

The Format Divide

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Earlier this year I was asked by Jim Erhardt, publisher of Nature Photographers Online Magazine, to contribute a bi-monthly column centered on Large Format photography. This article is the 5th in the series, and also marks a turning point for this column. Future installments will be dedicated to the art and craft of landscape photography and will likely be format-neutral for the most part, except for these occasions where the format makes the image. It is this concept that I want to introduce in this article.

The mechanics of using a View Camera are not very complicated. Yes, there are new skills and techniques to master in order to achieve proficiency, but the same can be said for other camera systems as well. To wit, fellow photographer Michael Gordon and I have successfully offered an Introduction to Large Format workshop, covering all aspects of operating the View Camera, along with a selection of general photographic topics (using filters, metering, composition) and were able to fit everything comfortably in less than 3 days of field work with participants who have never used a View Camera before. By day 3 participants were off making 4x5 images in the field with little or no assistance.

What else can one say that would directly pertain to Large Format other than extolling the virtues of a large chrome or negative, the mechanical and optical aspects of focusing and composing with a view camera, and other gear-related issues? Well – not much, and these topics were already covered. From here on it's about seeing and making images! As such, starting in 2006, this column will focus (no pun intended) on the creative aspects of landscape photography under the title "The Essential Landscape".

What's in a Format?

It is easy to mix camera formats with less tangible qualities associated with these cameras. For example, Small Format (used generically to describe 35mm and digital sensors of the same or smaller size) photographers will often quote speed and automation as some of the distinctive virtues of their chosen format. On the other side of the "format divide", Large Format photographers will praise the benefits of a slow and calculated process as conducive to careful composition, the quality of prints afforded by the large film area, and the flexibility of camera movements, allowing for control and optical effects not possible without them. Medium Format takes some of the best qualities of each system and provides much of the flexibility and speed of smaller formats mated with a larger film area for higher quality prints.

Having described the advantages of each formats, the disadvantages become obvious – Small Format lacks the detail of larger formats, Large Formats lack in agility and speed, and Medium Format maintains the rigid design of smaller cameras, yet uses longer focal lengths for a given angle of view, creating issues of narrow DOF that are not compensated for with movements, as in Large Format.

It is easy to see that but for a narrow range of situations, these systems are not really interchangeable. Why then would a photographer be so adamant about classifying themselves as a "Large Format Photographer" or a "Digital Photographer" etc.? I suspect part of it has to do with the marketing effect. Some technologies seem to be in favor by specific groups and it would be worthwhile to anyone targeting this group to associate themselves with them. There are also those who specialize in some types of imagery for which one format offers the most benefit. To a large extent though, I can see great value in achieving proficiency in multiple formats. Each has its place and unique uses. As such, whenever possible, I try to make room in my pack for both a 4x5 system, and a 35mm (or similar digital) system. For me these are perfect companions, allowing me to cover a very wide range of photographic situations, while making only those compromises that are absolutely necessary to capture a given image.

Why not Medium Format?



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

I mentioned above that Medium Format takes some of the best of each of its brethren – it's generally more portable, faster, and more convenient to use than Large Format, and allows for enlargements with improved detail over Small Format. This is all true, but along with these qualities, Medium Format also inherits some of the disadvantages of each system – it is generally heavier than Small Format, requires larger/longer lenses to cover a given angle of view, and does not allow for the flexibility of using camera movements. I find that in most situations where I use Small Format, Medium Format is not fast enough or agile enough (especially when it comes to long lenses), and for most situations where I use Large Format, Medium Format is not flexible enough nor lighter or much more portable. After trying several systems, I finally came to realize that the compromises made by Medium Format do not work in favor of the kind of images I personally like to make.

When Large Format Makes the Image

I have said this on numerous occasions – when working from a tripod, and having the right lens for the composition I have in mind – I will always favor large Format. The satisfaction of having a large bright screen, carefully composing the inverted image under the dark cloth, is an experience like no other. It is hard for me to explain why. Perhaps it has to do with the romantic flashbacks to the days of Jackson, Adams, or Curtis, but to me it just fits in with the experience of being out in the wilderness, immersed in a magnificent, unspoiled landscape.

Yet another time when I appreciate Large Format is when I'm home working on a large scan. The detail, the fine tonal transitions, and the front-to-back sharpness of a well-focused and exposed chrome always take my breath away. And, of course, when looking at the final product – a large fine print, the look of a Large Format image is unmistakable to the trained eye.

In situations where one requires precise control over perspective and/or focus (i.e. not relying solely on perceived DOF), be it to maximize sharpness across the frame, to create artistic blur, or to control optical distortion - there's little doubt that a View Camera can do things that are simply not possible with other formats. In my work I would say this applies to 40-50% of my images, making a View Camera indispensable.

