

RYAN NABULSI PHOTOGRAPHY

Abstract

One-step photography, specifically the Polaroid SX-70 format, changed the way photographers related to their desire to photograph. My work seeks to explore the transition of one-step photography from chemical to digital process; in turn, answering whether digital photography satisfies the desire to photograph in the same way as analog processes. The project has taken divergent paths at points leading to two separate, but linked, bodies of work. *Polaroidland* is comprised of *Things Left Behind* and *Dead on Arrival* which examines the SX-70 process using digital technology. The resulting bodies of work exist only as an amalgamation of analog and digital photography.

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One-step photography, specifically the Polaroid SX-70 format, changed the way photographers related to their desire to photograph. Since the late 1940's with Dr. Edwin Land's announcement of the one-step process, no longer did a photographer have to wait the required time to process the film and develop the print; the print was provided instantly. *Polaroidland* represents my experiments and experiences with SX-70 Polaroid film. My work seeks to explore the transition of one-step photography from chemical to digital process; in turn, answering whether digital photography satisfies the desire to photograph in the same way as analog processes. The project has taken divergent paths at points, but the theme and feel of the experiments remained the same. Each *Polaroidland* image started with the click of the shutter, or even before that, with the loading of the special pack film.

The SX-70 format fascinated me because of the instant process; however, the timing of this fascination was ill fated. In early 2008, Polaroid announced it would cease production on all analog films and cameras to focus on digital photography and televisions. Unfortunately for me, my experiments with Polaroid would be limited to the amount of film I could hoard and keep viable. Polaroids were something to be given away, personal memories, or instant identification (along with other "unimportant" uses); after Polaroid's announcement each SX-70 produced meant one less that could be made in the future. Facing this dilemma, wanting to create with the SX-70 but being limited by the finite time of film availability, I began to devise ways to not only reproduce the SX-70 but also free it from its constraints. If Polaroid was going to abandon their analog format in favor of digital procedures, then I, too, would start using digital processes to extract the likeness of the SX-70 Polaroid from its unique state. *Polaroidland* investigates

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the transition from analog SX-70 to digital copy. First, though, I had to examine the machine, the SX-70 itself, to understand how it related to a photographer's desire to photograph.

Even though the SX-70 process seemed to eschew formal photographic concerns in favor of an instant process, a photographer had to make certain what they saw through the shutter was what they wanted in the picture. Walker Evans, who began to use the SX-70 near the end of his life, has echoed this same sentiment:

I bought that thing as a toy, and I took it as kind of a challenge. It was this gadget and I decided that I might be able to do something serious with it. So I got to work to try to prove that. I think I've done something with it. After all, I am getting older, and I feel that nobody should touch a Polaroid until he's over sixty. You should first do all that work. It makes things awfully easy to have that thing pop out. It reduces everything to your brain and taste. It interests me very much; too, because I feel that if you have these things in your head, this is the instrument that will really test it. The damn thing will do anything you point it at. You have to really know something before you dare point it anywhere. You have to know what you're pointing it at, and why--even if it's only instinctive" (Evans 6).

Evans conflicting views of the SX-70 reflect my own troubles with the medium. On the one hand it could be a toy, something to play with, not a serious tool for producing art; however, on the other hand, the SX-70 is an instrument to test creative abilities. As a camera the SX-70 seemed too simple for anything it produced to be taken seriously. However, in its simplicity, Evans correctly ascertained that with the SX-70 the

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artist would have to think before reducing the process to a single click of the shutter. This thought process of framing, focusing, and knowing absolutely that what was viewed through the SX-70 appeared counter to common practices of the SX-70. Unfortunately, Evans died before he could leave any formal statement on his SX-70 work. Analyzing Evans's SX-70 portraiture, Jane Tormey, writing in *Afterimage*, stated, "If Evans's portraits appropriate any mode, it is that of the vernacular, adopting the extreme spontaneity and thoughtlessness that the Polaroid camera provokes" (Tormey 11).

