A Passion for Photos in Black and White

by Barbara MacRobie

“I’ve been taking photos since I was two and a half, and I never, ever had an interest in color,” says Kansas City photographer Gloria Baker Feinstein. “Of course I was using film—we all were back in the day—and I loved working in the darkroom making luminous silver prints. I never touched color until very recently when I got a digital camera. So for 57 years, I’ve really just been interested in black and white. And except in special cases, that’s what I still go for.”

Gloria did not reject color for all those years because it wasn’t available. Color photography became workable in the 1860s, usable for non-scientists in the 1890s, generally accessible in the 1930s after Kodachrome was invented, and widely affordable for home photographers in the 1970s. The digital revolution that kicked off in the 1990s has made color cheaper and more plentiful than ever. Yet photography’s first form has never gone away.

“Black and white images have always maintained a significant niche in the interest of many photographers,” notes John Nagel, executive director of the International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum in St. Louis. A format that began as a technique of necessity has become an art form of choice. Missouri photographers from serious hobbyists to seasoned professionals told us that black and white enables them to tell stories in ways that color cannot.
Eliminating the riff raff

A photograph is more than a visual image, said John Nagel—it’s a frozen moment in time. “The person who looks at the final picture doesn’t know what happened just before or just afterwards,” he said. “The image is also limited in space. I can’t see what’s outside the boundary of the frame—I only get to see what the photographer has chosen to include in the frame.”

Which is why, said St. Louis photographer and videographer David Rocco, that when he shoots photos, “I’m shooting little one-frame movies. And with black and white, all the riff raff is eliminated,” he said.

“If you’re going to walk around taking pictures of everyday life like I do, you might luck into nice situations that are beautiful in color. But more often, you find that you have great lines, form, figure, tonality—all the things you can accentuate in black and white—but totally distracting color,” he said.

“When you’re shooting a movie and you’ve got a house in the wrong color, you’ll paint the house. You can’t do that for a photograph! Your photography can be diminished by the mere fact that it is in color.”

“I want more than just a pretty picture,” said Koral Martin, creator of the Koka Art Gallery in Carthage and specialist in fine art nature photography. “I want a story that draws you in.”

Koral shoots color as well as black and white, and finds that in some situations black and white is the clear choice for photos “that help you see nature like you haven’t before,” she said.

“Black and white is wonderful for showing off texture, and all the lines and curves and details you might miss if you had the distraction of color. When I was hiking in Colorado, I saw some phenomenal bark on an aspen tree. I knew as soon as I looked at it that the photo had to be black and white.”

“I do color, too, but black and white has a unique look,” said Bill Helvey, a retired professor who grew up in Mt. Vernon, spent most of his career at Lincoln University in Jefferson City and then taught drawing and painting at Stephens College in Columbia, where he still lives. Bill not only photographs but paints in oils, acrylic, and watercolors, and draws with graphite and pen and ink. He has found that black and white photography “gives moods and expressions that some other avenues won’t.”

“You’re going to see the contrast and nuances of light and shade,” said Paul Rains of Ellington. A doctor in family practice whose photography is his lifelong hobby, he reaches for black and white not only for wide views of mountains but close-ups of hummingbirds.

“With colors, the color grabs you first,” said Kyle Spradley, a landscape and nature photographer in Columbia who also specializes website design and photography for sports, photojournalism, and events. “But black and white is all in the same tonal range, so it doesn’t jump out at you. Black and white simplifies the scene and lets the viewer just take it in.”
That lack of distraction, said Dan White of Kansas City, often makes black and white ideal for portraits. “Black and white requires you to look at the photograph, the person, the lighting, the composition,” he said. “There is no color to ‘color’ the image. Your eye doesn’t go to his bright red shirt, but stays on the face and eyes.”

Dan was on the team with the Kansas City Star that won the paper a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 1981 Hyatt Regency walkway collapse. Independent for more than 30 years, he does work from commercial assignments to art projects. One of those art projects was a series he completed in 2006, after two decades of work, of 50 portraits of Kansas City’s legendary musicians. (The series tours the U.S. through Mid-America Arts Alliance.) “I think most portraits are better in black and white, but some subjects cry out for it,” he said. “There was no question when I began the jazz series, it was to be in black and white.”

