

The 'slow photo' movement, developing a following

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

In an old shoebox, I have a Polaroid of my beagle and me, taken in Lower Manhattan about a decade ago. That was my last Polaroid print — until this spring, when I was walking around Cleveland with a camera shop owner and his friend Tim.

Tim was using a Polaroid 250, which he'd bought at an antiques mall, and an old pack of Polaroid instant film. He shot a picture of me, and in the palm of my hand, I watched the image miraculously appear. Because of the film's age (it expired five years ago), the colors were a little off, giving it an artsy, dreamlike quality. And because Polaroid will never make film again, it was also a collector's item.

Polaroid, best known for its instant cameras, stopped making film in 2008. That same year, rather than watch Polaroid fade into extinction, some former employees teamed up to form the Impossible Project. They saved the production machinery in the Netherlands and were able to start manufacturing new instant film for old Polaroid cameras.

Today, according to the Impossible Project, there are more than 100 million of these classic cameras that can use Impossible's film, which hit the market in 2010. Some are in our parents' attics; others are stuffed in boxes at yard sales; and more and more, they can be found — refurbished and shiny — at retro camera stores across the country.

Not surprisingly, says Cory Verellen, owner of Rare Medium, a photography store in Seattle, some of the biggest Polaroid enthusiasts are teens and young adults who have never known a camera that wasn't digital.

"But then you also get folks my age — I'm 39 — who grew up with instant cameras and want to capture some of the magic of their childhood," he says. "Every time I'd go to my grandma's, she'd break out the same Polaroid camera and shoot us to measure our progress. The Polaroid was ubiquitous in the U.S. I get a lot of customers who are nostalgic for that."

There's also a sense of backlash against digital technology, and the emergence of what might be called a "slow photo" movement.

"Our demographic is pretty young, so we're talking about a generation who grew up in digital, and they see our film as a way to escape," says Dave Bias, vice president of Impossible America. Initially, Impossible sold about 30 to 40 refurbished Polaroid cameras a month — found largely on eBay and through pickers (people who find cameras at yard sales). Today, it sells more than 2,500 each month and has standing orders through the end of the year.

But it's not all about nostalgia, says Bias. "For us, it's showing that film has a viable place in the modern world," he says. "People can have a real physical photo — something they can touch, something tangible."

Next month, Impossible will take the ultimate step in the marriage of digital and analog when it releases its first hardware device, the Instant Lab. Rather than taking instant pictures on vintage cameras, the portable Instant Lab allows users to transfer digital images from an iPhone onto instant Impossible film. It will be demonstrated Sept. 19-29 at Photoville (www.photovillennyc.org), a pop-up village in Brooklyn Bridge Park.

"Instant Lab means that we no longer have to rely on these vintage cameras," Bias says. "It makes sense. You go out on your travels, you want to stay light, you carry your iPhone and take thousands of pictures. Then you get home and can still make analog instant images without the clunky camera. I see images all the time that I think would look better on film than on the iPhone screen."

Impossible film is not exactly like Polaroid film: The combination of chem-



PHOTOS BY NATHANIEL GRANN FOR THE POST

Taking it slow: From top, Fuji Astia 100F 35mm film; a car, a dog and a residence in morning light, all in the District's Truxton Circle; and a gate at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Explosives in the District's NoMa. Images were taken with a Polaroid SX-70 camera using the Impossible Project's PX 70 Color Protection film.

icals used to process the film is completely different. The intention was never to replicate Polaroid film exactly, the company says; rather, it is experimenting. Verellen, the former Microsoft engineer who opened Rare Medium two years ago, says that he used to hear a number of complaints about the film, but he thinks that it has improved. The chief complaint today is that the film isn't really instant. Black-and-white film takes about five minutes to develop, and color film can take a full half-hour.

"Impossible isn't Polaroid," Verellen says. "They're making a more artistic product, so the casual photographer can be disappointed. With instant film, they expect it to develop in a couple of minutes before their eyes, and it doesn't."

In addition to setting expectations for film processing times, Verellen and other analog camera merchants spend countless hours talking to customers about vintage cameras and film. Many of these stores hold classes and workshops on how to use analog cameras, but more than anything, the owners spend time chatting about every aspect of photography — from reminiscing about childhood cameras to debating the merits of various types of film.

"We're enthusiasts here," Verellen says, "so people know they can come in and hit us with the most bizarre Polaroid questions, and we'll be able to help them out."

