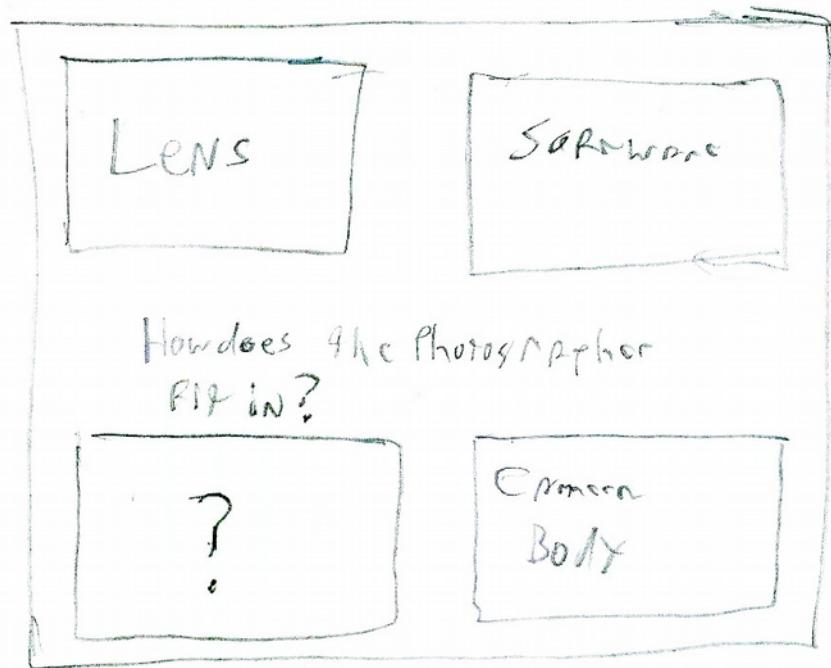


A photographer and the gear they use

by Malcolm McElvaney



When I started taking photographs in 2007 I wasn't focused on technical aspects or specific gear because a simple point and shoot camera I had bought before I needed it was all I needed in that moment. The camera you need at the moment is perhaps the best one to have but I had yet to think of myself as a photographer either. A parade of upgrades and new purposes was inevitable as the photographer in me did come into existence; however, I will cut this line of reasoning short and simply say that complexity comes from the earlier steps and where it leads is the adventure. It is with a more critical point of view that I begin this article that can be summed up in the included illustration, as long as there is room for the photographer to exist and pick and choose between gear available we can put some of our vision into our pictures. Another important aspect for how I work is being open to learning more about the other art forms and more about the world of film cameras that I can experience through others keeping that branch of photography going.

I can't say I embraced the full range of digital beyond a certain point either; however, I'm comfortable within that "time" capsule and it is in that effort to begin to look at that I let pass me by I struggle to put into some context. Having looked back and now forward will I come off as a purest wanting to see skill and experience triumph over AI and the easy button that seems so omnipresent, feels like I easily could as I do like the challenge of manually working on achieving an effect easily done. The story of photography was one of the few working with only raw material to an even more joining in as commercialization and miniaturization opened up this art form to the masses. The results

of innovation and helpful features is what drives this art form even now. I have some questions to ask aloud.

The photographer is key to photography but can AI and computers diminish that role when the most complex of edits can be done for them? What of achieving that for yourself?

The skill sets once required because a camera wasn't smart enough to do it for us seems just as important now as then. Is it really a requirement or optional?

If I had to learn photography based on past models would I have pursued it like I did? If one is introduced to the hobby at its easiest ever moment does that individual learn more about the gear available but requiring more knowledge to use them? Is there a path of least resistance?

Cell phone photography

This be the thing I have let blissfully pass me by and once upon a time it was lower quality so maybe wasn't missed but smartphones and powerful hardware through a branch of photography called computational photography has made it a very real option. I believe some context here might be helpful as my perspective can't help but be present. I do not own a cell phone yet or perhaps it is one doesn't own me yet, but I may have to just to do business one day. The camera function while improving seems like reverting back to that original point and shoot and just accepting the results as is, but having moved on from documenting can I impose any of my vision on that result. The cynical side of me sees this polished tool producing content anyone might share happily and so keep the social media monster alive and well. The more positive side is ease of use and sharing of photographs but I can see this aspect of it as I use it too, as the camera I know helps me to explore the real world and be around people. So there you have it with a torn point of view and a strong dislike of social media this makes for an odd entry into finally wanting to look at "phonography" as it has been called.