Black and white also gave the right tone to Gloria Feinstein’s series on black-owned, old school barbershops in Kansas City. Such a barbershop, she wrote, has been a haven for black men since the end of slavery. “It was a place where a man could openly share his ideas and feelings, a place where a man who had no voice could have one…. To this day, a barbershop is more than just a place to get a haircut and a shave; it’s a place to feel secure and comfortable, a place to socialize, converse and debate.” For a series about this tradition, she told us, “black and white immediately gave a quality of timelessness.”

“Black and white gets more to the soul of the subject matter,” says Kirk Decker of Kansas City, a juried member of Best of Missouri Hands. He has found that to be true whether he’s photographing portraits, which he does as a hobby and commercially, or the landscapes that catch his eye when he’s driving tractor-trailers cross-country for UPS. “It’s like how summer and autumn are beautiful, but winter strips everything down to the core.”
Gloria and David each told us that the slice-of-life, on-the-street, everyday photos they like to create have an especially strong history in black and white. "I have an inventory in my head of pictures from the ‘50s and ‘60s," said Gloria, "from the magazines like Life and Look that presented the raw, nitty-gritty black-and-white stuff of what makes up humanity." "You can draw a single thread for that narrative from André Kertész in 1910 through the whole 20th century," said David. "It’s something very special to me—to continue that thread into the future by shooting film and documenting our times."

It all starts with light

When Koral looks at a landscape for forms and patterns, "I also look for differences in the light." Ever since 1826, when French scientist Joseph Nicéphore Niépce made the oldest surviving photograph by sticking a pewter plate coated with asphalt into a box with a pinhole, light has been where all photography begins.

“All cameras, digital or film, black and white or color, work the same way,” said John Nagel. “They have a place for light to enter and a place to capture that burst of energy.”

For film, light focused through a lens hits tiny light-sensitive particles suspended in an emulsion on a flexible base, and the image is recorded on the film itself. For digital, the light hits a silicon image sensor, and the image is recorded on a memory card. No matter how it is recorded, the quality of the light that enters the camera has a profound effect on the final work of art.

“A lot of great black and white happens when you shoot during the ‘bad’ light hours like the middle of the day,” said Kyle Spradley.

Unlike the "golden" or "magic" hours right after sunrise or before sunset when the light is warmer and softer, mid-day yields strong highlights and dark shadows—perfect for the strengths of black and white.

Kyle illustrated his point with a pair of digital photos of a temperate rain forest in the Pacific Northwest. “This shot is a good example
of what can happen when you’re not shooting in that perfect sunset light,” he said. “At mid-day, the light was bright and sunny, so it was easy for black and white. But in the thick forest, it was also diffused, so the color works too.” In the black and white version, the dramatic forms of the trees and mosses stand out.

Kyle also likes the effects he achieves with black and white plus infrared. “This is done with a camera or filter that records only reflective light from the infrared end of the spectrum, not the available light we can see,” he said. “It’s a fun technique to mess around with, seeing how the light bounces off stuff.”

Paul Rains and Koral Martin also like infrared. “The camera records the light from anything that’s heat-producing, like leaves,” Koral said, “so infrared draws out texture and gives a surreal, almost winterish look.”

Williams Cemetery, near Avilla, Missouri; infrared – Koral Martin, Carthage

Crucial choices

Some photographers find their creative vision only in black and white. Some shoot mostly one format but choose the other for specific works, or split their work about equally. “When I began to photograph the Zapotec women of Oaxaca,” said Dan White, “color was such an important part of their lives, I couldn’t ignore it. On my first trip to Oaxaca, I shot both color and black and white, but was more drawn to the color images. On my return, I shot almost exclusive color.”

Black and white or color—ordinary black and white or infrared—“these are some of the creative decisions,” says John Nagel, “that make photography an art form. Should my image be small or large? Should I shoot a close-up or use a telephone or wide-angle lens?” These days, those choices also include whether to shoot with film or digitally.

Bill Helvey of Columbia shot this portrait of his grandmother in 1969 on film.
Film requires a photographer to commit to black and white from the moment the film is loaded into the camera. “I know I’m shooting black and white, therefore I approach the photograph with that mentality,” said David Rocco. “I know I need to find good lines and visual forms that work pleasantly within the rectangle.” David notes this is especially important for him because he does not crop his photos—“everything you see has to have happened within the frame.”

On the other hand, said Dan White, “the beauty of digital is the ability to go either way.” Koral Martin said, “Sometimes I know a photo will be black and white when looking through the lens; sometimes it’s when I’m looking at it on the screen.”

