

Instant art

In what we all assumed were the brand's twilight years, Polaroid and other instant photography formats have found a new lease of life as mediums for fine art work - but how do photographers make this unique format pay?

WORDS Charlotte Griffiths **PICTURES:** Susannah Conway, Charlotte Griffiths & Richard Ton

The rise of digital photography has almost exactly mirrored Polaroid's fall from grace. Although originally considered expensive and niche - much as Polaroid is viewed today in fact - digital image capture is now the mainstream and Polaroid (once an everyday choice for happy snapping families) has become something ever so slightly bohemian and left-field.

This creative group of die-hard Polaroid lovers is also responsible for instant's recent revival. These users of technically defunct, lo-fi cameras embraced the full hi-tech possibilities of the Internet and once the Polaroid factory closed its doors for good in 2008, the instant photographers clustered online, armed with their photo blogs and Flickr accounts, to upload their artistic takes on life, sell their prints and connect with other Polaroid users across the world.

More and more photographers who hadn't experienced Polaroid first time around stumbled across these fine artists and fell in love with the depth of colour, texture and inherent 'vintageness' of the Polaroid images - and, all of a sudden, a thriving underground market emerged, creating a huge demand for the remaining film packs.

Having recognised this demand and bought the 500,000 remaining packs of film from Polaroid, a group of Polaroid lovers called 'The Impossible Project' embarked on their own labour of love to start producing their own brand of instant film - which they unveiled in March of this year, rendering Polaroid a theoretically sustainable format once again. As romantic as the Polaroid story undoubtedly is, can this unpredictable and wildly expensive form of photography ever be a viable business model for modern professional photographers - and what is it that makes this medium so attractive to fine artists?

One shot

Instant photography's suitability for fine art work comes from the fact that each sheet of instant film

creates an entirely unrepeatable image, complete with its own iconic white frame (designers and advertisers routinely use the distinctive white border to indicate a photograph) that's almost exhibition-ready as it is.

Susannah Conway is a fine art photographer and writer currently based in Bath, England; she teaches e-courses to people based on using photography as a means of creative expression. She also laughingly describes herself as having a Polaroid obsession that "verges on fetishism".

"[The Polaroid print is] so iconic," she said. "I watch so many films, so many TV shows, and in detective shows for example, the murderer's always got his wall covered in Polaroids. It's shorthand for a photo - you just look and you know it's a photo."

The iconic nature of a Polaroid print is partly what made Susannah fall in love with the format: she now owns an SX-70 and 680 Polaroid camera and shoots almost every day for her blog, her course materials or simply for her own enjoyment.

"I'm known as a photographer but I don't make my sole income from it - however it's a key part and I couldn't do [my courses] without [my photography]," she explained. "A few years ago I was living in Bournemouth and trying to work as a portrait photographer, but to be honest my heart wasn't really in it. At that time I started playing with Holgas and getting back to shooting with film - I really just wanted to take beautiful pictures for me. I think I've always been a sort of fine art photographer rather than a commercial photographer, and trying to squeeze my abilities into commercial work didn't really come together.

"This is photography to me. Photography is film - is negatives - is prints, and Polaroid in the beginning is what digital is now, namely instant. I think now that's shifted and Polaroid's become an art form. It's more tactile. It has a little more soul to it.

"Selling my prints is a secondary part of what I do. I have sold prints and little postcards of my images, but I've actually just put my Etsy shop on

hold because I'm too busy working on two books, so all my photography goes into those two projects."

Although some instant photographers do choose to sell their original instant prints as unique artworks, Susannah prefers to scan hers in before filing the original away. "They're always scanned in, colour corrected and then professionally printed," she says. "I've done one giveaway of an actual Polaroid and that was so precious - it's like giving away your 'negs!'"

On Etsy, the popular 'craft' selling website, the going rate for a print from an SX-70 Polaroid seems to be around \$30, with prints from larger instant formats, such as 10x8in, going for \$85 and upwards. Framed original Polaroid SX-70 prints cost around \$150, as do larger Polaroid transfers (where pull-apart Polaroid film is used to transfer an image from the Polaroid negative onto another surface - usually a piece of watercolour paper). With 8-shot film packs starting at £15 (excluding shipping), every single shot of SX-70 costs around £2 - a cost that has to be factored in to the eventual price of the image. Only the seriously wealthy photographer can afford to absent-mindedly 'snap' with Polaroid, so the more considered, slower-paced world of fine art could arguably be described as the most economically suitable genre for this medium.

"I just bought my last massive batch of film from the Impossible Project - I bought some 600 from eBay but it was such a rip off that I just stuck with what was the Polapremium store, now known as the Impossible Project," Susannah explains. "When they had their last batch of 600 on I bought as much as I could. I also bought a small beer chiller to keep the film in: I just thought, I've just spent £700 on film, I've got to put it in the fridge! [Having film] is like having gold dust - I can't let it go off. Already the film feels a bit more yellow than I'd like, but it's because it's out of date. It's not cheap."

The artistic possibilities offered by the instant format don't stop at photography. Professional portrait photographer Ritchard >



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ABOVE & TOP: Ritchard Ton's manipulations create an impressionist effect within the print itself

TOP RIGHT: Susanna's artistic style was developed over years of practise
RIGHT: Charlotte's PX100 shots



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THIS SPREAD: Knowing what looks good in the Polaroid form helps to keep film costs down

Ton is known online as the 'Sx-70 Manipulator,' and his manipulated Polaroid images are at the point where photography truly blurs into art - by physically moving the exposed film emulsion around, his images are transformed into impressionist style pictures.

