



Chiara Salvi conducting a photographic workshop. Photograph by Walter Valentini

Chiara, thank you for joining us at *Voyages*. To start, would you tell us a bit about you, your background, your studies, and everything that could contextualise your photographic practice?

I am an Italian artist and educator working with historical, experimental, and sustainable photographic processes. I was born in Florence, where I grew up surrounded by an enormous visual history, and later moved to London to study photography at the London College of Communication, UAL. I lived in the UK for about five years, and that period was very important for me because it exposed me to a much wider understanding of what photography could be.

My practice slowly moved away from photography as something that only produces images, and toward photography as a set of relationships: between light, chemistry, matter, time, weather, plants, surfaces, and the body of the maker. I became increasingly interested in the material life of the image — what it is made of, how it appears, how it fails, how it changes, and how much control we are willing to give up.

Today my work spans cyanotype, anthotype, chlorophyll printing, chemigrams, watergrams, sustainable developers, printing on fabric, glass, leaves, and other unstable or unconventional surfaces. I also founded Alternative Process, an online learning platform dedicated to teaching these processes in a way that is experimental, and accessible. Teaching has become a major part of my practice because these processes are not just techniques; they are ways of thinking.

Growing up in Florence, a city synonymous with classical art and stable pigments, how did that environment influence your eventual fascination with the “unstable” and fugitive nature of plant-based photography?

Florence is a city where permanence is almost part of the atmosphere. You grow up surrounded by frescoes, marble, oil paintings, architecture, restoration — everything seems to speak about preservation, legacy, and endurance. There is a very strong idea that art should survive, that it should resist time.

I think my attraction to unstable and fugitive processes came partly as a reaction to that. With anthotypes and chlorophyll prints, the image is not fixed in the traditional sense. It is vulnerable. It changes with light, humidity, the plant, the season, the way it is stored. It refuses the fantasy of total permanence. Everything is temporary. We are only here for a brief period of time, and because some things remain present throughout our own lifetime, we begin to mistake them for permanent.

I don't see impermanence as a weakness. I find it very honest. A plant-based photograph carries its own conditions inside it. It tells you that it was made in a specific place, with a specific material, under a specific light. It has a lifespan. Growing up in a city so invested in preservation made me very sensitive to the opposite question: what happens when an image is allowed to be temporary, unstable, alive?

During your three years at the London College of Communication, you were surrounded by both digital and traditional photography. What was the specific “tactile” experience or moment that triggered your transition away from digital pixels and toward physical, sensitive surfaces?

I do not think there was one dramatic moment, but rather a gradual dissatisfaction with the distance I felt when working only digitally. Digital photography can be incredibly powerful, but for me there was

always something missing: the physical negotiation with the image.

The darkroom changed that. Seeing an image appear in the developer for the first time is still one of the most magical experiences in photography. You are not just looking at an image; you are witnessing a transformation. Your hands, timing, temperature, paper, chemistry, exposure — everything matters.

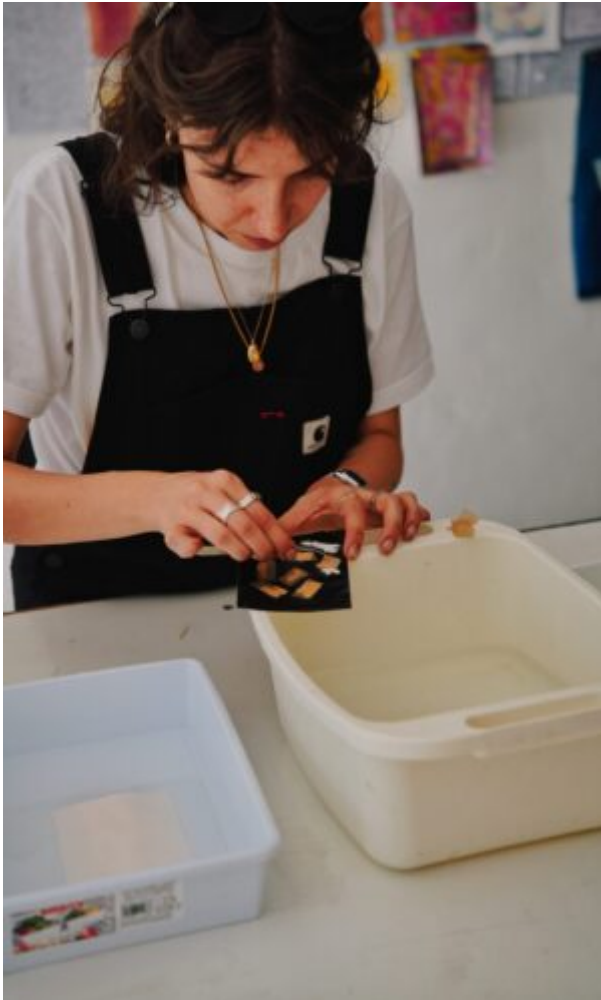
From there, I became more and more interested in processes where the surface was not neutral. With alternative processes, paper is not just a support. A leaf is not just a support. Glass, fabric, stone, eggshells, bioplastics — they all behave differently. They resist, absorb, stain, crack, hold, reject. That tactile unpredictability became much more interesting to me than the clean perfection of a digital file.

