



The TOY CAMERA LOOK, Digitally

by Larry Brownstein

Many years ago I attended a lecture by Jay Maisel sponsored by the ASMP. Maisel is well known for a wide variety of imagery—he is hard to categorize. But that day he blew our minds. He showed several sequences of images of unexpected subject matter such as used and discarded hypodermic syringes he had come across at a heroin den. After each series he paused and said to the audience, “I’ll bet you’re wondering why I would take a picture like that.” And, after another pause for dramatic effect, he answered, “Because I wanted to.”

It could have been as long as 20 years ago that I heard Maisel

speak so it is surprising that I remember anything at all. That said, there’s certainly no guarantee that I am remembering it accurately. But the essential message came through and has continued percolating in my mind—photography is not only about commerce. Sometimes, and hopefully often, it is about creative self-expression, or, in other words, art.

I try to keep that in mind and I often photograph subject matter in styles that are interesting to me without much concern for marketability. I started experimenting with the Holga (a cheap, plastic toy camera) as a way to stretch myself photographically. Actually, I



Above: This is an image taken with a Holgaroid. It shows the vignetting and liquidy edges that occur when you mess with the edges during development.

use a Polaroid Holga—a Holga teamed up with a Polaroid back. It is a strange beast indeed, with vignetting and flare attributed to the cheap lens and a strange color palette as well as liquidy, chemical edge effects from the Polaroid back. I still enjoy using that strange camera, even though the Polaroid back gets in the way of looking through the viewfinder. Shooting blind only adds to the fun!

The image above shows a good example of the interesting results one can achieve when using a Holgaroid, as it is affectionately referred to. Notice the fuzzy edges, vignetting and liquidy edges that I emphasized by peeling some of the edges prematurely. (See my article in the January 2005 issue of *Rangefinder* about The Polaroid Holga to see more Holga photos).

Before putting my hands on the Holgaroid, I had long been one to use a tripod and maximize depth of field—you might call it the *f/64* or Ansel Adams aesthetic—so I found it to be very liberating. I became a fan of the “small zone of sharpness in the middle and who knows what will happen elsewhere” aesthetic.

But the Holgaroid has its share of problems that are frustrating. For one thing, the

shutter speed is fixed and it is debatable if the sunny/cloudy slider really closes the aperture more than a fraction of an *f*-stop. In other words, it is pretty much an outdoor camera (think sunny *f/16*) although

you can use films with different speeds if you really want to adapt it for a variety of lighting situations.

Also, the Polaroid back is prone to light leaks, especially if unused film is left in the camera for a while. Sometimes this adds an additional serendipitous artistic effect but equally often it leads to disappointment, especially since the film costs over a dollar per sheet.

Though I put my Holgaroid away for a while, I discovered that it had changed the way I photographed. I began shooting with my lenses wide open to minimize depth of field. The 85mm *f/1.2* lens became my favorite lens because of its phenomenally shallow depth of field.

This lens is also wonderful because of its ability to suck up light. You hardly ever need a flash! A whole breed of photographers rely on this lens and lenses like it for spontaneous available-light wedding photography. But even more important than its ability to allow a photographer to shoot in low-light situations is its incredibly shallow depth of field, and the resultant blurry backgrounds! When I was researching this lens on some Internet forums I came across an unfamiliar word: *bokeh*. People were talking about what great bokeh this lens had. I thought it was some slang that I would never run across again. But when I saw it in a few more posts, I looked it up and found that it is





indeed in the dictionary, meaning “the visual quality of the out-of-focus areas of a photographic image.”

I, too, used this lens for my wedding photography and for portraiture. But I realized it would be a perfect lens for a street photography series that I had already begun working on—a series that was a bit moody and explored the isolation that I sensed is increasingly a part of our culture.

Then I came across a Photoshop action—the Square Color Shift action that comes with Parker J Pfister’s Digital Darkroom package—that simulated the toy camera effect and I began playing around with it. Soon I was creating images that were just as compelling as those I got with the Holgaroid.

