

THE FUTURE OF FILM
AT PHOTOPLUS EXPO 2004

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Digital photography has been advancing with such momentum that the future of film photography had begun to look doubtful. Not that manufacturers would discontinue sale of traditional cameras and film in the foreseeable future, but new product development would taper off. Specialty and other slower-selling film products would be discontinued.

The trend was unmistakable: Digital cameras as a proportion of total camera sales increased from 30% in 2000 to 67% in 2003. By mid-2004, digital SLR cameras capable of quality enlargements to 16x20 inches had dropped below \$1000 in price. Currently, by my rough measure, about three fourths of articles in photography magazines are devoted to digital cameras or technique. Overall sales of film products have begun to decline, in some cases precipitously. No new, flagship 35mm film camera had been introduced in 3-4 years, and hardly any new lenses. Several camera manufacturers, recognizing that market niches for film cameras can no longer sustain more than a few premium systems, essentially ceased production. (One somewhat positive statistic for film photography, published in *Shutterbug* in September: roughly 40% of professional photographers use digital cameras in their work—less growth than expected by my reckoning, and indicative of the qualitative benefits of film.)

A Brighter Outlook at PhotoPlus Expo

The future of film appeared hopeful at PhotoPlus Expo 2004, held in New York City on October 21-23. Four trends in film photography were apparent:

- ***New product development:*** Innovation in traditional cameras and film has experienced a comeback—tangible albeit limited—even as digital technology continues to advance.
- ***Recognition of particular film advantages:*** Introduction of more specialized optics for film cameras and other market developments appear to confirm that digital cannot and will not soon match film in very wide-angle, panoramic, architectural, and low-light (high ASA) imagery. For serious photography in these areas, film offers robust versatility and unmatched consistency.
- ***Film aesthetics have attracted and sustain a loyal following:*** For a sizable number of film and darkroom romantics, digital cannot substitute for the distinct nature of film. In applications such as large-format photography, which is growing in popularity, film will continue to predominate.

- **Film and digital system compatibility:** Manufacturers of high-end, traditional camera systems are introducing digital backs and even digitally proportioned lenses for film cameras, affording photographers fungibility among technologies.

In sum, the future of film glimpsed at PhotoPlus Expo looks positive, notwithstanding continuing digital advances. Film will remain the medium of choice of a sizable number of photographers, for technical and aesthetic reasons. Product development will continue for both general and specialized film applications, although the market will not be able to support as many different makes and manufacturers. In many cases, new and older-generation film cameras will be easily mated to digital technology—a trend already underway—helping to sustain the more classic film marks such as Leica, Hasselblad and Sinar.

New Product Introductions for Film Photography at PhotoPlus Expo 2004

- **Nikon F6:** Unveiled in September, the F6 improves upon and will supplant the highly advanced F5, Nikon's flagship film camera since the late 1990s. The Nikon F5 has featured the most accurate, intelligent, unflappable automatic exposure system in the world—3D Color Matrix Metering—including a database of 30,000 model images (which has been shared with Nikon's advanced digital cameras), as well as other exceptional features.

The F6 improves upon the F5 in three ways. First, Nikon provides an even more sophisticated exposure system, 3D Color Matrix Metering II, which is touted as adding further finesse, especially in the treatment of shadow scenes. (The new exposure system will be offered on future Nikon digital cameras as well). Second, the Nikon F6 is smaller and not as heavy as the F5, and is much lighter than the competing Canon EOS-1v model, without sacrificing any advanced features. Third, the controls are simpler and easier to use.

- **Zeiss Ikon rangefinder camera system:** Zeiss, the world-renowned lensmaker, displayed an all-new camera system—its first such instrument for sale in decades. The diminutive Ikon 35mm rangefinder camera features refined controls and an automatic exposure system designed for its peerless Zeiss wide-angle lenses. The new system will be competing with three other (film) rangefinder cameras: Contax, Leica and Voightlander. This investment by Zeiss in a small film niche reflects the difficulties of digital camera technology in achieving premium-quality wide-angle images. Design limitations relate to digital sensor size and distance from the lens, which preclude or greatly reduce the effectiveness of the better wide-angle optics in digital and film SLR cameras.
- **New Kodak films:** Photographers queued in long lines at the extensive Kodak exhibit at PhotoPlus Expo for samples of new transparency and color negative films for 35mm and medium-format cameras. Kodak E100G, a new slide film, offers ultra-fine grain. Kodak E100GX, a sister film, provides the equivalent of a

built-in warming filter. New Kodak 100UC and 400UC (Ultra Color) negative films feature dynamic but highly refined color saturation.

- **Hasselblad-Zeiss 40mm CFE/IF Ultra Wide-Angle Lens:** Introduced over the past year, this optic is undisputedly the finest very wide-angle lens available for SLR cameras. Its resolution and clarity are comparable to the legendary Zeiss Biogon lenses that fit only rangefinder cameras. One tradeoff: Unlike the Biogon, the new 40mm CFE/IF lens has moderate though acceptable distortion near the image periphery.
- **Hasselblad, Leica and Mamiya digital backs:** The classic medium-format and 35mm camera makers have recently introduced advanced digital backs to fit a wide range of current film cameras, and historical models too. At the Hasselblad exhibit, the V96C digital back was demonstrated on a 30-year old 500C square-format camera. The pop-on back features 16mp resolution on a square 37mm sensor, with storage capacity for 1,150 images on a single charge. For the Hasselblad H1 autofocus medium-format film camera that entered the market in 2003, an upgraded digital option offers 22mp resolution on a 37x49mm sensor. The camera is also offered as a digital kit (the H1D) with this back. The Hasselblad digital backs are comparable in price to Canon and Nikon digital models of similar resolution—on the order of \$8000.
- **Schneider *Fine Art* large-format lenses:** Fans of ultra-large format photography—gargantuan cameras with 11x14 inch or larger film plates—are rejoicing at the introduction of new 550 and 1100mm lenses with unparalleled resolution. The lenses will excel for landscapes but also as copy lenses—the film area will often be larger than the image copied! Unfortunately the number of photographers using such ultra-large format cameras is perhaps only 0.01% of the photographer population.

To summarize the outlook for film photography at PhotoPlus Expo 2004, it is abundantly clear that the medium lives! This is not to ignore that digital technology meets and has begun to exceed 35mm film quality in many situations using high-end equipment. Moreover, advantages of digital cameras with respect to speed, convenience and user enjoyment have made the technology the medium of choice of the majority of technically literate Americans for casual and much serious photography. In professional photography, inroads have been made in studio portraiture and avant-garde artistry using all-digital media, following up ideal digital applications such as photojournalism. That being said, film photography still provides more consistent quality across the board in diverse situations. Moreover, from the standpoint of personal aesthetics, film offers its own allure. PhotoPlus Expo 2004 demonstrated that the market recognizes and is responding to these realities.