“One half is looking at what you’re shooting, seeing what would be great in black and white before you even take the photo,” said Kyle Spradley. “The other half is the ‘darkroom,’ where thanks to Photoshop you can turn any photo into black and white.”

Even for film, the image the photographer sees through the viewfinder will be in color. But as Dan White said, “After many years shooting black and white, it is easy for me to visualize images in black and white”—what Paul Rains describes as “looking through black-and-white eyeballs.”

From chemicals to computers

In a film darkroom, film bathes in chemicals that transform it into a negative. The photographer then uses the negative to create a positive print, perhaps
projecting light through an enlarger onto light-sensitive paper, perhaps pressing the negative directly onto such paper to create a contact print. Many other printing methods can be used. “The vintage printing processes are still very much alive,” said John Nagel.

Between the creation of the negative and the creation of the print lies as much hand-crafted editing as the photographer wants. Hence the statement by Ansel Adams, 20th-century master of black-and-white landscapes: “The negative is comparable to the composer’s score and the print to its performance.”

With digital, all the developing and editing takes place in the “digital darkroom” on the computer. “There are many programs you can install to get different nuances just the way you want it,” said Paul Rains. Some of the printing processes created for film, said John Nagel, can be adapted for digital as well.

“I went kicking and screaming into the digital world,” said Dan White, “but mostly because when I started, the quality wasn’t very good. Well, the price came down and the quality went up. The gear out these days is quite remarkable, and digital post-production has opened up all sorts of creative possibilities.”

“I was a computer person, so I was really excited when digital came out,” said Koral Martin. “It’s so much more affordable. I can take 1,000 shots in a day and it’s not going to cost me anything. I have vivid memories of when I was 14 and went on a trip out West with my aunt and uncle, and shot tons of slides. When I brought home all these rolls and rolls of film, my parents about died!”

“Storm Pass Colorado – Kirk Decker, Kansas City

“I was one of those guys who started photography with 4H when I was in junior high,” said Kirk Decker. “I loved working in the darkroom and swore I would never leave film,” said Kirk Decker. “Well, I still have large-format cameras but I don’t know if I’ll ever use them again. With digital, I can finally get the images that I always wanted to get. In the darkroom I’d slave over it. Then I’d get up the next morning and look at the results and say, ‘Several hours down the tube!’"
David Rocco is devoted to film, but “I will say this for digital photography,” he said. “With film, you have to develop your film just to see what you got. I was able to take 300,000 digital photographs over four years and train my eye exactly to my style. By the time I moved back to analog, my eye was set in motion and I just applied it to shooting in film.”

“I don’t like to do a lot of Photoshop stuff,” said Kirk. “I don’t import skies, though I’m not above taking out a telephone pole! I generally only do what I would do in the darkroom, which is to adjust the contrast and exposure. But it’s so much easier in digital. I can take a lot of pictures and capture so much more for my clients, instead of thinking, ‘No, I have to save this last exposure for something special!’

“It kind of pains me to say this…but it’s gotten to the point where digital is in all respects better than film.”

Film’s unique beauties

Not all photographers agree. 29-year-old David Rocco has grown up in the digital age and did shoot digitally for six years, but went back to film for his master’s degrees. He now shoots only film, and that in black and white. Tim Layton of Wildwood west of St. Louis is a naturalist and veteran professional photographer who has worked extensively with both film and digital and with color as well as black and white. But he unequivocally chooses to do all his current work in black and white film.

“Black and white is deeply in my soul,” said Tim. “I think it comes from influences I had when growing up. Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Minor White—those wonderful artists worked in black and white. That created the spark.”

Tim makes his art “the old fashioned way—100% analog, no computers,” he said. “It’s all done by hand with film, paper, and chemicals.” He not only creates analog photographs, but actively promotes the art through teaching workshops and writing his popular blog where he shares philosophy and techniques.

“I’d shot film in undergraduate,” said David, “and taken all the courses in analog photography. I’d built darkrooms in my parents’ basement. I abandoned all that to go work digitally.” After earning his B.A. in film production, he moved to Los Angeles, where he worked in films and also shot digital photography. “But “eventually,” he said, “I realized that digital just didn’t add up for me.”

