

EPSON STYLUS PRO 3880

BIG AND BETTER

The desktop-sized A2 format 3800 was a huge success with photographers who have lowish printing volume requirements so its replacement has a lot to live up to. Report by Trevorn Dawes.



▲ The Epson Stylus Pro 3880 in closed down mode.

Epson's Stylus Pro 3800 has enjoyed the status of being the most popular A2 printer, but after three years it's been replaced by the Pro 3880 model which has to meet the challenge of being equally – or even more – successful.

Like its predecessor, the Stylus Pro 3880 is an ideal printer for both the professional's studio and the enthusiast's study because it presents well as a relatively compact and elegant 'box', is easy to set up and equally easy to operate. Prints made with it in both colour and black and white leave little to be desired. The lack of a roll paper capability is reflected in the appealing price, but isn't a feature many will miss when using single sheet feed is the prime intention (even if these sheets are cut down from paper rolls to the maximum paper handling of 950x432 mm).

This sleek black-and-silver printer has a pull-out rear automatic sheet feeder and a drop-down receiving tray at front. These fold neatly away when the printer isn't in use. The rear manual paper feed is a separate item that's attached when required.

Apart from the badging, there are no changes to the outer appearance compared to the 3800, but several significant changes lie within. 'Vivid Magenta' and 'Vivid Light Magenta' inks have been added to the UltraChromeK3 pigmented inkset to enhance the colour gamut, especially in the blues and purples. AccuPhoto HD2 screening improves the ink placement accuracy for smoother colour and better tonal gradations. A new print head provides better colour placement and there is now an ink repellent coating to help

reduce clogging and minimise maintenance. For those keen to fully exploit their printing the Stylus Pro 3880 will accommodate 16-bit files. The front control panel with its seven buttons, three lights and a LCD info screen provide access to all functions and monitors precise ink levels and the print status. Three paper feed systems cover all sheet handling requirements.

Apart from the two new 'Vivid' inks, the remainder are the same as for the Pro 3800, however the vivid colours can't be used in the earlier model.

Setting Up

Straight out of the box, the printer's moving parts are so well secured with blue tape, it takes several minutes to free everything up. Thereafter it's a case of plugging in the power cable, switching on, shaking each ink cartridge before insertion, closing the ink bay lid and waiting about seven minutes for the print head to be automatically charged. When the 'Ready' indicator appears in the LCD panel, connect an USB or Ethernet cable (not supplied) and install the CD with the printer driver, user guide and software download. Altogether, set-up takes about 30 to 45 minutes, but is very simple and straightforward, aided by the "Start Here" instruction sheet.

After set-up, if you wonder why the ink levels do not register as full, it's because about 20 percent of each cartridge (which have an 80 millilitre capacity) is used to charge the print head. Of course, all new ink cartridges thereafter will have 100 percent capacity.



▲ The set of nine UltraChromeK3 pigmented inks. The Photo Black and Matte Black cartridges have their own individual slots.

The maintenance cartridge is already in place. This collects inks discharged by cleaning processes and by purging when the Photo Black and Matte Black inks are swapped. The status of the cartridge is continually monitored to give adequate warning for replacement, an event not likely to eventuate unless many hundreds of prints are produced.

First Prints

With any new printer I usually start out by making some small prints and with the expectation that several trials will need to be run before a good result is achieved. The Stylus Pro 3880 merely follows through on its easy set-up routine and, if all the settings are correct, those first prints will be spot-on.

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I started out with Epson gloss, semi-gloss and Traditional Fibre (Premium Gloss profile), used the ‘canned’ profiles and allowed the printer to manage colour. No problems whatsoever.

Media choice is a very personal matter and although semi-gloss or lustre are popular choices, it’s with the more expensive fine-art papers that the Stylus Pro 3880 really shows its potential.

Printing on papers such as Epson Fine Art Velvet and Epson Fine Art UltraSmooth is a real pleasure. Simply lock in the Epson profile and select the high quality mode. Excellent results were obtained every time without any need for test strips, even on the A2 prints.