While living in London you participated in various workshops and symposia. How did these events affect the way you began to view the “material behind the image”?

They helped me understand that photography is not only about representation. It is also about material culture, history, ecology, labour, and access.

I encountered artists and researchers who were asking very different questions: What is an image made of? Where do these materials come from? Who developed these processes? What histories were forgotten? What toxicities are embedded in photographic production? What happens if we replace industrial chemicals with local plants, food waste, minerals, or household materials?

That changed the way I looked at images. I became less interested in the final print as a finished object and more interested in the chain of decisions and conditions that produced it. The “material behind the image” became the image itself, in a way. Having access to mentors, a network of artists, spaces dedicated to these processes was a turning point for me.



You have successfully mastered and documented an extensive range of alternative techniques. What is the internal drive that pushes you to move on to a completely new process once you have achieved a successful result with a previous one?

I think I am less interested in mastery as an endpoint and more interested in mastery as a doorway. Once I understand a process well enough to make it behave, I immediately want to know where it breaks.

For me, a successful result is not the end of the research. It is the moment when the process starts asking better questions. What happens if I change the surface? What happens if the humidity is different? Can this be done on fabric, glass, leaves, bioplastic? Can the chemistry be shifted? Can the image be toned, degraded, preserved, altered, grown, or allowed to disappear?

There is also a strong pedagogical drive. I document processes because I want others to be able to enter them, but I also want to show that these techniques are not fixed recipes. They are living systems. Every new process expands the vocabulary of what photography can be.

In our past conversations you highlighted the importance of sustainable processes like anthotypes and chlorophyll printing, among others. Was there a specific moment in your darkroom practice where the environmental impact of traditional chemicals became a personal concern that shifted your research toward “greener” alternatives?

It was gradual, but it became impossible to ignore. Traditional darkroom photography is beautiful, and I still value it deeply, but it also comes with a material cost: silver, developers, fixers, water use, disposal, ventilation, and the hidden infrastructures behind photographic production.

I started asking myself what it meant to make images while pretending that those materials disappeared after the print was made. They do not disappear. They go somewhere.

That question pushed me toward processes where the relationship with materials is more visible. Anthotypes, chlorophyll prints, phytograms, caffenol, plant-based developers — these are not automatically perfect or impact-free, but they force you to pay attention. You have to ask: what plant am I using? Is it seasonal? Is it local? Is it invasive? Is it food waste? How much water am I using? What happens to the material after the image is made?

For me, sustainability in photography is not about purity and being strict. It is about awareness, small changes, paying attention.

Your work involves techniques that emerged in the 19th century. Beyond the visual outcome, what do you find personally fulfilling about “re-performing” the experiments of early scientists like Henri August Vogel or Sir John Herschel?

I am not interested in nostalgia or in recreating the past exactly. I am interested in entering the same state of curiosity. When discovering something was possible. What happens if this substance meets light?

Re-performing those experiments also reminds me that photography was built through trial, failure, observation, and documentation. Chlorophyll printing began to circulate in the early 2000s, when artists started presenting it not as a fixed photographic recipe, but as an open-ended experiment with living material, sunlight, and time. What makes the process so interesting is that it cannot really be standardised: every climate, season, leaf species, humidity level, and exposure condition changes the outcome. Because we all work in different environments (and because the process is quite new) and have access to different plants, there is no universal “how-to” that guarantees results. Instead, chlorophyll printing asks us to experiment actively — to test local leaves, observe how they respond to light, document failures, and build knowledge through direct experience.

Much of your research focuses on camera-less techniques. What does removing the camera — the primary tool of a photographer — allow you to discover about the nature of light and plants that traditional photography might obscure?

Removing the camera makes light physical again.

With a camera, light is often mediated through optics, lenses, sensors, film, and composition. With camera-less processes, light touches the material directly. It bleaches a pigment, reduces an iron salt, degrades chlorophyll, stains a surface, or records the shadow of an object through contact.

