

Epson Stylus Pro 3800 Printer Review

Since its introduction, Epson's Ultrachrome K3 pigment inkset has established a dominant position in the hearts and minds of legions of professional photographers and knowledgeable enthusiasts. With a wide colour gamut, a higher D-max of 2.3 and the virtual elimination of bronzing on prints, Ultrachrome K3 arrived with a hiss and a roar! Subsequent glowing reports by Wilhelm Research International on the longevity of these inks when combined with selected Epson paper types served to seal the deal for many. It's one thing for prints to look superb but when those prints can offer life expectancies greater than 100 years the left brain and the right brain are in a rare state of perfect agreement. Where the heart and mind goes the cheque book invariably follows. Epson tells me that almost 70% of professional photographers in New Zealand and Australia use their printers! No wonder Epson continues to demonstrate strong support of our professional photographers' events and awards programs!

This Ultrachrome K3 revolution began with the A3+ Epson Stylus R2400 and made its way into large format graphics printers in the form of the wide format Epson Stylus Pro 4800, 7800 and 9800 models capable of A2 (17"), 24" and 44" wide paper handling.

I reviewed the Epson 2400 in the November 2005 issue of TPM and the 4800 model over two issues of TPM in March and April 2006. Regular readers will know that I was mightily impressed with both these printers.

The 2400 would go on to be the favourite printer of many amateur and professional photographers of my acquaintance. They love the quality, can live with the speed but can sometimes be a wee bit frustrated with the small ink cartridges. The 4800 too has found a loving home with many professional photographers. The feedback I hear is that they're just as happy today as the day they bought the beast. Not a hint of post-purchase dissonance.

However, in my idea of a perfect world, the 2400 and 4800 would not require wasteful and time consuming changeouts of the black ink cartridges. With these models it is necessary to switch between Photo Black and Matt Black in order to match these to different printing stocks.

In my idea of a perfect world, an A2 photo printer would not require two burly blokes to lift it, nor would it be as noisy as the 4800.

In my idea of a perfect world, an A2 photo printer would cost less than just under four thousand dollars including GST.

Fast forward to 2007 and hello, the clever boffins at Epson have been listening to the feedback from around the world, continuing to evolve the product and doing their part in the quest for printer perfection. Enter the Epson Stylus Pro 3800, an A2 photo printer which answers all of my "in a perfect world..." requests.

So here we go...



Matt Black and the Photo Black are installed simultaneously. No black ink changeouts necessary! The printer simply uses the right black for the job depending on what media you select in the printer dialogue box. There's still some minor wastage but I'm assured that it's tiny and the printer whirrs away doing all that's necessary without user intervention.

There are four black cartridges, the two previously mentioned plus Light Black and Light Light Black and five colour for a total of nine on board. Why all those blacks? Print a few long tonal scale black and white images and the question is both quickly asked and resoundingly answered.

I lifted the box all by myself, the 3800 is a svelte 19.8kg versus the 4800's 39.4kg and physically not much larger than a 2400 A3+ printer. How do they do it? Well, they've done away with an internal paper tray and replaced this with a 20 sheet cut sheet feeder. Also, the 3800 does not offer roll paper handling capability and that's helped quite a bit in the weight and shape stakes. Neither of these are drawbacks for me as I'd rather use sheet paper anyway and I don't need to have many sheets in the printer at one time.

It's very quiet, way quieter than the 4800 where most of the noise comes from the vacuum system which flattens the paper. There's no vacuum system in the 3800 and it seems none the worse for it.

The 3800 costs less than four thousand dollars, way less actually at \$2699 including GST, and if you can live without some of the 4800's features it looks damned attractive at that price point.

At 80ml each, the 3800's pressurised ink cartridges cost round \$124 each, track key data such as ink levels and usage rates and are

only a bit smaller than the standard size 4800 cartridges which are 110ml.

The 3800 cartridges will be more expensive to buy - but more economical to use - than those for a 2400. It won't be as economical to run as a 4800 though, particularly if you're using the larger optional 220ml cartridges available for that model. That's the thing with ink, buying in larger capacities saves money and delivers economy. A lot like soft drinks and nothing at all like petrol!

The quality of prints is identical to that produced on the more expensive 4800 and the print longevity is identical. Prints made using this ink system are now widely accepted as archival quality so you'll be in good company with many professionals who sell their print work.

The 3800 is faster, Epson says more than 20% faster than a 4800, and I would not argue with that. Prints simply race out of the thing!

My testing of the 3800 involved a wide range of materials from Epson. I was particularly impressed with the UltraSmooth Fine Art Paper and the Enhanced Matte. Also tested was my old favourite, the Velvet Fine Art Paper. Although I'll admit a distinct preference for these matt stocks anyone who has used an Epson printer will know that the Premium Glossy and SemiGloss Papers are also superb.

The automatic sheet feeder works brilliantly and the rear manual sheet feed and front manual feed facilities necessary for some paper types (and weights) are a dream once you master them. Overall, I found thicker sheet paper handling superior to the 4800 with far fewer mis-loading issues. Also, like the 4800, if you do poke a sheet in slightly off centre the printer warns of this and makes you get it right before you commence printing.

There's a lot to like about the 3800 and in my short time with the printer I can honestly say I found nothing to dislike, apart from a flimsy door on the front print feeder tray. This may not be typical; the unit I tested had been elsewhere and I suspect that some clumsy writer may have damaged the thing before it got to me. Minor quibble.

The prints really are superb and with time and the trial of various paper types any photographer will get into a workflow producing output of which they can truly be proud. The combination of Micro Piezo print head technology and a minimum ink dot size of 3.5 picolitres results in 2880 dots per inch at the highest resolution. If you could see these dots you'd be working for NASA - this is continuous tone output that simply rocks!

The Epson software is excellent and provides a high level of control and customisation for advanced users. Epson's advanced black and white mode offers quick and easy tone and contrast control and some nice effects are possible. The less experienced will still be making prints quickly and easily but will find that they can explore more of the options as their skills develop and as they become more demanding about their own print work. The printer dialogue is intuitive and it's easy to find the paper you've chosen to use within this setup for a perfect match of paper and print settings.

So why would anyone buy an A2 photo printer? Most likely because you're making and selling fine art prints, or have a requirement to produce large images for décor, education or promotion. Purchase cost aside, it's faster and more economical than an A3; even if you make mainly smaller prints the A2 size is there when you need it. You might also be able to do away with buying expensive double mattes by doing first level matting or edge effects in Photoshop and printing for this effect on larger paper sizes.

Why would you buy the more expensive Epson 4800? Well, if you're making heaps of prints and need higher capacity ink cartridges, or maybe the roll paper capability is important for batch production or panorama printing, or maybe you need a large paper tray because you're churning out prints in huge volume.

More specifically, why would you buy an Epson 3800? Maybe you're a 2400 owner wanting to make larger prints with the same quality. Or you've considered a 4800 but resisted for purchase cost reasons, the black ink swap out issue or the amount of desktop real estate available to you.

Thanks to the nice folk at Epson NZ for making this fabulous piece of gear available for review. It's a tough act to follow and will be hard to improve on as it responds to so many of the suggestions made by reviewers of its admittedly excellent predecessors.

When I finally pull off that Big Wednesday win this baby is high on the list of items that I simply cannot live without!

Tim Steele



Side by side comparison of ink cartridge sizes, Epson 2400 left and 3800 right.