In the main dialogue panel of the printer the defaults are for the Premium Lustre Photo Paper and the sRGB colour space. However, most of us work with Adobe RGB 1998 colour space and prefer either a matte or fine-art media, but once your favourite routines are established then all settings can be saved to convenient names (e.g. “My Glossy Premium”) and dialed up for prompt usage.

Borderless prints are a welcome feature, but the facility only applies to six standard paper sizes and doesn’t function on custom settings. The auto sheet feeder can handle papers from 150x100 mm (postcard) to A2+ while the front feed prints on paper or board up to 1.5 mm in thickness. Custom or ‘user defined’ sizing varies from 89 mm to 431.8 mm in width and from 127 mm to 950 mm in length.

There are nine profiles built-in for popular Epson media types and settings for proofing paper, plain paper and “others.” ICC profiles for other papers or any custom profiles can be introduced. Gloss differential and bronzing on gloss and semi-gloss media are problems generally associated with pigment printers, but the Stylus Pro 3880 test prints in colour didn’t exhibit these distractions and most of the black and white prints were satisfactory. One black and white print with

high contrast edgings did have gloss differential, but it was evident only at an acute angle.

Quality And Speed

The level of print quality can be established and high-speed printing may be set to ‘on’ or ‘off’. With all the variables available it’s up to the individual to assess the difference in print quality, note print times and measure ink usage.

At 2800 dpi (unidirectional print head movement) the printer uses only small droplets compared to some large and mostly small droplets at 1440 dpi (bi-directional). Printing times almost double at the higher resolution and about ten percent more ink is used. I found no real difference in the prints, but I’m inclined to believe anyone using expensive fine-art papers would

prefer to go for the maximum quality settings. The following results were achieved with a 370x272 mm image on A3 Epson Premium Gloss paper.

- Level 5, high speed off – 8:05 minutes, 1.5 millilitres of ink
- Level 5, high speed on – 4:55 minutes, 1.4 millilitres of ink
- Level 4, high speed off – 5:35 minutes, 1.4 millilitres of ink
- Level 4, high speed on – 2:24 minutes, 1.4 millilitres of ink.

Printing on fine-art papers like Epson Velvet at maximum quality is decidedly slow, but the end results are a joy to hold... and to behold. Few users will be concerned about the speed and will savour the paper’s journey through the printer. For the record a 370x210 mm image on A3 Velvet took 9:35 minutes, while a 540x305 mm image on A2 size paper took 17:40 minutes.

Black And White

When it comes to black and white prints the Stylus Pro 3880 leaves little to be desired. The three-level technology – photo or matte black plus two greys labeled as ‘Light Black’ and ‘Light Light Black’ – allow all those subtle tones to be revealed. In the ‘Advanced Black And White Mode’ the default setting is “Neutral”, but “Cool”, “Warm” or “Sepia” (or, indeed, any custom toning) can be established along with variations in tonal brightness. Metamerism is virtually eliminated.

Changing over from the Matte Black to the Photo Black ink takes 3:30 minutes and purges 4.6 millilitres of ink while switching from Photo Black to Matte Black takes 2:30 minutes with a loss of 1.6 millilitres. This happens because the two blacks share a common line to the print head and one must be cleared. It’s all part and parcel



▲ A print made on the maximum paper size of 431.8x950 mm shown half-way through from the rear manual feeder.



▲ A monochrome LCD read-out is provided on the 3880’s top deck and includes a set of ink level indicators.