At Studio Space Junk in Chattanooga, Tenn., owner Diane Edwards encourages people to stop by, and if she's not busy, she'll give them an introductory lesson on Impossible film. She calls her store an analog camera convenience store. "I'm a one-stop shop," she says, "where you can get your Impossible film, talk about cameras and have a cup of coffee."

Some of the stores host photo walks — casual strolls around a neighborhood that give photographers of all skill levels a chance to slow down, carefully frame their shots, take pictures and discuss the minutiae of the experience with like-minded folks. The walks are typically free, and some shops lend or rent out cameras to those who don't already own them.

I tried an informal version of this in Cleveland. The camera store owner, Scott — who has a Polaroid camera tattooed on the inside of his forearm — lent me a camera. He set up a tripod, and I leaned over awkwardly to look through the viewfinder, snapping a picture of boys' and girls' bathroom signs at Lincoln Park, then waiting for the chemicals to react and produce a photo.

Tim, who took my picture, is a creative director with an ad agency and shoots digital all the time for work. Shooting on his Polaroid has made him look at pictures differently. "I used to go out and shoot 300 photos, bam, bam, bam," he says. "With film, you can't do that. It's too expensive. You have to slow down. You have to think before you shoot."

Slowing down forced me to notice things I would normally have overlooked, like a chain-link fence painted lavender, in front of some purple flowers. I spent minutes — eons in a digital world — deliberating over how to frame one shot, mindful that I had to ration my film. As we walked past abandoned houses and old churches, I was consumed with thinking about the composition of my next picture.

That night, back at the hostel where I was staying, I put my instant photos in a safe place, already looking forward to showing them (physically handing them!) to friends at home. Then I walked up to the rooftop deck, looked out at the twinkling Cleveland skyline and pulled out my digital camera.

I snapped a dozen shots before I got it just right.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer in Washington.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

You can buy Impossible Project film for old Polaroid cameras at about 500 stores in North America, including the ones below:

Impossible Project Space

425 Broadway, fifth floor
New York
212-219-3254

www.the-impossible-project.com

The first Impossible shop in the country. Monthly 8x10 Portrait Days offer instant portraits for \$40; next are Sept. 14-15 and Oct. 26-27; reservations suggested. Free photo walk on Governors Island Sept. 22 and 5Pointz Aerosol Art Center/Long Island City Oct. 20. Creative Manipulations Workshop Sept. 28 and 600 Camera Workshop Oct. 13, each \$50.

Photoworks

2077-A Market St.
San Francisco

415-626-6800

www.photoworkssf.com

Veteran analog photography store, with refurbished Land Cameras as well as vintage Polaroids. Land Camera Instructional Picnic in Golden Gate Park Sept. 22. \$200 buys you a refurbished

Land Camera to keep plus film, Land Camera photobooth shot, lesson and lunch. Get everything but the camera for \$50.

Rare Medium

1321 E. Pine St.
Seattle

206-913-7538

www.raremediumseattle.com

Features entire spectrum of Polaroid models from folding Land Cameras to Colorpacks. Partnering with Glazer's Camera (www.glazerscamera.com) for Instant Photo Contest; entries due Sept. 20.

Studio Space Junk

436 Frazier Ave.
Chattanooga, Tenn.

423-531-6066

www.studiospacejunk.com

Year-old analog camera convenience store with accessories including film, darkroom chemicals and paper. Polaroid Art Show Aug. 30-31, free. Polaroid workshops held on ad hoc basis.

Blue Moon Camera & Machine

8417 N. Lombard St.
Portland, Ore.

503-978-0333

www.bluemooncamera.com

Sells new and refurbished cameras and typewriters; one of the few shops that still has an optical printing lab. Annual customer photo show Dec. 7.

Beau Photo Supplies

1520 W. Sixth Ave.

Vancouver, British Columbia

800-994-2328

www.beauphoto.com

Stocks new and used cameras, including Polaroid, Holga, Lomographic and Hasselblad. Hosting an Impossible Project photo contest. Vancouver's first citywide Capture Photography Festival launches Oct. 1.

A&A Studios

350 N. Ogden Ave.

Chicago

312-278-1144

www.thevintagephotoshop.com

Carries a full line of vintage cameras, specialty film and vintage gear. Home of 312photobooth, with vintage camera Polaroid photobooths for public use and a Polaroid photobooth available for rentals.

— M.D.G.K.