

## DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY vs FILM

In my gallery I am often asked, 'what is better, film or digital?' For me this is a simple problem, since I stopped using film in 1998. In those days digital equipment was very expensive ... my first 4mp digital camera-back cost \$40,000. But for five years now I have used a digital 35mm SLR camera. When the Canon EOS 1 Ds was introduced, the consensus was: 'Film is dead!' That was still a very expensive camera, but now-a-days a 10mp camera does not have to cost more than \$1,000 (Canon G7). And the picture quality is extraordinary. So the answer to the initial question is, 'digital.' Full stop.

But if one wants to ascertain, 'what is more suitable for me, film or digital?' then the answer is more complex. When people say, 'oh, I just like handling film, processing, printing.' I'll say, 'good luck to you.' But the day I was able to abandon film and use the digital darkroom was a happy day for me, indeed. Digital is better, easier, quicker and more satisfying. And for a professional, it offers a lot less stress: Your client sees the picture on the spot, you import the image into Photoshop, manipulate it (a little or a lot – your choice), email a lo-res file to your client, they call and say, 'that's great', you make a print, burn the disk, write the invoice, mail or courier the lot, and it's only 4:00pm on the day with time still to go to the beach! On the other hand, you may be a traditionalist, where you do your best on the day and then take a handful of film into the darkroom or to the lab. When the film is processed, it's either exposed properly, sharp and what you wanted. Great. But it may be wrongly exposed, unsharp and useless. That's where the stress thing comes into it. Still, as a dedicated amateur you may prefer the old workflow; myself, I can't think of a reason why.

The point with digital photography and today's modern cameras is: A lot of the 'technical stuff' is taken care of by the camera software. You can override the auto settings and work on manual, but

you can also leave it on 'P' (P is for professional!) That way you concentrate on composition, light, the right moment ... i.e. on the creative process. Check your picture on the spot. Learn your lessons within 60 seconds. Correct your mistakes. Improve your photograph. Get on with it.

The next question often is, 'should students learn the traditional camera and darkroom techniques?' Imagine you want to become a motor mechanic, and they told you, 'we'll start with working on horse-drawn carts!' The comparison is probably a little harsh, but you get the drift. Contrast with film is very different to the digital process, where you don't have to choose a certain film stock, you just dial it into your camera. Just think: You never again agonize over colour or black & white? Tungsten or daylight? Fast or slow? And once your picture is taken, Photoshop offers tools that improve a photograph dramatically. If used with discrimination - and I strongly advise not to use any 'digital effects' at all, ever - your pictures will be no different to 'traditional' photographs ... just a hell of a lot better.

To come back to the above question: Probably. But only if these techniques are taught with bearing in mind that 'for real' you'll be using digital photography. Film will be history in just a few years. Nevertheless, on the fringe chemical photography - predominantly silver halide (bromide) b&w prints - will always be used by some dedicated, traditional artists. Just as people still play around with pin-hole cameras, the collodion (dry plates) and gelatine processes, albumen prints, daguerrotypes et al. All this stuff is great fun. Research it. Learn about it. Get books about it. Enjoy it. Pursue it as a hobby.

But if you want to take a picture, get it published in a magazine, have it pay the rent and put food on the table, you'll be using digital photography ... and the sooner you learn Photoshop, the better.

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