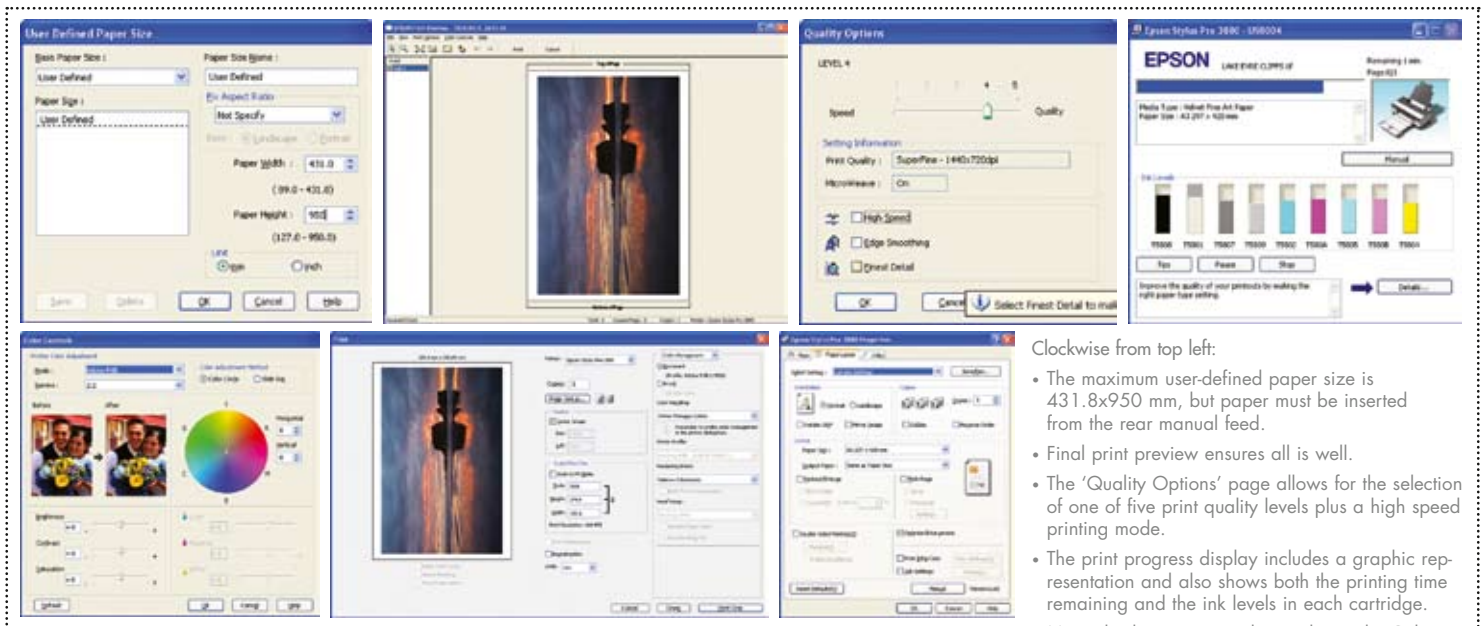
▲ Straight out of the box – printer, ink cartridges, rear tray feeder, the “Start Here” sheet, software CD and mains power cable.

of the cheaper printer price and will enforce efficient printing sessions with mixed media.

The front feed for fine-art media requires a platform to be first lowered. The ‘Down’ button on the menu panel is pressed to open the gate and paper is fed through to a guide position. The button is pressed to pull the paper through (hence space is needed at the printer’s rear) and the gate to close. When printing is complete press again to release the paper and the process can continue for the next print. This involves a few steps more than the standard rear sheet feeder but it does make for a perfectly flat and straight paper path and hence the very best relationship with the print head. Papers or board up to 1.5 mm can be accommodated.

Maximum Size

The maximum paper size that can be established in the User Defined panel is 950x431.8 mm. It’s



Clockwise from top left:

- The maximum user-defined paper size is 431.8x950 mm, but paper must be inserted from the rear manual feed.
- Final print preview ensures all is well.
- The 'Quality Options' page allows for the selection of one of five print quality levels plus a high speed printing mode.
- The print progress display includes a graphic representation and also shows both the printing time remaining and the ink levels in each cartridge.
- Manual adjustments can be made via the Color Controls panel.
- Page layout is the second print panel.
- Print panel.

critical to have the paper loaded into the rear, manual feed and not the auto sheet feeder as the latter approach will truncate the image, even though it looks OK in the print preview. This isn't mentioned in the user guide.

Print time at Level 5 (with high speed printing switched off) for an 832x360 mm image on 950 x 431 mm paper was 29:40 minutes. The 6.0 millilitres of ink used was calculated to cost \$7.44 in return for a rather sizeable print. At the end of printing the paper will remain on the fully extended receiving tray so it's safe to attend to other matters during the printing. The two prerequisites for rear-feed printing are adequate space and having the paper well flattened out after cutting down from a roll. Curled paper can be loaded, but it can lead to head strikes.