David moved back to St. Louis, and in 2014 earned his M.F.A. in studio photography from Fontbonne University. While he continues to work as a freelance videographer, he is also opening a commercial darkroom together with two other young photographers. “We’re building it from scratch to be a tightly controlled lab environment that will yield the highest results we can achieve fully analog,” he said.
Tim says he envisions his end product from the beginning. “When I’ve arrived at the place where I want to create something, the first thing I’m thinking about is the final print. I’m not thinking about putting it on the screen or Facebook. So based on years of mistakes and successes, I select the film that has the characteristics that can create the emotional connection I’m looking for.”

Black and white analog photography “should really be called ‘black and white with a million shades of gray,’” said Tim. When he and David are developing film, they use the Zone System developed by Ansel Adams and Fred Archer. This enables them to attain the maximum dynamic range of black and white’s “colors.” Tim called the Zone System “a dance between the film and the exposing chemicals.”

“You manipulate the light with your hands,” said David. “You’re painting with light.”

“Say I’ve photographed a flower,” said Tim, “and I feel it’s important to communicate the suppleness and delicate nature of the petals. I can control that with absolute precision in black and white. I can place every tone. With color, I just have to make sure I give it enough exposure, and that’s the only choice I have. Black and white gives me total control over the creative process. For me, the rewards are so much greater.”

Even some photographers who work with black and white digitally have not given up on film.

Bill Helvey says his work is about 90% digital, 10% film. “You can freeze film and it will last forever—I have a box of film in the freezer I’m determined to use up,” he said. “And digital makes me lazy in some ways because the camera does everything for you. Every once in a while I like to go back into my darkroom at home and get my hands in the soup. I can spend an hour or four hours there—I get so immersed in the image-making process that time stands still.”

“I recently bought a medium-format camera,” said Koral Martin. “I want to start playing with film again. We’ll see if I get daring enough to develop it myself!”

“I think film will be one of those things that are slowly rediscovered,” said David. “When photography came out, the painters didn’t quit.”
An open-ended story

No matter what formats and processes a photographer chooses, to again quote Ansel Adams: “The single most important component of a camera is the twelve inches behind it.”

“Photography is a very faithful thing. It’s just light reflected from the subject,” said John Nagel. “Yet the picture I make will be different from the one you make.”

“I have taught hundreds of workshops,” said Tim Layton, “and when we all reconcile our work at the end of the session, even though we’ve shot in the same location, everything looks different.”

Photographers who love black and white cherish the way the format fosters those differences. “What most attracts me to black and white are the endless possibilities,” said Gloria Feinstein.

“For the photographer,” she said, “it gives me an endless range of tonal values. It lets me put myself in there more readily than a color photograph would. For the viewer, it’s more open-ended, more stimulating to the imagination. There are more opportunities to fill in the blanks.

“You’re invited to make the photo your own, to relate it to your feelings and experiences. You figure out a way it can make sense to you. You make up your own story.”

More work by the artists

Gloria Baker Feinstein
Kansas City
• gloriabakerfeinstein.com

Three Girls, Kajjansi, Uganda

Gloria first met the orphaned children of St. Mary Kevin Children’s Home in 2006 when she went to east Africa for a photography workshop. When she came home, she set up the nonprofit Change the Truth foundation for these children’s benefit. She works as the foundation’s CEO and returns to St. Mary Kevin every year.
Kirk Decker | Kansas City | • kirkdecker.com

BELOW: Olin is from Kirk’s ongoing 100 Strangers project. “I got the idea from a Flickr Group,” he said. “You approach 100 people you don’t know and ask their permission to do their picture. It’s not so much about the photography, but interacting—engaging and talking with them.”

William Helvey
Columbia
• helveyart.com

Fabrics

“In 1974 when my wife and I were in New Hampshire visiting her sister, we were given a tour of a woolen mill. I looked at the fabrics hanging down and draping across, the women working. I don’t know what they were doing, but it was such an interesting interplay of people and repetition of subjects.” Bill shot the photograph with 35mm film.
Tim Layton | Wildwood

- timlaytonfineart.com – Fine art gallery and photography blog
- healthcareart.com – Evidence-based nature art for the healthcare industry
- timlaytonllc.org – Naturalist blog and gallery of Missouri’s natural beauty
- meetup.com/St-Louis-Photographers – St. Louis Explorers and Photographers Meetup Group that Tim hosts “for anyone interested in photography, nature, and getting out and exploring Missouri” (not just photographers)

Woods Avenue, Wildwood

“It was an early morning as I turned onto Woods Avenue. I literally stopped in my tracks to admire the light coming down through the trees. It was magical. I found a side road and parked my truck. I went back to the spot where I had that flash and watched the light. When I felt it again, I released the shutter. Just one exposure and then I went back to my darkroom, developed the film, and made a gallery print. That was one of my favorite days.”

