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Polaroid Instant Film- Gone in a Flash

Photographer Cathy Brown, now 60, has been shooting pictures for as long as she can remember. Using a Polaroid camera from the 1950s, her father, a recreational painter, would have her take pictures of him and use her photos as a basis for his self-portraits. “As a kid that’s pretty thrilling that your father wants you to help him. I think that had a powerful impact on me,” she says. To this day, Polaroid is her camera of choice, using them not only for fun pictures of friends and family, but for her art. Born in 1948, the same year that the Polaroid Company sold its first instant camera, she’s continued to work with Polaroids till this day. “I just have an affinity for it,” says Brown.

Polaroid has been the pioneer in instant photography, thanks to company founder Edwin Land. But now Land’s legacy is coming to an end. After filing for bankruptcy in 2001, selling off technology innovations, and eventually being bought by Petters Group Worldwide, a privately held trading company, in 2005, Polaroid has been steadily losing ground. With the advent of digital photography and the decreased sales of traditional film, Polaroid has decided to enter into the digital age- leaving instant film in the dust. On February 8, 2008 Polaroid Corp. announced it was stopping production on all traditional film and camera devices, which includes instant photography. And since the film expires after a year, the snapshots that pervade many people’s childhood and memories will be gone by the year 2009.

Dealing with the News

The reaction has been tremendous. Loyal fans have started websites and petitions to save the Polaroid film products, including www.savepolaroid.com, but it seems these efforts have

failed. And with artists using these film products all over the world, the discontinuation announcement has left people stunned. For 26-year-old French photography student Guillemette Minisclo, the news was almost too much to bear. Taking one Polaroid a day since 2003, she's created a part diary, part art project that can be viewed on her site, teatiny.canalblog.com. "I heard the news on February 10. The next morning I passed out in a train and was brought to a hospital... considering my sensitivity, I tend to think [these events are related.] It came as a shock and like somebody's death to me," she says. "It's been like a grieving process since then."

While some may view that reaction as extreme, it serves as testament to the many artists and consumers who are disappointed with the decision to cease production on these films. Jenelle Norris, an artist based in Minneapolis, Minn., where Petters Group Worldwide is headquartered, heard about the news after writing a book how to do manipulations with two types of instant film, the 600 and the Spectra. "My first thoughts were 'oh crap, all of that work was for nothing,'" Norris says. "I had written that book and had turned down the last publishing offer for it a week before I found out [about the discontinuation.] I saw it coming, I just didn't think it would be so soon."

Other artists felt the ceased production looming as well. Elsa Dorfman has worked with Polaroid exclusively for decades. Using a very rare 20 x 24 camera, of which there are only six in the world, Dorfman also works with other Polaroid films for fun, including the 600. "Actually for the last ten years I've been telling my clients [the ceasing of film production] is going to happen. But... it's kind of like when you say something but you hope it's not going to be true, you know?" says Dorfman.

Beginning of the End

The recent announcement came only two years after another discontinuation- that of the SX-70 Polaroid film in 2006. This film was introduced in 1972, and renamed Time Zero in 1979. The film was loved for its manipulations, where the artist could manipulate the gel-based emulsion to get a painted or rippled effect. Although the product was widely popular in the '70's and '80's, the cult following wasn't enough to keep sales going, according to Sue Gagnon, commercial product technical support for Polaroid. Working with Polaroid since 1968, Gagnon understood the disappointment that came with the Time Zero announcement. "Manipulation with SX-70 was an extremely wonderful, special process, [but] there wasn't enough of a group to merit making it after 34 years. That was sad, but what can you do?" Gagnon says. "Time marches on."

This SX-70 discontinuation was a red flag for some artists, who became wary of Polaroid's intentions after hearing the news. Brown, who received word of the discontinuation after receiving an email from a visitor to her website, remembers wondering about the other popular instant Polaroid films. "I did go to my local camera store and asked them, is this the beginning of the end? 'Oh no!' they said, 'don't worry about it.'"