It was a simple and ongoing quest to teach photography that began on massive assumptions, so while logical to me wouldn't have worked. What I know wasn't enough to bridge that gap so my interest in what was came into play but the evolution of the camera is still a niche and just as likely not to help either. Simplify and continue to simplify was the key but would it apply to cell phone cameras at all? It is that unknown and need to see photography from a fresh point of view I began and like all my journeys will meander along randomly until something connects.

It is an unusual approach the first question takes but as I still have no desire to use a cell phone the next best option is to understand the process and what happens from an

intellectual point of view. Theory is useful to a point but I found the common element that bridges back even to the post processing software I might use, computational photography, born of limitations and the way to exceed them. The smartphone has a very limited form factor so putting those three little cameras on back comes at a cost, in general they have a 12mp sensor and the optics are fixed for the best image possible at all times. How do you apply the exposure triangle if no variable aperture even exist? Add a powerful processor dedicated to only image processing, a rolling buffer of images to work with prior to pressing the shutter button, and a set of routines and AI to implement them and that limit is solved. I appreciate that highly compressed pipeline that occurs between the press of a button and presented image, made possible by the close proximity of the hardware and optics working in a closed loop. In this context does anything manual even apply so maybe the solution dictates I have to change my mindset going into this potentially. I'm open to the idea but the dedicated gear and time between images taken and any processing of the downloaded images still appeal to me.

The model

I can pick my lens used, I understand what functions my camera has, the sensor used and even its level of being clean, software I prefer, etc but they are loosely connected and help me to collect images that I can see processed into something greater. Success isn't guaranteed but it is that coordinating of factors that somehow make me feel like part of the process overall. Being in the right place and time is a factor but I know my gear and can be ready, in theory. It is within the space I allude to that I think I really explore the most as the challenge of just what will inspire my next idea as I go along will fit in there somehow; however, explaining those results seems to be the purpose of the website as a whole.

Before digital there was film and as a system it is very flexible but the role of the photographer in it was important as the built in help was not always present so photographers had to know more about their chosen craft to compensate. The tools like built in range finders and light meters evolved with the camera as the tool developed so even these taken for granted options had to be learned from experience. I only know enough of the bits and pieces accumulated to appreciate the history of photography as a whole but more importantly the elements digital has built upon I take for granted.

The place to start to illustrate the photographers hand in the process would be the earliest process of wet-plate photography and how much the practitioner influenced the results. The early days of photography wasn't supported by commercial endeavors and the art form was totally hand crafted so the photographer was the artist and their tools at their command. From that initial pour to create the glass plate or tin plate medium to the darkroom processing done in realtime as that plate had a finite time to be viable, this one exposure took far more time than that the digital "equivalent" I do. Success was based

on practice and time put into perfecting the art form, the camera I use almost guarantees an image with every button pressed. I should note they are not great images but something is captured at least.

Even when film that was commercially made became available and the cameras shrank in size a mishap in loading that film or processing it was a possibility but another option for the photographer was a photo processing lab to replace the personal darkroom. The “easy” button perhaps started with Kodak Brownie camera in 1901 and birth of the amateur photographer but the modern amateur photographer may be using a cell phone camera instead and just as happy with the results as is. Multiple paths of enjoying photography can coexist. Film and digital coexist as photography speaks differently to each practitioner to preseverse what was more commonly used before or push forward to what is new.

I seem fixated on cell phone cameras but I know what I can do with my current dedicated system and do enjoy the ability to seemingly connect the components in new ways but given the degree of intergration in the latest technonology where does my mindset fit in. “Perfection” is achievable yet emulation of the look of the the old analog process is part of the post processing done today so we appreciate the imperfect and random as well. The photographer still comes through in the process but the need for knowledge to even achieve an useable result is mitigated to a larger degree than not as our tools seem to just need us to point them in the right direction and take the picture for us.

Conclusion

I started out documenting a place and unaware I would become a photographer but is it possible I'm documenting a place even more surreal than those shifting sands as I focus inwards. Visually I see the concept as illustrated but it is a construct to share and place some ideas. I have more questions than answers but that is the nature of the process influencing me as I work out details. So maybe ending this with a question or two is most appropriate, as there are no wrong answers but it is a starting point.

*What do you bring into your photography as the photographer?
How do you make your gear work around you?*