"Polaroid film has many ways in which it can be manipulated: SX-70 manipulation, emulsion lifts, emulsion transfers just to mention a few," he explains. "Type 669 pack film and Sx70 Time Zero films also have a unique blue shift, which I find to be beautiful. I stockpiled a bunch of TZ before Polaroid stopped production and I currently have twenty packs left in my fridge. I haven't purchased any TZ since Polaroid ended its production."

As the cameras have become creakier and the remaining packs of film have slowly passed their 'use-by-date,' the images produced have become even more unpredictable - however these colour variations, light leaks and technical faults and their authenticity are hugely desirable to the fine art photography crowd.

"It's like anything vintage," Susannah explains. "We project more feelings onto it because it's old, it has some kind of heritage, there's history behind it - it feels like there's a few more layers. I could take a photo with a Polaroid and it already looks a bit vintage, a bit soulful, whereas with digital I would

have to use actions or filters for the same effect."

The fine artists are about as far from 'button pushing' photographers as you could get - most of them shoot with SX-70 cameras that require manual adjustment of exposure and focus point. "Originally, I bought a little 600 automatic camera that I found in a market for £1 - it had some film in that was really yellow, really old - and that convinced me to get an SX-70," Susannah explains. "I wanted a camera that I could focus with and obviously have a bit more control over the image."

"The SX-70 camera is like having a highly portable medium format SLR camera," Ritchard says. "It has a sharp lens and the camera is known for its shallow depth of field capabilities."

As the films have become more unpredictable with age, knowing one's own equipment inside out is an essential starting point in order to get a usable image. "You have to learn to work with the film, but the film can only go so far," Susannah says. "When I was shooting 35mm, I always liked to shoot on fast film so it would have a bit of grain to it - and you get that same texture with the Polaroid. TZ is really grainy, with an almost wobbly effect: and 600 has a lovely creamy element to it. When you start blowing it up you really see that."

As Susannah has touched on, modern Polaroid users also have the benefit of being able to scan

their prints in for enlargement, making the possibilities and potential professional applications of this format almost endless. "Polaroid has definitely become an art form - the quality of the film, the colours," Susannah says, "but it still becomes digital because I scan my images. You keep the essence of the film and get the best of both worlds. You can't replicate it - no matter how many stupid layers, filters or actions you put on it, it still looks like what it is. With Polaroid, you're not just looking at the tiny square of film any more."

Being able to visualize how the image will turn out is essential when shots are costing you at least £2 each - misfiring, under-exposing or simply ruining a shot isn't just frustrating, it's expensive. "After a while, you know what's going to look nice in Polaroid," Susannah says. "Also you're working with the square format, so whether I'm shooting Polaroid or with my Hasselblad, I know how to compose a shot. Certain subject matters look great - or on the other hand, it can give something that's completely soulless some soul - something really modern shot on Polaroid has a whole other dimension to it, whereas if I snap it with my Canon 'digi' compact it looks a bit sterile."

"The funny thing is that Polaroid has always been around, but it was only when it was on its last legs that everyone started getting interested



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PX100: The Impossible Film

We test the first instant films from The Impossible Project

The Impossible Project's achievement is immense: saving the original film machines from destruction, kickstarting them with their own blend of chemicals and finally producing their very own packs of instant film for SX70 Polaroid cameras. The 'First Flush' packs have been available for several weeks now and results are gradually trickling online, and it's fair to say that some photographers have had more success than others. We asked both the fine artists that we spoke to for their thoughts, as well as testing it ourselves:

RITCHARD Although he hadn't received his packs of PX100 when we spoke, Ritchard was excited to get his hands on them: "From the photos and comments I've seen on flickr, it's my kind of film, volatile with a learning curve," he said. "That's what makes film exciting for me. Getting to know what the limitations and characteristics are for the film and how to use that knowledge to create an image are challenging. I have a great deal of respect for the people at the Impossible Project and I know they will succeed in producing amazing new film

SUSANNAH "I'm finding this new film a bit of a learning curve, and it's expensive to learn! My first pack was completely white - I'm hoping they stabilise it a bit more and that the colour pack [promised in Summer 2010] is more reliable. If I can only shoot indoors, that's annoying. I've seen what other people have done with it and I'm like 'that's amazing.' They really

have created something that's artistic, because it's unpredictable.

"I know 600's all gone now, but it is vaguely reliable and I know how it works in my particular camera - so this new stuff's great, but I've still got to learn."

CHARLOTTE Having watched the very first images pop up online on the day of the press conference announcing PX100, I was hugely excited to try it out for myself: but as most people have experienced, my first few images came out over-exposed or slightly yellow. It's incredibly light sensitive, and rigging up some sort of shield for the print as it emerges is the best way to protect it from overexposing.

You also need to keep it warm while developing: the best results I've had were when I immediately put the print under my coat then gently stroked the back of the print to provide gentle warmth. It's possible to 'burn' out the image by lingering too long in one spot, so keep your hand moving and don't overheat it.

A few photographers are saying that this film isn't professionally viable just yet, simply because of the unreliability - I think if you get yourself over the learning curve and know how to handle the film, you can produce beautifully artistic images. However, that learning curve will probably take you a couple of packs - expensive packs.

"Take a photo with a Polaroid and it already looks a bit soulful, a bit vintage"

- it became much more precious. I hope it doesn't die out - that's like getting rid of oil paints because painters now all use acrylic, but oils is where it started. I hope film will always be here. For me, it is a bit like painting - I'm not into drawing, I'm not a painter, but my canvas is this square of film. Thank God for the Impossible Project, otherwise I'd be completely screwed!" ✕

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