Tormey's assessment countered Evans's own regard for the SX-70 camera; however, she sees the vernacular power of the SX-70 to produce a counter aesthetic, one that challenges the viewer to appreciate the subtleties of not only the medium (Polaroid) but also the unexpected aesthetic view Evans portrayed in his images (Figure 1). Ultimately, Tormey hinges this argument on all of Evans's previous work arguing the SX-70 portraits are important in that they show a departure from Evans's established rules of documentary style. But, is it Evans's unique vision or the quirky SX-70 that produced the images Tormey ascribes as being a counter-aesthetic? This same question began to linger over my own SX-70 work. Why had I chosen this camera? What about it compelled me to make the images?

This struggle for understanding led me to Geoffery Batchen's book, *Burning with Desire*, in which he argued for a concept called "photo-desire". Batchen contended that the traditional story of photography's origin failed to account for people experimenting with photographic means prior to Louis Daugerre's 1839 announcement of the daguerreotype. Batchen argues that to ignore these people, the proto-photographers, denies a full understanding of the concept of photography. For Batchen, each

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manifestation of a photographic means, whether daguerreotype, photogenic drawings or others, displayed the proto-photographers trying to devise a means to capture images from nature or "to let nature draw itself" (Batchen 43). Batchen argued that these two aims were not entirely similar; one set of proto-photographers passively sought an interaction with nature while the other wanted to trap the likeness of reality. While subtly different, Batchen contended that these divergent methods became entangled within the concept of photography, as it became a more stable and standardized practice. Batchen stated that by understanding the proto-photographer's own dilemmas with conceptualizing their inventions, photography can be rethought to encompass this duality.

Evans's troubles with the SX-70 seemed somehow tied to this idea of photo-desire. Even though Evans was not inventing new photographic technologies, he understood that the camera was an ambiguous tool that satisfied specific desires of the photographer. Additionally, Evans knew that the images depended on the mindset of the photographer and the specific camera. I realized that like Evans the SX-70 had captured my photo-desire, that is, something about the camera drew me to photograph with it.

I looked at other photographers enthralled by the SX-70 to see how they used the subtleties of the process. Artists such as Lucas Samaras, David Levinthal in addition to Walker Evans have each used the SX-70 for varied but specific ends. Samaras discovered that the SX-70's developing chemicals could be manipulated before the process completed, therefore allowing him to transform the original image. Samaras took advantage of the SX-70 chemistry; SX-70 had a viscous set of fluids that formed the image, which took only a few minutes to complete. Samaras would manipulate the fluidity of the chemistry creating transformed and surreal imagery, which served as a

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psychological study of his personality. (Figure 2a 2b 2c.). Instead of focusing on the chemistry, David Levinthal used the SX-70's unique perspective to photograph miniature sets. Levinthal's use of the SX-70 allowed the miniatures to become real by producing life-sized toys within the confines of the SX-70 structure. (Figure 3a 3b 3c.). Eschewing the quirkiness of the SX-70, Evans employed its immediacy to create thousands of images of people and everyday landmarks such as road signs (Figure 4). Evans imagery captured what he saw with the SX-70 in an unabashed way. Unlike the strictly formal images of Evans's previous Farm Security Administration days, the SX-70 appeared to free him from formal constraints and allowed him to, once again, enjoy the practice of photography (Figure 5).

As my exploration with Polaroid began and shortly after Polaroid's announcement of the end of analog film, I began to regard the photographs produced with the SX-70 differently than those produced from any other form of photography. These photographs were not images that could be reproduced indefinitely; they were single unique objects. Every click of a SX-70 shutter produced an image and simultaneously an object. With SX-70, the two, image and object (or print), are merged together via the instant process. Because SX-70 has collapsed the time and practice of photography into the single click of a shutter, what is produced is a compilation of all the previous wet process smashed into a single little image/object, a SX-70 Polaroid. Unfortunately, I was limited to the amount of image/objects I could produce. My practice with SX-70 became different. Instead of wildly snapping the shutter, I became precise and exacting with each use of the camera. Each click excited and saddened me; one more made, but a future SX-70 lost forever. It might not be tomorrow, but I knew there would come a day when no more viable SX-70

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film existed. I wanted to preserve the images I made with the last bit of film, but also wanted to have the freedom to create with the SX-70s.

