

Polaroid

IN THE DIGITAL AGE

AS A FAVORITE FILM OF MANY PHOTOGRAPHERS IS DISCONTINUED, LEARN HOW TO KEEP THE CREATIVE LOOK ALIVE IN THE DIGITAL DARKROOM

By Mark Edward Harris | Photography By Sachi Kato



“Due to marketplace conditions, Polaroid has discontinued almost all of its instant analog hardware products. Polaroid has also made the difficult decision to cease manufacturing of instant film products in 2008.” This announcement by Polaroid was an arrow through the hearts of many visual artists around the globe. Soon after its invention in the mid-20th century, Polaroids found their way into the hands of photographers and mixed-media artists ranging from Andy Warhol to David Hockney; when using this medium, artists discovered an inherent softness and an emulsion that could be manipulated, or even transferred to receptive mediums such as watercolor paper.

With the demise of Polaroid film, photographic artists are seeking new ways to express themselves in an increasingly digital world. Fujifilm has sought to capture this market with its own brand of instant film, which works well for checking images. However, the film neither allows for the classic and popular Polaroid transfer technique nor successfully renders the soft colors that many artists find appealing.

Japanese-born, California-based photographer Sachi Kato has found a way to seamlessly make the transition from analog to digital, re-creating the feel of her Pictorialism-inspired flower series begun with 4x5 Polaroids through delicate use of digital techniques.

Kato credits her early exposure to Japanese ceramics and painting for her interest in a hands-on approach to





artistry. Her father, an artisan potter, taught her to make objets d'art out of clay when she was a child, while her grandmother, a painter, demonstrated how ideas could be leant permanence by introducing a brush and paint to canvas. Immersed in artistic pursuit from an early age, Kato asserts, "Art has always been an essential part of my life."

Unlike the generations of artists in her family before her, Kato is most comfortable expressing herself with a camera. Although she began her career with Polaroids in hand, she now explores images with a digital camera and computer. While her image-capture equipment has changed, her subject matter hasn't. Kato has found continual inspiration in the forms of flowers due to the unique tranquility with which they imbue an observer. She finds endless variety in her subject matter, pointing out that, "No two of even the same specimen are exactly alike."

STEP 1: SELECTING THE SUBJECT

Kato carefully selects her subject matter in a variety of locations, ranging from flower shops to neighbors' gardens.

STEP 2: LIGHTING THE SUBJECT

If she has discovered a flower in either the wild or a nearby garden, Kato will use direct ambient light or will diffuse the ambient light with a handheld silk. When photographing flowers, wind can be a serious issue, and she's acutely aware of what shutter speed she needs to use in order to freeze a subject perfectly.

Kato prefers the total control of a studio, where she can work in a windless environment. She often uses Japanese rice papers for her background and lights them from the side to emphasize their unique textures. When artificial light is necessary, she prefers strobes or Kino Flos because hot lights could "wilt my flowers," she says. Originally developed for the video and film industry, the flicker-free, color-stable fluorescent Kino Flos can be directed with the use of barn doors.

Kato discovered this lighting system several years ago when assisting a food photographer who wanted a continuous light source, but couldn't work with hot lights because of the negative effect the heat from the lights had on the subject matter.

STEP 3: PHOTOGRAPHING THE SUBJECT

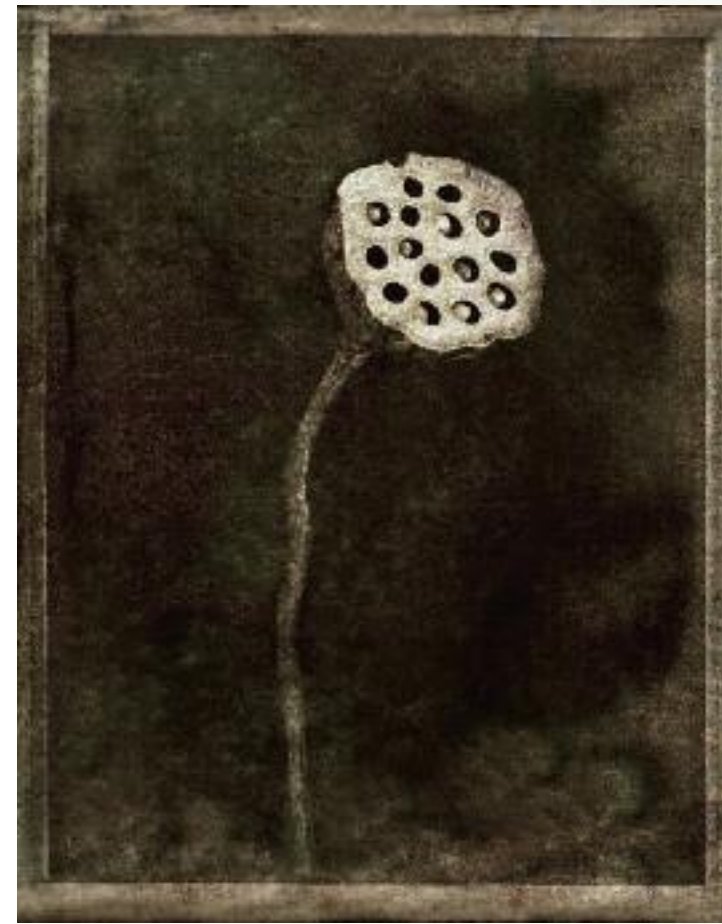
Kato has replaced her Polaroid camera with a Canon EOS 40D. To keep the 4x5 feel, she often attaches a Horseman/Rodenstock darkroom enlarger lens with bellows on a Canon mount. She has found that using this setup produces an aesthetically pleasing selective focus for close-up shots.

Both Canon and Nikon make lenses with perspective control that can work for the "4x5" shifted bellows look. For extreme close-ups, magnifying filters are an inexpensive way to create tight close-ups with limited effort.

Regardless of whether she envisions her final piece to be in color or black-and-white, Kato will capture the initial image in color RAW, giving her greater exposure adjustment flexibility and the option to revisit a black-and-white image in color.

STEP 4: WORKING WITH THE IMAGE

When Kato began her flower series, she'd scan the Polaroid print on a flatbed scanner, bring the file into Photoshop,



enlarge the image to 16x20 and manipulate the image. Digital capture has eliminated the need for the scanning phase.

In order to emulate the Polaroid look, Kato usually desaturates colors. She digitally stores a file made from a scanned black-and-white Polaroid negative to help reproduce the texture of classic Polaroids. If she wants a grainy image, she adds a layer she created from frames of ISO 3200 black-and-white film she shot of fog.

Kato finds it important for her aesthetic to make the blends look as natural or "organic" as possible. She achieves the look by working in blending modes and manipulating opacity. This stage takes longer than when she worked with Polaroids, says Kato, "because the Polaroid is inherently softer, so I didn't have to do as much work."

To keep a consistency in her series, she combines her digitally captured images with scans of Polaroid "frames," allowing her to match the look of her previous work with authentic Polaroid edges.

STEP 5: PRINTING THE IMAGE

Kato prints on Epson Enhanced Matte paper using Epson Stylus Pro 4000 and 4800 printers. She exhibits her images in off-white beveled window mattes and simple black-and-white wooden frames. When clients have desired a more modern look, she has presented her images sandwiched in Plexiglas. With either mode of framing, Kato says she uses wide margins to give her flowers "plenty of room to breathe." PC

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See more of Sachi Kato's work at www.sachikato.com.