Job information is accessed by the printer's LCD read-out panel. By working through 'Printer Status' and 'Job History', data for the last ten prints can be accessed, including the amount of ink consumed to 0.1 millilitre accuracy. If the graphic representation of ink levels isn't to your liking, the menu will show the percentage remaining for each cartridge.

Epson's UltraChromeK3 inks may not enjoy quite the same longevity ratings as the HP pigments, but they are extensive enough. The Wilhelm Research rating (for a print under glass with no UV filtration) for the Premium Glossy paper is 85 years, for the Ultrasmooth it's 108, the Velvet is 166 and the Premium semi-matte is rated at 67 years. In album or book storage the ratings are between 200 to 300 years.

Flying Colours

All the usual tests we conduct were passed with honours – and include using various paper types including dual-sided with back-to-back registration marks for book work, large prints and borderless prints. The 'canned' profiles were accurate and didn't require any test strips. I'm not one for printing test charts because there are so many variables involved and a truly helpful evaluation is hard to achieve. There is an improvement in colour gamut compared to the 3800, but it would take special instruments to find the differences.

Printing a series of favourite prints and comparing the results from other printers is my preferred way of making assessments. Provided the appropriate media is selected and all printing settings are correct, the Stylus Pro 3880 certainly turns out great results with minimum fuss.

The Epson Velvet Fine Art paper is 100 percent cotton rag, has an acid-free base and a bright white surface. Expensive as it may be, this paper is something special and would be my first choice for fine-art printing in both colour and black and white when using the 3880. The Epson UltraSmooth Fine Art paper is also a favourite, but its base colour may be a little too yellow for some tastes.

The Verdict

The beauty of the Epson Stylus Pro 3880 lies just not in its elegant appearance, but in its ease of set-up and its printing capacity. The majority of users will probably opt for Epson's own media and can confidently adopt the included profiles and follow the let 'printer manages colour' method. Those who prefer other media merely install the appropriate ICC profile, turn off colour management via Mode>Custom>Colour

Controls>Off and let 'Photoshop Manage Colour' with the profile locked in.

Priced at \$2195 the 3880 is tantalising enough for those contemplating a new or replacement A3+ printer. Although the 3880 is more cost-efficient with inks compared to an A3+ printer it's important to appreciate this advantage doesn't come into play until a large volume of prints is produced. Anyone requiring just A3 or A3+ size prints would need to carry out some calculations with regard to the initial outlay and the on-going ink cartridge costs.

In many respects the Epson Stylus Pro 3880 could be regarded as 'entry-level' to the A2 format because it lacks some of the features of bigger and higher-end models such as a roll paper feed, larger ink cartridges and a built-in colour calibration device. But being relatively affordable and far more compact, this printer allows many more photographers to move into the A2 format. Significantly, there are no compromises in print quality. 🖨️

VITAL STATISTICS

EPSON STYLUS PRO 3880 \$2195

Printer Type: A2+ format (17 inches wide) for photo-quality prints via a nine-colour pigmented inkset (but eight cartridges in use at any one time with auto switching between matte black and photo black).

Maximum Resolution: 2880x1440 dpi.

Ink Cartridges: Individual per colour, 80 millilitre capacity. Epson UltraChromeK3 VM/VLM pigments. Colours are photo black, matte black, cyan, light cyan, vivid magenta, vivid light magenta, yellow, light black and light light black. Smallest droplet size is 3.5 picolitres.

Paper Sizes: Borderless printing on cut sheets from 150x100 mm up to A2. Printer cannot accept paper rolls. Maximum custom print size is 432x950 mm.

Interfaces: One USB 2.0 high-speed connection

and one Ethernet connection.

Acoustic Noise: 39 dB (A).

Main Features: Micro Piezo print head with 180 nozzles per colour, variable droplet sizing, AccuPhoto HD2 screening, LUT Technology, five print quality levels and two speed modes, Advanced B&W mode, auto matte/photo black ink switching (according to media type), head alignment and maintenance sensors.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 684x257x376 mm (closed).

Weight: 19.8 kilograms (without ink cartridges or media).

Price: \$2195 (inc. GST). Ink cartridges are \$99 each.

Distributor: Epson Australia, telephone 1300 131 928 or visit www.epson.com.au