Image 1, made by my good friend Michael Gordon, illustrates the View Camera's ability to selectively blur various areas of the frame using creative placement of the focus plane, creating a visual effect that would be impossible to replicate with other camera systems.

Another consideration is, of course, image detail, especially where the end goal is large prints. Here again, there's no substitute for film/sensor real-estate – the bigger, the better. Some images simply rely on size, fine detail, or smooth tonal gradation to achieve their intended impact. Here again - size matters.

Image 2 illustrates these conditions well. This near-far composition, captured with a "normal" lens would likely have yielded blurry foreground and background even if captured at the lens' smallest aperture, thus imposing a severe limitation on its enlargement potential. Using front-tilt I was able to place the plane of focus such that the sandstone face is all captured in perfect focus.

When Small Format Makes the Image

Several factors make Small Format an obvious choice in some situations. Speed and convenience mean one can make more of fleeting moments and fast-changing conditions. Small Format also allows for hand-held operations in some conditions where a tripod is impractical or too slow to use, again increasing the potential for capturing an image that would otherwise be lost.

Another important consideration is the use of long lenses. With their ability to fill the frame with distant subjects and the compression effects, these lenses can result in striking images. Achieving similar composition using larger formats can quickly lead to some prohibitively unwieldy setups. Long lenses for Medium Format tend to be very large and heavy, as they contain a built-in extension mechanism (same as smaller formats), while those designed for Large Format require very long bellows to match, making them prone to vibration and impractical for use in windy conditions.

The physical size and weight of a system are also of great importance to those of us carrying our gear on our backs, often alongside other necessities on long backcountry excursions. A Small Format camera, with the flexibility of zoom lenses, and the capacity to capture a large amount of images on a small roll of film or memory card, can provide great relief and allow for more photo opportunities in the back country.

Image 3 illustrates such a situation. In order to capture it, I had to carry my camera system up a steep slope to find an opening where I could have a clear view of the opposite side of a canyon. Even then I had to use a focal length of 400mm to capture the portion of the scene I was after. Without an SLR and a long zoom lens I would never have captured it.

Another interesting note with regards to this image is that it is “stitched” from four separate exposures, allowing me to capture greater detail than what a single-frame could hold (especially considering the square crop).

What About Tilt/Shift Lenses?

Tilt/Shift lenses bring the flexibility of movements to Small and Medium Format. To many they are the “missing link”, allowing them to fully switch away from Large Format.

With these lenses, many of the issues of perspective and focus that are present with standard Small/Medium Format lenses are easily resolved. Some situations still require a combination of both front and rear movements that are not possible with Tilt/Shift lenses (providing the equivalent of front-standard movements only) but these may or may not be of sufficient interest or value to base a camera choice on.

Of course, the capture area is unchanged and will not capture the detail possible with Large Format. To me this is an important factor in many situations.

If I absolutely had to limit myself to a Small Format system, I would undoubtedly have made the investment in these lenses (and choose a system that offers flexibility in focal length choices).

Managing Multiple Camera Systems in the Field

This is the crux of the matter for many of us who photograph while hiking and backpacking. On day hikes it is often possible to carry both systems, with some careful planning – carrying only those lenses and accessories that differentiate the various formats and allowing the most flexibility (e.g. wide and normal lenses for 4x5, ultra-wide and long zooms for 35mm).

The real conundrum is what to use when it is only feasible to carry one system. In the past my choice was always Large Format, with the assumption that if I came across a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I would want it captured in all its glory on large film. I have since decided to try a different approach.

Looking back at images from the last couple of years, I realized that my approach to photography is such that my best work is almost always the result of careful pre-planning and repeated visits to the same location. I very rarely capture an image I'm happy with on my first visit to a new location. Therefore, I now carry a 35mm digital SLR with a flexible zoom lens (ranging from 24-135mm) which allows me to work with a large variety of situations. When I find something worthy of a larger format, I will make a return trip to the pre-scouted location with a View Camera, and spend the time planning in advance for optimal conditions.

In the mean time, using the smaller camera, I am able to capture those rare serendipitous moments in a format that's usable for small and medium prints. Chances are these are images I would not have captured at all if my only choice was a View Camera.

I will surely re-examine this choice next time I'm faced with an amazing scene that I am not likely to ever witness again and all I have with me is a Small Format camera, but if nothing else – I will still have an image I can share, and likely many others I would not have had at all.

So – rather than classify myself by the type of camera system I use, I decided to keep my feet firmly planted on both sides of the Format Divide. If the past year is any indication – I find that I have been more productive with this approach than I have been before, limited to just one system. I still make as many Large Format images as I ever have, but these are now augmented by images from the Small Format camera that would otherwise have been but a memory.

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Guy Tal resides in Utah, where most of the Colorado Plateau's breathtaking grandeur can be found, and where issues of preservation and land-use are among the most prominent on the political agenda. Guy's large format photography can be viewed on

his website at <http://scenicwild.com>.

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