Magic

But people are still worried; worried about their art and the product that has meant so much to them over the years. Ask these users to describe why they are so drawn to Polaroids, and you'll undoubtedly hear the word "magic." Raoul Benavides, a 35-year-old photographer in Minneapolis, has used Polaroids all his life thanks to their accessibility. "When I think about Polaroid, it's just a little bit magical," says Benavides. "It's not so real, there's just something about it that's kind of... fun and not so technical." The same can be said for Kenan Aktulun, creative director at the marketing strategy firm Digitas, who chooses to use film for his personal

projects. The appeal: unexpected results. “It seems as if there’s something magical about it. It’s not like producing a car or a product where everything is perfect and you can predict the end result. There’s always a nice surprise.”

“It is magic,” says Gagnon, the Polaroid representative. “It’s magic to everybody young and old no matter how you use it- whether you use it for family use, documentation, medical use, creative use- it’s magic.” To some, the results of chemical and exposure, the unique, not quite perfect coloring, the size and shape give an unexplainable feeling that conjures up sentimentality, nostalgia, and an unidentifiable quality that produces a connection with the film.

Dedicated Users and the Digital Age

Artists find the connection or interaction with the film to be an integral part of the creative process; the outcome always a little unexpected. “I still just love the process of film. I believe strongly the quality is better- the colors are better,” says Brian Adams, a 23-year-old photographer from Anchorage, Alaska who got into Polaroid cameras and SX-70 thanks to his former boss. He believes it’s the emotional connection with the film that is lacking with digital. “You get all excited because you don’t know how everything turned out, and you get to pick it up and look through it [and say] ‘Oh that came out! Oh that didn’t come out! Oh now I know how to do that!’ and that’s just not something you get with digital.”

But Polaroid maintains that the digital age is a step forward. Marketing its digital cameras and a new product coming out later in the year- the new ZINK printer, a mobile, pocket-sized, inkless printer that connects to digital cameras and cell phones- Polaroid is taking instant imaging into the new digital platform, according to Pamela Landis, group marketing communications manager for Polaroid Corp. But the big question is, is ceasing production on film and going digital really innovation or a change to better things? “I don’t really think that

something being discontinued is an evolution,” says Benavides. “It’s kind of like...if they discontinued diesel fuel would we really be evolving to unleaded? It’s just more of a different thing altogether.”

Minisclo, the French student, feels that digital has benefits- but not for art. Photography for her is making the picture “alive” with distortion, experiments and other processes that are still very active within the dedicated niche market for the Polaroid artists. Digital is convenient and less expensive, but the impact is different. “The closing of Polaroid marks again how fast our society and technologies evolve without taking into account our mindset or perception of them. Most likely when you use digital, it’s to make it perfect and flat as the screen of your viewfinder puts it,” she says. “You cannot have the same perception and relation to beauty.”

Stocking Up

Many artists agree and are clamoring to stock up. Photography and camera stores are seeing customers scurry to get the last remaining packages of film. B&H Photo Video, one of the leading photography suppliers on the web with a store base in New York, has seen a rise in orders for Polaroid film in stock, as well as a dramatic rise in requests for Polaroid films that are no longer made. “Basically, people desperately looking for the last few remaining morsels,” writes a customer relations representative in an email.

Freestyle Photographic Supplies, in Hollywood, Calif. has also seen a rise in requests and bulk-buys from all over the country thanks to their website. Having several hundred boxes of both Type 55 and 600 before the announcement, they were bought up almost immediately after Polaroid Corp. released the information, according to Marketing Coordinator Michael Tullberg. Although they still have some Polaroid films in stock, they direct those who can’t find what they

need to general retailers who may have some left on hand. Fuji, they note, has also made some of their instant films available for purchase to U.S. markets.

“Fujifilm makes its own Polaroid-type products, which are really good quality,” says photographer Benavides. “Except it’s not available in large format sizes, which is the kind that I shoot... Hopefully Fujifilm would take over the production over the whole thing.”

Alternative Options

In fact, Fujifilm is many Polaroid users’ last hope. Petitions are asking those who want to see Polaroid instant films continue to write to Fuji and ask them to buy Polaroid’s technology. Polaroid *is* actually interested in licensing the instant film technology to another company, but according to Polaroid Corp., nothing has gone through.