Much like Polaroid, I turned towards digital process to create the work. Using a high-resolution scanner, I was able to capture the likeness of the SX-70 image/object in digital form. These digital scans of the original SX-70 opened the images to a deeper investigation. No longer was the SX-70 confined to its small stature; it could now be zoomed in, stretched, expanded, colorized or changed according to any number of Photoshop features. Through scanning, it was no longer a precious unique object to be held with awe, but something different, a digital code unique in itself. Even though its chemical structure had been digitally encoded, the SX-70 remained central to the code. It was as if the scanner had extracted the soul of the SX-70, because no matter how the image was received, either printed or projected, the relation to the SX-70 remained constant. With this finding, the work began to take shape.

Things Left Behind

I began working on a body of work that would later become *Things Left Behind* to see how the digital SX-70 would stand up to foreign interjections. I wanted to create work in which each piece created narratives like the works of David Levinthal. Instead of photographing toy sets, my narratives worked upon the SX-70's connection to the immediacy of its production and memory. I sat down with a stack of my Polaroids and began to sort through them. As I started amassing a selection of Polaroids to work with, I began to view the images as theatrical stages that were contained nicely within a white border. The stages begged for interaction, as if the images transformed from image to the

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set of a play. All I needed to do was add a few elements to expose the inherent narrative within the image.

I started with a simple form of a person, not wanting to inject any story onto the character; a simple stand in for every person, everywhere. I crafted the character from hand-drawn sketches on artist paper, which were then cut out and scanned using the same process employed for the SX-70s. Therefore, both the image/object of the SX-70 and the object of the paper character were transformed both into new digital code. Leaving the character faceless and genderless (my intention) would allow play with how viewers interacted with interjections into the SX-70 experience. However, being human and full of subconscious bias, the character appeared to be a murky reflection of me or at least my generation. The character came to be called the hoodie; it embodied both my generation (children of the 1980's) and reflections of my persona.

In "Alleyway," the character's backpack, attire and pose give the impression of an escape from something, but what is unclear. The hoodie appeared to be moving fast through the alley, as if caught in the act of something ambiguously wrong or sneaking away into a hidden sanctuary. "The Couple" worked upon the same counter-aesthetic Tormey associated with Evans's Polaroids. The informal portrait of the two subjects captured them in an unguarded moment similar to Evans's portraits. In "The Couple," the hoodie can be seen in the background not paying attention to the world around, but looking skyward. This gesture communicated a sense of loss or longing, what I felt towards Polaroid, but also how I perceived my generation as it transitions from college-age to middle age. Uncertain of the past few years, but wanting to make an impact upon the world, my generation is searching. This searching or longing can be seen in "Smoke

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Break," "Long Way," and "With my Friends," by the placement of the hoodie character within the SX-70. This idea further developed in the work as the idea of marking developed focusing on what we, as a people, leave behind when our presence is no longer in the environment. In pieces such as, "A Moment of Solitude," and "Tagged Garbage Can" a book bag, similar to the hoodie's, sits in front of landmarks that have been marked with graffiti. In these pieces, I wanted to draw a connection between the marks within the image (the graffiti) and the marking upon the SX-70 itself. The book bag, regardless of its connection to the hoodie, retained the attachment to my generation and persona as did the graffiti marks; soon we all would be leaving our book bags behind and trading in our spray paint for fountain pens in an attempt to transition into positions of responsibility and power. Additionally, the markings on the SX-70 represented an amalgamation of transition: from analog to digital, from college-age irresponsibility to middle age conservatism, from innocence to awareness. In "Waterpark," "Out to dry," and "Napping Place" the markings took on more uncertainty. In these pieces, the marks upon the SX-70 allude to a missing presence, something that existed but has since passed on. This reflected both the life of the SX-70 and my generation; the playfulness of the SX-70 process will cease to exist as will the innocence of the children of the 1980's.

