

Douglas Dubler > Master Digital Photographer

INTERVIEW BY JENNI MILLER > IMAGES BY DOUGLAS DUBLER

IF AN AWARD-WINNING FASHION AND BEAUTY PHOTOGRAPHER TOLD YOU THE FUTURE OF PHOTOGRAPHY WAS DIGITAL, WOULD YOU LISTEN? DOUGLAS DUBLER STUDIED FINE ARTS AND LIBERAL ARTS AT HARVARD AND BOSTON UNIVERSITY AND LATER WAS MENTORED BY ANSEL ADAMS AND ISAMU NOGUCHI. HE HAS BEEN TAKING PICTURES PROFESSIONALLY SINCE 1970. AS A PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER, HIS PICTURES HAVE CAPTURED SOME OF THE MOST FAMOUS NAMES IN THE WORLD FOR COUNTLESS MAGAZINE COVERS AND COSMETIC ADS. ONE OF HIS MOST RECENT COMMERCIAL JOBS WAS CONCEPTUALIZING AND TAKING THE PHOTOS FOR LVMH'S E-LUXURY WEBSITE.

Douglas Dubler is also one of the most outspoken advocates of digital cameras; his fine art photos are all taken digitally, and he is a consultant for companies who vie for the ever-growing digital camera market around the world. How does someone who set out studying black and white photography and sculpture with modern masters strike out on his own in this brave new digital world? I visited Dubler in his studio in NYC to find out.

On his conversion to digital cameras, Dubler says, "I had been watching the progress of digital capture for a number of years. When *PhaseOne* introduced their *LightPhase* single shot camera, I felt the time had come to dive into the digital waters. Unlike most people, my transition was sudden and complete. I worked with someone who was very good with digital imaging technology for a couple of months to get me up on the learning curve. Looking back on this period, I must admit at times my frustration level was quite high due to the instability of the camera and computer. Crashes were frequent and prevented a consistent workflow. Now, thankfully, most of that is in the past, and we have achieved a



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workflow which is productive, stable and creative."

Douglas' first digital camera was an *Olympus C-2000 Zoom*, a consumer camera that he bought four or five years ago. He took some experimental shots of flowers using different shutter settings and slow flash sync and was amazed by the results. "The files were very small, probably 2 MB to 5MB. I could only make small prints with them, but they were absolutely exquisite," he says. "That hooked me." It was at this time that he began investigating using digital cameras for his commercial photography as well.

His clients love the results too. "To shoot in the studio and have images come up instantly on the 22" *Apple Cinema* display is quite an experience. Shooting film, I would shoot six or seven hundred pictures a day; now maybe I shoot a hundred digital images a day. I see what I'm getting immediately. If there are any changes to be made, we can do them on the spot, not after the job is finished. The model can also see. Sometimes that's good, sometimes that's bad, sometimes you have to turn the screen away," he laughs.

Using a digital camera and computers to capture, retouch and print the images is a relief for the clients and for the photographer. Dubler says, "The client loves to be able to see the images. I send the clients away with prints at the end of the day that have been retouched." Though the technology wasn't very reliable when he first started, Douglas says that now "it's unusual for us to lose any images in the course of a shoot. I can't remember the last time we lost an image."

Douglas Dubler has recently rediscovered his love for fine art photography, this time with a modern technological twist. According to him, digital cameras have revolutionized the way he creates images from start to finish. Using a technique taught by **Ansel Adams** called "pre-visualization," Dubler first sets up the shot mentally. "That concept is what I learned from Ansel, and that involves looking at a scene and imagining in your mind's eye what your interpretation of that will be. It doesn't have to be literal. You can change it as the tools and the methodology enable you to. You determine how you want that final product to look, and then you go about the necessary steps taking the photograph to create, in black and white photography, the negative. Then you make a print from the negative. In digital capture, everything is done in the camera. If you need any additional adjustments later, those are realized in *Photoshop*."

Douglas' fine art photos are breathtaking, and they are all the more striking in a time when anyone with a copy of *Photoshop* considers himself or herself an artist. He creates the images without any post-manipulation. He works in a continuous cycle of "inspiration, execution and observation," which when working digitally makes the result more immediate and thus more productive. Time and energy are conserved because the images are readily available; there's no need to take excess photos in case some don't turn out, and turnaround time is minimal. This is a boon for both his fine art and his commercial photos.

Dubler advises, "I think it is imperative for anyone who envisions a career in photography to become conversant with digital technology. There will come a time in the near future when anybody who wants you to shoot a job will demand a file from you, not a photograph that has to be scanned. A perfect example is the project I worked on for *LVMH's* E-luxury website. We had to shoot the pictures, edit them, have them retouched, burned onto a CD, and *FedEx*ed to Paris for

next morning delivery. There's no way I could have accommodated a work schedule like that shooting film. I wouldn't have had film back until the next day. Time is money. That's what it comes down to. And once the remaining quality issues are resolved, there will be no contest."

Since Douglas acts as a technical consultant to the major players in the digital camera market [his specialty being color management and skin tone], he is well versed in where the technology comes from and where it's going. Some of his time is spent helping direct where it's going as well. Dubler points out that an 8 Megapixel camera, which is already available to professionals and will soon hit the consumer market, has a higher resolution than pictures taken with a traditional camera and film.

Douglas has also taught photography at the International Center for Photography in NYC for the past ten years and will be teaching a course this summer on digital imaging as well. He has what some traditional art educators might say is a radical vision of what students of the camera need to know. "I don't believe there is great value in teaching chemistry based/silver halide technology to students who are anticipating a future career in photography. Maybe some brief discourse from a historical perspective, but to delve deeply into such subjects would require a disproportionate amount of time. Time that would be better spent mastering those skills they will need. Maybe that's a bit unfair to say when you have the benefit of that traditional training, but this is what I believe in my heart of hearts."


Dubler adds, "The situation is further compounded by the fact that the manufacturers of all of these materials will at some point in the future, when they no longer see commensurate profits, cease producing these materials. I have seen it happen in the past."

He also feels that the environmental impact of digital photography is far less than traditional developing and printing, which requires a toxic concoction of chemicals. "I always felt bad pulling the plug on the sink and watching those chemicals go down the drain. The color chemistry is particularly toxic, not to mention the contact with your skin and breathing the fumes. Now I can breathe easier in both senses."

So if the future of photography is digital, what part will programs like *iPhoto* and *Photoshop* play? Dubler uses professional image-transfer and manipulation applications but thinks *iPhoto* is "a great idea for consumers." His views on *Photoshop* are more interesting, and as usual, Douglas doesn't hesitate to share his opinion. He says, "I try and create it in the camera. As an artist, I feel that is more challenging. No effect I produce in camera can be duplicated to my satisfaction post production."

His current equipment includes the *Mamiya RZ67 w/Leaf Cantare XY digital back*, the *Mamiya 645AFD w/Leaf C-MOST digital back*, the *Fuji S-1 camera*, the *Olympus E-20*, and the *Olympus C-4040 Zoom*.

Dubler's immediate plans include a gallery show this fall in NYC that will exhibit his digital fine art prints. This exhibition, "*Solstice*," will be at Synchronicity Fine Arts, 106 W. 13th ST., NY, NY 10011. The show opens Oct. 29th and lasts through Nov. 23. He is also currently contributing to the high-end online photography and design magazine *ZooZoom* (www.zoozoom.com) and launching his own website (www.douglasdubler3.com).



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