The great thing about Pfister’s actions is that they leave the original image intact on the background layer (apart from the crop-to-square format). Also, each step that the action performs creates a new layer. This leaves the user with numerous options. Any of the layers can be turned off, layer masks can be edited, adjustment layers can be edited to change contrast, saturation, or lightness and the opacity of any layer can be changed.

The action prompts you to select a square crop box and then does its magic. The first thing I do after the action is finished is

change the layer mask used to create the soft edges. Pfister uses a Radial Blur in conjunction with a circular mask to protect the image center from blurring. Even after feathering the mask by 200 pixels, I find the transition to be too hard. So I replace Pfister’s mask with a mask I created with a Radial Gradient. This provides an extremely smooth transition.

Similarly, Parker uses a circular mask to mimic the vignetting that is a “feature” of the Holga. I change this mask by using a Radial Gradient for a smooth transition. I also lower the opacity of that layer so the effect is not so dramatic, though of course this is just a matter of taste.

Pfister also uses a Color Fill layer to add a color cast to the whole image. For some reason he chose a light blue as the default. I often change this to match the mood of the image and have had some good results with everything from pink to red to brown. Adjusting the opacity of this layer allows me to fine-tune the color cast.

You can, of course, make your own action to do similar steps. The basics are as follows:

Crop to square dimensions, duplicate the background layer and use a Radial Blur with a Radial Gradient Mask to simulate the blurry edges of the cheap plastic lens. Again, duplicate the background layer, darken it and mask with another Radial Gradient Mask to simulate the vignetting of the plastic lens. Pfister’s action goes well beyond these basic steps, but these are the essential ingredients. (Of course, Pfister’s Digital Darkroom has numerous other actions too. Pfister’s actions seem to have in common the creation of a vintage look and he also includes actions that add a variety of toning effects.) Finally, you can consider





at ISO 160 at 1/200 with no flash. Notice how the poster is quite out of focus even though the man is leaning against the display. Interestingly, I showed the picture to him and he looked at me as though I was a magician—his eyes bulged with amazement. It wasn't clear whether he was surprised by how he looked, or simply because he had never seen an image on the back of a digital camera. The photo was accepted into the book *Canon DSLR: The Ultimate Photographer's Guide*.

It is this type of experimentation that has kept photography interesting for me and has led to an evolution of my style. Even in my more commercial endeavors—travel, stock images, weddings and portraits—I find myself shooting differently. Clearly, Maisel's lecture had a powerful impact on me. I hope I can always keep in mind what he was teaching: If you want to grow as an artist, it is important to experiment, have fun and, most simply, photograph **"BECAUSE YOU WANT TO."**

using some digital edge effects (Edgy Girl, Kubota Sloppy Borders, Parker J Edges or PhotoFrame) to simulate the liquidy peel-apart Polaroid edges.

I've begun using this technique—the 85mm f/1.2 or 70–200mm f/2.8, shot wide open and post-processing with the toy camera treatment—around Los Angeles. I've shot at Venice Beach, Hollywood, Beverly Hills and on Broadway (downtown). Each locale has its own flavor, but the images are tied together into a coherent series by the toy camera look. They also seem to have another characteristic in common: an overtone of melancholy. I'll leave it to the reader to determine if this is a function of the subject matter, the technique or the image-maker. Perhaps it is a bit of each.

One of my favorites in the series is the image of the harmonica player in front of the billboard of Jim Carrey, taken in front of the famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre in the heart of Hollywood. I went there to photograph just for fun. I was aware that a variety of performers dress up and impersonate famous movie characters—Chewbacca, Borat, Superwoman, etc.—and pose with tourists for tips. I thought I might get amusing images of them, and I did. But I also found this man playing his harmonica. I asked him to move just

a few feet until the juxtaposition of him and the poster in the background was just as I wanted. I had him play while I took a few frames. At f/1.2, even though the light was fading behind the buildings on Hollywood Boulevard, I was still shooting

Larry Brownstein is the photographer and author of two books, Los Angeles, Where Anything is Possible and The Midnight Mission. His photos appear in numerous books, magazines, calendars, etc. His stock photography is represented by Getty Images. He has a growing wedding photography business. His work can be seen at www.larrybrownstein.com.