Although many people use Polaroids to document family trips and for snapshots of the kids with Santa and the Easter Bunny, 60-year-old Brown and other Polaroid users believe that Polaroid has always had a maverick side to its films that spark creativity. Emulsion lifts, transfers, and other manipulations are processes that came about with experimentation and fortunate accidents. And for those interested in these alternative processes, Fujifilm offers a valuable option. Peter Balazsy, a New Jersey artist, deserves credit as one of the most accomplished artists in photo image transfers. Working with Polaroid film for many years, Balazsy was the first to use Fujifilm to attain similar results. Although different from the Polaroid transfers, the Fujifilm process offers an alternative to those who primarily work with the Polaroid film that has been discontinued.

“For people who love the Polaroid transfer this is not exactly the same, but similar. I’m sure it would satisfy about 60 percent of the users for the results you get using Fuji compared to Polaroid,” says Balazsy. The other 40 percent, he believes, would be those who focus on a

process known as lifting, which is when the user takes a fully developed Polaroid print and places it in hot water, and then peels the top layer off, sliding it usually onto a piece of metal or glass. Fujifilm, with its tougher top layer, doesn't give as delicate a look as Polaroid according to Balazsy. "They can use it, but they'll hate it," he says.

Iconic Appeal

In fact, many are sure to have objections to anything that isn't Polaroid, because Polaroid has survived throughout the years thanks to its dedicated followers and loyal enthusiasts. Just one entry into an internet search engine and up pops dozens of websites to submit photographs, artists' personal websites, forums on manipulations, blogs on reactions to the discontinuations, flickr groups and more. The instant film has moved its way into pop-culture and everyday life. Famous artists have books solely documenting their Polaroid pictures. YouTube videos are dedicated to the end of Polaroid film. Entire movie plots including Memento and Martian Child rely on the instant camera. Even the hip-hop musical group OutKast asks listeners to move their body- and immortalizes the film in the classic line- "shake it like a Polaroid picture." The instant photo has been the mainstay in the Polaroid legacy and has continued to have an effect on users with its distinctive look. But soon it will join the ranks of other relics of the past. "I mean, the square format, that white border- it's so iconic. You can't duplicate that," says Brown. "That's the sad part... I think [in the future] people won't understand. They'll just say, 'oh yeah, back in the day you could take a picture and it would pop out of the camera, isn't that weird?'"

Everything Changes

With the end of instant film approaching, Polaroid- under the direction of Petters Group- has moved onto consumer electronics, including digital cameras, printers, and even TVs and DVD players. To some purists, this seems like a slap in the face to the legacy of Land. "Polaroid

was the way Apple is now. It was innovation. [But now] all the geniuses from Polaroid are gone, the company's been dismantled and all [Petters Group Worldwide] bought was the name- you can put a name on anything right?" says Dorfman.

Others share the same sentiment and believe the brand will soon just be representing another item on the shelf, with no brand loyalty to speak of. "Polaroid is an empty shell," says Norris. "Petters Group... all they do is take a company that already has an established name, they buy it, and they hollow it out. The name means nothing. Those Polaroid TVs? Polaroid has nothing to do with those TVs. All that's going to happen with the name Polaroid is it's going to be used until it means absolutely nothing to the public."

Nevertheless, Polaroid representatives contend that these innovations are in keeping with Land's original notion of innovation. "As the inventor and founder of Polaroid, and a legendary innovator, Dr. Edwin Land would want Polaroid to be pursuing digital opportunities," says Landis. Polaroid Corp. also maintains that while Polaroid is now a complete consumer electronic company, the exciting part of the future is digital instant photography.

But while some at Polaroid take this time to pitch their latest gadgets and products in keeping with their marketing strategy, those who have been a long-time part of the company truly sympathize with the consumers for the loss of what they know is a great product. "We're all, you know...sad over this whole business, too," says Gagnon, who has been with the company for 40 years. "Unfortunately we're in a technological age where things are always changing. The original premise of Polaroid is instant photography. Everybody's going to miss it. The world's going to miss it."