Dead on Arrival

Dead on Arrival manifested when I began to regard the SX-70 not as only an image but as an object as well. When these two become merged into one, neither takes significance over the other, but become a singular, inseparable image/object. This aspect of the SX-70 has been used throughout its history even if unknowingly. Whenever an

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SX-70 was used on a bulletin board, or as a form of instant identification, or as an instant keepsake, the image/object of the SX-70 emerged. As stated previously, my supply of film was limited which further invoked the image/object of the SX-70 because the process, even though it appeared simple, had many quirks, which led to malfunctions. Additionally, because Polaroid had decreased the production of the SX-70 film in favor of the more stable Polaroid 600 version, most of the SX-70 film available had expired. This combination of malfunctions and expired film led to the production of "Dead on Arrival." This body explored the second aspect of Batchen's photo-desire, allowing nature to draw itself. In this case, nature had been substituted for the SX-70 process; in other words, to let the SX-70 process with its quirks, malfunctions, and expired film exist as an expression of itself. Samaras learned to control these idiosyncrasies of the SX-70 by hand manipulating the chemicals to produce his Photo-Transformations. Instead of manipulating the process, as Samaras did, I allowed the SX-70 to act upon itself. These images displayed the structure and beauty of the disappearing analog chemistry. Turning again to the digital scanner to reproduce these images, their likeness is transformed from a small collection of chemical mishaps into a visual experience that allows the viewer to see the SX-70 process for itself, analog chemistry that will no longer exist, an art form removed from artists.

"Untitled 3," "Untitled 4," and "Untitled 5" each display the varying degrees in which the SX-70 process can malfunction, but at the same time created an abstract form which displayed the potential of the chemicals within the SX-70. In "Untitled 6" a malfunction can be seen as part of the exposed SX-70 appeared within the chemical spill. On the other side, "Untitled 1" and "Untitled 2" displayed how the SX-70 process

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responded to expired film. Even though the chemicals to produce an image were unusable, holding the SX-70 sacred as both an image and an object, these SX-70s were still proof of the process if not of reality. As I found more and more of these expired SX-70 film packs relations between the forms within multiple images began to make relationships. "Untitled Triptych 1" and "Untitled Triptych 2," were created in an effort to explore the connections within a single film pack. Each expired film pack had its own particular color palette and repetitive theme; however, after sorting through the "dead" SX-70s and placing them next to one another, patterns appeared as if the chemicals had decayed in a particular way. These triptychs showed how even without human interference, nature, or the SX-70 in this case, could be creative on its own.

Conclusion

Polaroidland started with an obsession to understand how photographers relate to their desire to photograph and why I felt compelled to photograph with an obsolete and simple medium, the SX-70. Furthermore, *Polaroidland*, explores how digital processes related to this specific analog. Even though digital photography may have killed the SX-70 process, it has also given it new life. Digital photography has opened up new ways to view and experience the SX-70s. Instead of losing the image/object feel of the SX-70, digital photography has allowed the SX-70 to impact on both a conceptual and an artistic level. The display of both bodies of work reinforce the image/object of the SX-70 by affixing the digital image into a sculptural element, Plexiglas. Now, instead of tiny images to be tossed around, the *Polaroidland* images are monumental in comparison, rigid image/object structures. Digital photography has changed the way we relate to and

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understand analog processes by allowing things to be seen that may have previously been unseen, like in "Dead on Arrival." Digital processes have also allowed more interaction within the SX-70 itself, as seen in *Things Left Behind*. Instead of fearing that one process, either digital or analog, is superior to the other, both can be used in tandem to create work unable to be produced previously. Because these processes, both analog and digital, exist so can *Polaroidland*.

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