This makes the process feel less like capturing and more like collaborating. In chlorophyll printing, for example, the leaf is not a passive support. It is a living material with its own structure, pigments, thickness, veins, water content, and biological history. The image appears through the plant’s vulnerability to light.

By removing the camera, I can study photography at its most elemental: light, time, surface, and change.

Alternative processes are described as a “return to the slow rhythms of the past,” often requiring days for an image to appear. How has adopting this slower, laborious lifestyle influenced your personal perspective on the “immediacy” of modern visual culture?

It has made me much more aware of how quickly we expect images to arrive, circulate, and be

consumed.

With many alternative processes, you cannot force the image into existence. You can prepare the surface, choose the material, expose it, observe it, adjust conditions — but you also have to wait. Sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days or weeks. Weather matters. Seasons matter. The plant matters. Your schedule is not the only schedule involved.

Slow processes create a different kind of attention. In a culture where images are often instant and disposable, I find it important to make images that ask for time. Not because slowness is automatically better, but because it creates space for a different relationship with looking.

To work with anthotypes, you must research dye plants and pigments. Do you see yourself more as a chemist, a botanist, or an artist, and how do you balance these different identities during your creative process?

I would say I move between them, but I do not fully belong to any single one.

I am not a chemist in the formal sense, but I use chemistry constantly: pH, extraction, oxidation, reduction, mordants, binders, light sensitivity, pigment behaviour. I am not a botanist, but I have to pay close attention to plants.

I think the balance comes from allowing these roles to overlap. The artist asks the question, the chemist helps understand the reaction, the botanist helps understand the living material, and the teacher tries to make the process legible for others.

I like that these processes do not allow me to stay in one category.

Unlike traditional painting which seeks stable pigments, anthotypes are designed to vary with light. What does the act of creating “disappearing” art teach you about the concept of permanence in the digital age?

Permanence is not always the most interesting form of value.

We often assume that if something lasts, it matters more. But anthotypes challenge that. They are fragile, fugitive, and light-sensitive. Their instability is part of their meaning.

In the digital age, we are surrounded by images that appear permanent because they can be copied endlessly, but they are also strangely weightless. An anthotype is the opposite: it may not last forever, but it has a strong material presence. It records a moment of contact between plant, light, time, and maker.

For me, disappearing art is not about loss only. It is about performance.

Your research touches on figures like Mary Somerville, who was unable to publish her findings because she was a woman. Do you see your own research as a way to physically “re-perform” and validate the work of these historical figures who were silenced?

I am very interested in the histories of people whose contributions to photography, science, and material experimentation were overlooked.

Mary Somerville is especially important because her experiments with plant-based light sensitivity predate or sit alongside some of the better-known histories of photographic invention, but her position as a woman shaped how her work was received and circulated. There is something powerful about repeating an experiment with your own hands. It brings the historical figure out of abstraction. You understand the patience, the uncertainty, the intelligence of the process. It becomes a way of acknowledging that photographic history was not made only by the names we were taught to remember.

You often mention that alternative processes imply a “particular lifestyle” involving slow rhythms. Outside of your research and professional life, how has adopting the “patience” required for these images to appear changed your personal daily routine?

Probably taught me to accept that not everything can be optimised or go as you please. Sometimes the sun disappears. Sometimes a plant does not behave the way it did last week. Sometimes a print fails for reasons you only understand later. That has influenced my daily life beyond the studio. I think I have become more comfortable with processes that unfold gradually and less interested in forcing

immediate results.

Many of the techniques you teach, such as phytograms and chlorophyll prints, are done in daylight rather than a darkroom. How does this shift from a controlled room to the “atmospheric conditions” of the outdoors change the artist’s relationship with their environment?

It changes everything.

The darkroom is a controlled space. You manage light, chemistry, temperature, timing. When you move outdoors, you enter a space where control is shared. The sun, clouds, wind, humidity, temperature, insects, plant moisture, and even the time of day become part of the process.

This can be frustrating if you expect consistency, but it is also what makes the work alive. The environment is not just a backdrop; it becomes a collaborator. A print made on a hot, dry day will not behave like one made on a humid, cloudy day. A leaf collected in spring will not behave like one collected in late summer.

Working outdoors teaches you to observe instead of simply execute. You have to adapt, respond, and sometimes abandon your plan. I think that is one of the most important lessons these processes offer.

Chiara, thank you so much for sharing your insights on the material life of the image, the importance of patience, and the value of letting go of control. We truly appreciate you joining us at *Voyages*.