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Digital defiance

As the industry shifts away from film cameras, some photographers stick with tradition

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The cheery voice on the answering machine of Benbrook photographers J.B. and Susan Harlin tells callers: "We're busy at the moment. We're having fun the old-fashioned way."



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J.B. Harlin and his wife, Susan, practice their love for landscape photography the vintage way, with large wood-and-brass cameras, dark cloth and bellows. At top, images in the Harlins' viewfinder appear upside-down to the photographer.

In a world gone digital, that means the Harlins are pursuing their love of photography without memory cards or computers. They use large-format film and brass-and-wood cameras, complete with old-fashioned bellows, dark cloth and upside-down images in a viewfinder. And while many darkrooms are vacant or remodeled for other uses, the Harlins still spend hours in theirs.

The film and camera industry is changing to accommodate the spread of digital cameras, which use sensors instead of film to record images. A shrinking but resolute number of photographers still cling to film cameras, although generally not as old as those used by the Harlins.

Now many people talk of pixels instead of grain, and some of the most popular and innovative cameras will fit in a shirt pocket.

And in the world of film photography, some iconic camera models will become harder to find.

Nikon Corp. announced in January that it would stop making most of its film cameras to concentrate on digital ones, and Konica Minolta announced that it would stop making cameras, film and color paper by March 2007.



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Although many professional photographers and ardent amateurs are migrating to digital, some have been reluctant, area photographers say.

"A lot of people that have spent years with film hated to go to digital," said Ken Spencer of Fort Worth, a former president of the 75-year-old Fort Worth Camera Club.

But he estimated that 90 percent of the club's 120 members have made the switch.

Spencer said he still uses film when he shoots large-format images, because "there's no digital that can give me that resolution -- although there may be soon."

The Harlins, who travel frequently, say they use digital cameras only to shoot "reminder" images, quick shots of spots they want to revisit so they can photograph them in a more leisurely and extensive manner.

"It can be slow and tedious to process all that, but it's what we do," said J.B. Harlin, author of several books on photography.

Besides spending long sessions in the darkroom, J.B. Harlin also builds some of his own old-fashioned cameras.

"A lot of my friends who print digitally scan film because they think the film resolution beats digital," he said. Scanning film allows photographers to import a digital image of the negative or transparency to their computer.

His wife, Susan Harlin, puts it simply: "Digital just doesn't sing to me -- especially for the size we do."

Ted Black of Bedford, a former president of the Trinity Arts Photo Club, said he and a few other photographers in the 70-member group remain skeptical of even the most advanced digital cameras.

"I know the world is changing rapidly," Black said. "But some of us still have the trusty Canon or Nikon, or whatever, that is still doing a very good job with very good resolution. We are just not fully convinced that a \$1,000 or \$2,000 digital will deliver. I get kicked in the shins all the time because I haven't gone digital."

Die-hards wanting such supplies such as slide film are finding them scarce, although some small companies are filling niches.

But there's more to consider than supply, cost, familiarity and even loyalty, film aficionados say.

Because digital photography allows for greater manipulation of light, contrast, color and other aspects, some say it's not clear at what point a quality photograph becomes a clever manipulation.

"With film, the contrast of the scene is more or less a function of the film," Spencer said. "If the light is very harsh or flat, you're more or less stuck with it. And with film, at least with color transparencies, that's true, too."

But by blending digital photography with software, "you can change contrast, work on the color balance," he said. With some of the newer, more advanced programs that cost several hundred dollars, the possibilities are even broader, he said.

"If the roses aren't red enough or you don't like the sky, you can change that," Spencer said. "You can put things in and take them out. A lot of old-time photographers have been reluctant to accept this.

"Before, they would say, 'Pictures don't lie.' But now, they do lie."

Still, one thing hasn't changed, Spencer said.

"To obtain a good photograph, whether it's in the old view cameras or the latest digital, you still have to be a good photographer," he said.

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