

A different point of view



ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE

"It was my mother's. I've taken great stuff with it."

—Dan Zamudio, on his vintage Diana camera



PHOTO BY CHRISTINE CONNELLY

Fisheye

Christine Connelly shot this with a Fisheye2 camera, whose oblong exposures reduce the world to a keyhole. She's not unusual as collectors go, said Jill Enfield, a judge at the Krappy Kamera Competition. "I think it proves to people they have an artistic bone in their body."



Polaroid

Christine Connelly, a 24-year-old Chicago Web designer, prizes her Fisheye2, but sometimes she reaches for a Polaroid instant—which gives everything the gauzy mask of a Fleetwood Mac magazine shoot. "I like that these cameras take a lot of technical stuff out of my hands. They don't do it that well. But they're fun and inexpensive and it's about the image. If I dig it, who cares what [kind of camera] I took it with?"

PHOTO BY CHRISTINE CONNELLY



PHOTO BY BILL VACCARO

Holga

Bill Vaccaro, a Rogers Park librarian, had "a torrid three-year affair with digital and it drove me to my true love—film, medium format." Vaccaro and his modified plastic Holga have won contests, and his images have been published in Light Leaks, a new magazine dedicated to low-fi photography. "I love the dreaminess, the fact you don't need to think while shooting—the crappier the camera, the more interesting the image."

Flaws add beauty, aficionados say

Continued from Page 1

(they do; 62 percent of U.S. adults have bought a digital camera, according to the Consumer Electronics Association).

Yet a shabby-chic movement has taken hold among everyday picture takers, bored with the perfection of digital, and perhaps a bit nostalgic. They've discovered the warmth of old-fashioned, gaffe-loaded photos shot with cheap plastic cameras.

"And no, I'm not surprised," said Robert Clarke Davis, who teaches photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "People still want to remind you there's a real person behind an image. They want to remind themselves, I think. You wouldn't write a love letter on a computer, would you? I think it's the return of the craft aspect of what's become a passive activity."

Even more ironic—this low-fi movement is being driven by technology, by fans of junk cameras who flood blogs and social networking sites with blurry, overexposed images. (On Flickr, for instance, there are 250 groups dedicated to the virtues of those fogged-in Diana images.) Indeed, this low-fi trend is even threatening to go mainstream—if you think of Urban Outfitters, the leading retailer of low-fi cameras, as mainstream.

Now gift shops like Paper Source are stocking cheap cameras. And neighborhood camera stores—and museum shops, too. "Artists have always been fascinated by the unusual," said Laura Nealon, chief sales manager for Lomography, the Austrian-based camera society (with offices in Brooklyn) that has become the primary distributor of affordable retro cameras. "But I think we're seeing a shift. I see more regular people—between 18 and 35—falling in love with this stuff."

We're talking toy cameras—the professional photographer term for badly made novelty cameras. We're talking the Diana, the sort of hollow-body giveaway you once

Let yourself go low-fi

So, you say you want to take lousy pictures? Ahem. We mean, rather, you say you want to take interesting pictures with a cheap plastic camera? Climb on the low-fi bandwagon. Here are a few answers to your questions:

1. Where can I find a low-fi camera?

The quick answer is Urban Outfitters (for instance, 20 S. State St.; 312-269-9919), which sells a variety of Lomography branded cameras, including Dianias, Holgas, and the Fisheye2. Central Camera (230 S. Wabash Ave.; 312-427-5580) and Helix (310 S. Racine Ave.; 312-421-6000) carries Holga—as does Paper Source (919 W. Armitage Ave.; 773-525-7300). The shop at the Museum of Contemporary Art (220 E. Chicago Ave.; 312-280-2660) carries a few kinds, in addition to Lomo replicas. Most of these stores

also sell film. For Polaroid instant cameras, try eBay or Craigslist.

2. OK, but can I get the film developed?

Usually at professional labs. Central, for example, says they "develop any kind of film." Another good place: Gamma Imaging (314 W. Superior St.; 312-337-0022).

3. Where can I learn more about low-fi photography?

The Museum of Contemporary Art (mccachicago.org) tends to have a class in pinhole camera making every few months. Dan Zamudio's gallery, the Sulzen Fine Art Studio (2720 W. St. Georges Court), shows his Diana pictures. Online, try Light Leaks magazine (lightleaks.org) and Lomography.com.

—Christopher Borrelli

got in the mail for answering a survey. Zamudio's Diana is an original, but Urban Outfitters sells a replica for \$95. And we're talking the Holga, the most popular retro camera, a Chinese-manufactured brick that gravitated east in the 1980s, known for its inevitable light leaks. It's available at the Museum of Contemporary Art store for \$82. We're talking the Lomo, the disposable Soviet-era relic that became a cult favorite in Europe (then North America), thanks to a pair of Lomo-loving Austrian backpackers who later founded Lomography. And we're talking the trusty Polaroid instant camera—simultaneously on the brink of extinction (Polaroid announced in February it was halting production on instant cameras and film) and the verge of something like a revival, appearing routinely at low-fi-friendly competitions such as SlideLuk PotShow (held last month in Chicago) and the Krappy Kamera Competition, held in New York City. Sarah Knopf relates.

She's 24, lives in Hanover Park and always travels with a vintage Horizon. Each image

comes out two negatives wide—vast and panoramic and, in Chicago, few shops will even develop it. "I was at a carnival and I set up my camera, which takes time. But all these people were taking pictures with their digitals and saying like, this is much easier. And I'm like, Oh, my God, what is wrong with the world? Why is the cleanest way of doing something necessarily the best way of doing something?"

Jane Fulton Alt learned this lesson the hard way. For years the Evanston social worker has been making a regular pilgrimage to Mexico with celebrity chef Rick Bayless. Her pictures from Mexico hang in his Frontera Grill and Topolobampo. About 12 years ago, while preparing for the trip, her Hasselblad camera—a prized possession among photographers, costing several grand—broke. She panicked, then she thought "Why not shoot with a Holga?" She paid less than \$20 for one. "It just opened me up to do this incredible body of work," she said. "You can't regulate everything—it has a setting for sunny, and for cloudy. That's it.

It's this total camera of faith. You have no idea what you're going to get."

Junky cameras exist in a limbo, between the casual and aesthetically minded. Interest is at least as old as Janet Malcolm's 1970s New Yorker essays on the Diana (which gave the camera renewed life), and at least as hip as when toy cameras became the tools of choice for Andy Warhol's Factory.

And often—if shoddy construction has given you a hairline split, if streaks of light sneak into the final image—you can get the most ethereal, unpredictable, vaguely apocalyptic results.

It also illustrates a curious selling point about low-fi photography: Take a picture of your cat and you don't need to know much about photography to come back with something poignant, even unsettling. "I'm a little wary of these cameras, to be honest," said Whitney Bradshaw, the curator of the Bank of America's photography collection. "The aesthetic can override everything. I have an issue with people who rely on the unusual—as though that's somehow enough for a body work to be interesting." That said, Mary Warner Marien, a Syracuse University art professor and author of a history of photography, said as long as there have been cameras there have been photographers who say photography is growing soulless, too easy. They crave failure.

Like Adoree Dunn.

On an early September morning, the 27-year-old store clerk stands on Sheridan Road, demonstrating her Holga. She shows off a few pictures of her family. The photos have an enchanted quality. The colors are soft, the shadows velvety. She assembles the camera with reckless speed, snapping plastic against plastic. She points her camera at a garbage can and presses the shutter. "I like that I can take film to the store and get it developed. I miss that." Her camera has a hole in the bottom. Sometimes sand gets in and negatives come back with scratches. "I like that I have no idea what I'll get."

There's a faint click.

She shrugs.

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