



PAUL AREN / Daily Camera

Carl Mondragon, owner of the Mondragon Gallery of Art in Boulder, stands in front of his photo, 'Peaceful Wilderness,' which is a combination of two photos digitally combined.

Picture perfect

By Ellen Grady
For the Camera

Photo gallery owner goes high tech to improve reproduction

Carl Mondragon does not see the mixture of art and science as a paradox. In fact, the nature photographer and former engineer views his unique knowledge base as a springboard in a quest to produce the highest-quality art prints possible.

"I don't know of anyone in the industry who goes through the pains I do," Mondragon said. "And that's why my prints are so good."

Inside the Mondragon Gallery of Art, upstairs at 1320 Pearl St., an 8-by-20-foot portrait provides a window to a lushly col-

ored grove of evergreens jutting into a sinuous mountain stream. The level of detail, down to the blanket of moss covering the streambed's rocks, is remarkable.

"It's very self-satisfying when people come in and are taken by the work," Mondragon said. "When I show them how it's produced, they're amazed and shocked, because to do photography at this level is really hard."

Perfection, the true reproduction of an image, is

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COVER STORY



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Carl Mondragon, owner of the Mondragon Gallery of Art in Boulder, holds his Heildelberg D8400 scanner, one of four in the United States.

Next best shot

Carl Mondragon is always looking for the perfect image

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Mondragon's obsession. In an office behind his showroom, he converts film to prints, using state-of-the-art digital tools to enhance detail, clarity and image fidelity. It is an arduous process. "It's a matter of knowing the sources of variation and being able to control them," he said. "This is where my engineering background is very helpful, for control of process."

A spectrophotometer is used with his computer monitor to ensure precise color calibration. A voltage regulator provides a consistent level of electricity to eliminate input noise. A \$120,000 German-made acrylic drum scanner produces scans with resolutions up to 11,000 dpi. Scans are meticulously edited onscreen to remove any dust spotting, and are

printed from a giant Epson printer, covering one whole wall of the office.

It can take months from the time a photo is shot to the time it is ready to print.

"When I shoot film, my goal isn't how fast I can go," Mondragon said. "Sitting there and taking it all in, absorbing it all, is part of the food of the process for me."

Once an image is captured on film, Mondragon himself composes it through the production process.

"I want the purchaser of the art to know that it is my product, heart and soul," he said. "Unfortunately, most photographers are not part of the exposure process."

Mondragon said he finds the control ceded by most photogra-

phers in the printmaking process bewildering.

"Back in the older days of photography, most photographers did the developing, retouching and printing themselves. Digital photography tends to remove the artist from the total process."

Mondragon opened his gallery in January 2003. Sizes of the prints on display range from 13 inches by 9 inches to 44 inches by 96 inches, and cost between \$200 and \$3,500.

Since the opening, Mondragon has steadily gained a Boulder-based clientele.

At the downtown Boulder office of UBS, a financial services company, between 18 and 20 Mondragon prints adorn the walls.

"The prints are just so striking; the detail is amazing," said Gary Karre, the Boulder branch

manager.

Karre was introduced to Mondragon's work by a co-worker who took him to visit the gallery.

"It really spoke to me in the sense of it being stunning work," Karre said. "It was much easier for me to identify with than some of the institutional art we'd seen."

UBS employees were able to select the prints they wanted for their individual spaces. Karre feels the work is a fitting complement to the modern, light-filled office.

"The nature-oriented aspect of Carl's work seems to associate itself well with an office located in Boulder," Karre said. "Carl's a Boulder type of person; a local artisan, and I think his vision is totally appropriate."

The detail in Mondragon's prints recently impressed archi-

tect Paul Karre, the Boulder branch manager.

"I had sent in a DVD of my work, hoping they would consider it for exhibition," Mondragon said. "I was told, 'We really like your images, but most photographers have to be dealt in get an exhibit.' However, they were really impressed by the quality of my images."

Helping to archive one of the world's finest collections is a thrill for Mondragon. "I can't believe my good fortune," he said. "It's like I get my own private tour."

In spite of recent successes, for Mondragon, the quest for perfection continues.

"A lot of people ask me, 'What's your best image?' My answer is always I haven't taken it yet; it's still out there."