



Out with the Old and In with the New

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The phrase that graces the title of this article is not a new one and it's something that we do on regular basis with clothes, furniture, cars and yes, even cameras. In the world of photography however, this ritual of replacing old gear with new and improved gear happens quite often. Photography today, and how we photograph, is changing so quickly that we can hardly keep up with the changes. I am not immune to the changes either.

In the last couple of years, I started to sell my work at art fairs; small desk-sized photos to large 20x30 inch wall-sized framed pieces.

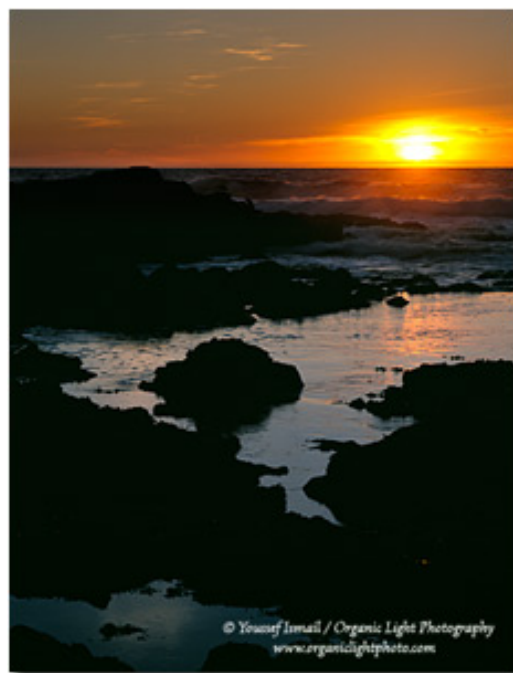
However, I started to notice a definite lack of quality in the enlargements beyond 12x18 inches. I longed to produce exquisite enlargements that were worthy of the composition portrayed. This led me to question my out dated 20-year old equipment and that maybe it was time for an upgrade. For the last ten years I have used 35mm equipment, which ten years ago was top of the line - Nikon camera bodies and Nikon manual focus coated glass optics. I had honed my technique as far as I thought possible and what I was seeing was the limitation of the 35mm format. With my gradual move to digital printing and digital darkroom techniques, the natural choice to extend the digital workflow would have been to trade in my film bodies and go with one of the new top of the line digital systems. And although it seemed that digital had come of age and surpassed the quality of 35mm film, what would be new about the way I photographed the natural world or how I looked at it?



Spring Wildflowers, Gorman Hills, CA. Nikon F4s, Nikon 400mm f/5.6 on Fuji Velvia

So I started to ponder on using other systems; medium format, panoramic and of course the granddaddy of them all, large format. By the time I had finished my survey of medium format gear, medium format digital backs were making in-roads in the photographic world and like the 35mm format, placing the long-term viability of film in question. Panoramic format was still fresh but was also quite limiting - after all not everything lends itself to that long and narrow format. Then in January 2003, I participated in a digital darkroom course taught by Charles Cramer and Bill Atkinson. During the introductions we all talked about what we liked to photograph and what equipment we used. I concluded during my introduction that I was probably not using the best format for the subject matter that I photographed, which was the landscape. I made an interesting comment that afternoon, "had I known about large format cameras when I first started out, I would probably be using one now." That got me to thinking - so why am I not using one now?

After nearly a year of contemplation, I finally made the change and purchased a new large format camera system. It included a brand new wooden field camera and three brand new lenses. I also bought a brand new flat bed scanner to scan the transparencies. Before buying the new system, I read and studied how to operate the camera so that I would know how to perform the basic operations. The first weekend I had the camera, I went out into my backyard and exposed five sheets of film. The first sheet was to test the ability to increase the depth of field by changing the plane of focus; the second was to test the contrast and anti-flare capabilities of the large format lenses; the third sheet of film was to test the resolving power of the large format lenses to capture detail; the fourth was to test the flatness of the film held in the film holder and finally, the fifth sheet of film was purposely underexposed to have it pushed processed. I made some mistakes but they were generally acceptable photos and at least I discovered that I was able to use the camera.



Sunset, Psecadero State Beach, CA. Shen-Hao, Nikon 300mm f/9 on Fuji Astia

I then made my first excursion with the new camera to the Pacific coast. I wanted to test it out in the "real world" and under the real pressure of changing light. I also brought along my 35mm gear as I also intended to photograph the new crescent moon that was to be visible that evening, something that I have been doing every month for the last ten years. I knew from the onset that I was not going to retire my 35mm gear. I would still need it at least once a month for the moon photography that I have grown so accustomed

to doing. Hey, if nothing else, it's an excuse to go out once a month and photograph something.

I wandered the beach for about an hour looking for something grand to photograph, a composition worthy of large format. As the day drew to an end, I found myself photographing the most typical and probably the most photographed subject with my new large format camera - the sunset. After exposing a few sheets of film, I returned to my truck thinking that after all the debating and contemplation and commotion about how great large format is, I have resorted to photographing the same old thing. Was I doomed to still see the world the same way I did with my 35mm camera? I packed away the new camera and unloaded my old 35mm gear to get it in place for the new moon. As I stood behind my camera with the 400mm lens pointed at the moon and firing off frames, a thought occurred to me – it's strange how I stand here photographing the new moon with my old "advanced" gear, and how I just finished photographing the end of the day with my new 100 year old technology gear. As I started my new adventure into large format photography, what better way to start it than by photographing the same old thing but in a new way. And with the marking of the new lunar month in front of me as I photographed that new crescent moon with my old camera, the phrase "out with the old and in with the new" took on a whole new meaning. Even though I will still be photographing the same old subjects, I have no doubt that I will be looking at them with a very new perspective. So as we start out the new year, with whatever new or old gear we are using, we owe it to ourselves to go out and photograph those same old subjects in new ways.



New Moon and Venus, Pescadero State Beach, CA. Nikon F4s, Nikon 400mm f/5.6 on Fuji ProviaF 400

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