Koral Martin
Carthage

- koralmartin.com
- healingnatureofart.com

Nature art that heals and reduces stress

Dead Horse State Park, Utah; infrared

“With my infrared camera I was able to capture the wonderful lines and textures of this bristlecone pine tree, the clouds, and the rock formations in the background. I grew up in a family that did lots of hiking and camping, and I’ve had a big love of nature since I was a child.”
ABOVE: Untitled

“When I take a foreign trip, I shoot mostly people. I was just walking along a side street in Amsterdam when I saw this poster advertisement along with the man lying on the bench.”

RIGHT: Gypsy Girls

“I took a walk in Punjab in northern India near the Pakistan border and wandered into a settlement of gypsies. I was a bit concerned but quickly felt relaxed because even though we could not speak each other’s language, they were very hospitable. They invited me into their tents, and I was able to take numerous photographs including this one. The original gypsies migrated throughout Europe and North America from North India. I believe that these are descendants of those same gypsies that did not migrate but remained in India.”
ABOVE: Oregon Coast

“The whole Pacific Northwest coast is gorgeous for photography—great rocks, a lot of good contrast. I was walking along a beach and thought, ‘This would be cool in black and white.’ Plus the day was cold and rainy, and the scene kind of looked black and white even before I shot it. In post-production, I just got rid of the rest of the color and flattened it out.”

(NOTE: We added the border so the overcast sky would not blend into the page.)

RIGHT: Shut-Ins, Crane Lake, Mark Twain National Forest, Iron County, Missouri; infrared

“I took this image using an infrared filter, a specified piece of glass that allows infrared light to pass through the filter, only allowing reflective light. This requires long exposures and thus can create very moody scenes, such as this one. It adds a different effect because it records light we normally don’t see and gives the viewer something special.”
David Rocco | St. Louis | • daveyrocco.com
• cargocollective.com/filmbasestl - Film Base, David’s new commercial darkroom “with the specific intent to preserve the silver gelatin process by creating relevant and contemporary work”

This untitled photo is from David’s 365 project, a photo representing every day of his life in 2013. He carried his 35mm cameras with him at all times, ending up with 131 rolls of film for 3,144 frames, which he winnowed to the final 365.

Dan White | Kansas City | • danwhite.com

Dan has created both portraits and action photos for Hilti, a global construction company, for many years. “I work on a project by project basis. If I'm lucky, my client hires me both for the fine art and commercial abilities. More and more, this is the case. I feel fortunate to have these types of clients. Usually, they tell me what kinds of images they'd like to see. And then, they let me go.”
The International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum preserves, promotes, and educates about the history of photography. Founded in 1965 in Santa Barbara, California, as the Photographic Art & Science Foundation, and subsequently located in Oklahoma City, the museum moved to the Grand Center arts district of St. Louis in 2013. The Missouri location features gallery and exhibition space to showcase the museum’s 6,000 vintage cameras and more than 30,000 photographs in special exhibits about the art and science of photography.

LEFT: Kodak’s original camera. The company produced 5,000 of these 26-ounce boxes between 1888 and 1889.

RIGHT: The Portrait/Process exhibit in 2014 featured approaches to portraits by 12 contemporary photographers, plus a historical perspective from the daguerreotype to the smartphone. In this photo are works by Mark Katzman of St. Louis.

P.S. The world’s oldest photograph

The oldest surviving photograph made in a camera, View from the Window at Le Gras by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, is now on permanent display at the Henry Ransom Center of the University of Texas in Austin. An online exhibit shows the photo and tells its story.

Images of the International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum photos are courtesy of the museum. All other photos are courtesy of the photographers featured. None of the photographers’ works was cropped or, with the exception of the border we added to Kyle Spradley’s Oregon Coast, otherwise altered.

A Passion for Photos in Black and White was created in November 2014 for the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency and division of the Department of Economic Development. The Missouri Arts Council provides grants to nonprofit organizations that meet our strategic goals of increasing participation in the arts in Missouri, growing Missouri’s economy using the arts, and strengthening Missouri education through the arts. For information, contact moarts@ded.mo.gov.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Please feel free to share and distribute. Attribution: Courtesy of the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency.