rote learning, where you are expected to look at something only one way," says Lin, who met Syko at the Tianmu gallery.

Workshops end with a discussion about each student's photos;

Lin and Syko focus on making students without art backgrounds feel less intimidated. "If they have absolutely no knowledge or opinion about photography or the images they are looking at, I try to make them a bit more comfortable about speaking," says Syko. "I just want them to feel comfortable saying even the simplest things about what they see."



Syko mixes the solution of potassium ferricyanide and ferric ammonium citrate used in cyanotype printing. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



The Van Dyke printing process is similar to that of cyanotypes, but uses different chemicals that result in rich brown prints instead of indigo blue. PHOTO COURTESY OF SYKO



Cyanotypes are created using a mixture of just two chemicals and UV light. PHOTO COURTESY OF SYKO

Photo opportunities

Por Que Base offers workshops in alternative photographic processes — as well a chance for students to take a deeper look at the images they have created

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

SNAP HAPPY

Por Que Base's cyanotype workshops are NT\$2,000; Van Dyke workshops (another form of alternative photographic processing) are NT\$2,500. Both include two sessions and the cost of materials. Workshops are conducted in English and Mandarin.

• For more information, visit porquebase.blogspot.com, call 0939-215-724 between 11am and 9pm, or send an e-mail to porquebase@gmail.com

• **ADDRESS:** 4F, 38 Heping E Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市和平東路三段38號4F)

• **ON THE NET:** porquebase.blogspot.com or tw.myblog.yahoo.com/porquebase-blog

