

“The Formulary is a most amazing place in a mountain setting for that “mountaintop” creative experience, and August is the perfect time to end the summer filled with new inspiration.”

After spending a week at the Photographer’s Formulary this August teaching my third gum printing workshop (and having TA’ed for several other excellent instructors there as well), I mused on the question, why choose the Photographer’s Formulary for a workshop out of all the myriad things you could choose to do in the summer?

Montana is Big Sky country, known for its remote beauty, mountains, and grassy meadows. The weather in the summer is hot, dry, predictable, except for an occasional dramatic storm. Silence at night is deafening except for the occasional bear getting into the garbage can. Who wouldn’t want to visit?

The Formulary is in the middle of buck-nowhere, an hour north or south from the nearest town. Most cell phones do not work there (YAY) even though there is wireless. Detaching technologically from the outside world provides much time to concentrate on the creative process. There is nowhere to go and nothing to do but meet your own creative goals.

Food and lodging are all completely taken care of by the very owners and managers of the Formulary, so there are no distractions (and did I mention how excellent the food is?). The dining area, darkrooms, dimrooms, are all in one large facility so you get to know your fellow classmates and your instructor intimately. All are likeminded people pursuing likeminded interests. The instructor is there to share his/her passion and you are there to absorb. It is truly a magical experience. Tip: a lot of the off-the-record knowledge from classmates and instructor tends to happen over that beverage of choice before dinner. And at what other workshop do you have access to a chemistry store on premises to meet all your alternative process needs?

A few suggestions for before and after the workshop experience:

Before: plan on a day before the workshop to clarify goals for the coming week. Make sure the goals are specific and attainable. You will have from 9AM to 9PM (later if desired) Monday through Thursday to work on these goals, with Sunday night as the entry point and Friday morning as the day of detachment. This amount of time is perfect, neither too short nor too long.

Give yourself a free day the day after the workshop to compile notes from the workshop, develop a plan to continue your creative pursuits with what you have just learned, and to just plain come back to reality. During this time of reentry it is often a period of letdown as you move away from an intensive creative experience. This is as much for the instructor as it is for the students.

If at all possible, and time and money allow, a day or two of vacation after the workshop to experience the Montana landscape by driving to Big Fork or Flathead Lake nearby is a great way to reward yourself for investing such time and energy in your creative pursuits and experience the after-the-workshop letdown ever-so-lightly.

Keep in touch with your instructor and classmates by an occasional update email. This will encourage you to move forward with your creative goals instead of confining them to a workshop experience.

Better yet, set aside a week and make a plan to return next summer as well!