

Kodak Professional DCS Pro-Back 645M

by Douglas Dubler III

Several years ago, a friend at Eastman Kodak asked me to look at a new digital back that Kodak had developed for the professional medium-format market. I signed the usual NDA agreement and we did a fashion shoot to test the camera. My memory of that experience prompted me to raise an eyebrow when I heard Kodak was introducing a hybrid of this back to mate with a 645 autofocus camera. Then at PMA in Orlando last February, Jerry Magee, Kodak's product manager for digital cameras, demonstrated the back to me – and I raised the other eyebrow. I would have raised a third eyebrow if I had one after I tested this new back at the request of PT. It should raise your eyebrows, too, along with the quality of your work.

The Professional DCS Pro Back 645M will be available in three models, one for the Contax 645, and the other two for the Mamiya 645AF, and my favorite, the Mamiya 645AFD.

Let me begin with a few words about the Mamiya 645AFD. My familiarity with the quality and marriage of form and function of Mamiya's other medium-format cameras set me up like a shill at an auction. I didn't have a chance. The RZ67 had been my camera of choice for the majority of my fashion and beauty work. Its unquestionable reliability and precision optics have always delivered my most memorable images.

Luckily for me, when my vision started to go, autofocus started to come into its own, starting for me with the Nikon F4. For years, I lamented that no medium-format company had yet to jump into the autofocus pool. So for the time being, if I wanted medium-format

images, I would have to rely on manual focus.

Then in 1999, Mamiya introduced the 645AF with infrared autofocus assist. Two years later, they introduced the 645AFD with improvements relevant to digital capture.

The advantage of being able to hand-hold the camera and use accurate autofocus – coupled with sharp

zoom lenses – was a great leap forward for me. Using the zoom to compose the shot without having to move, saves time and effort, while maintaining that subtle connection between photographer and model.

Enter Kodak with the Pro Back 645M. This is a marriage made in heaven. Together, the two units look like they came out of the same factory. All of the advantages of the Mamiya camera join with the ability to capture and review images at the rate of 1 frame every 1.6 seconds. This camera and digital back is initially being marketed to the portrait, wedding and commercial market. But as a fashion and beauty shooter, I can think of few things more appealing.

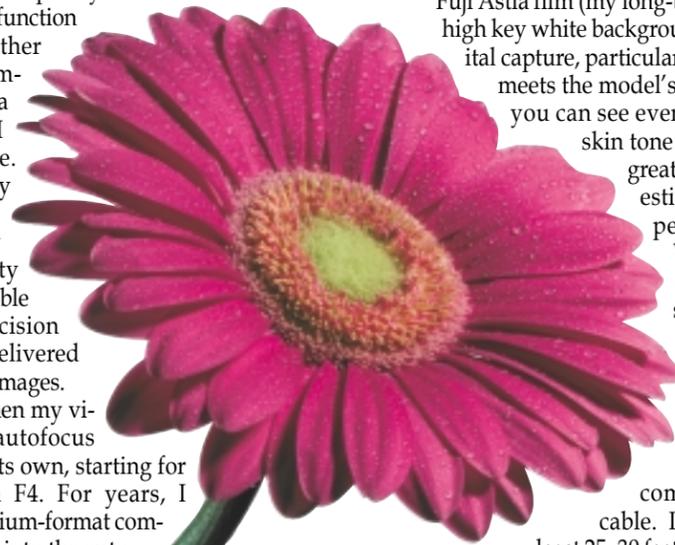
For statistics and tech talk, you can visit www.kodak.com. Kodak has a nice, four-page brochure in PDF format for you to study at your leisure. Here, I'll concentrate on the practical details and my personal experience with the camera.

The image (opposite page) I chose to illustrate this exciting new digital back is from an editorial beauty piece called "Primordial Beauty." I thought the combination of skin tone and iridescent colors together, with texture created by make-up artist Sylvia Pichler, would present a formidable challenge to any medium, be it film or digital. And as a reference I shot 120 Fuji Astia film (my long-time favorite) in my Mamiya RZ67. A high key white background is also a serious challenge for digital capture, particularly at the point where the background meets the model's face and starts that first "wrap." As you can see even in the magazine reproduction, the skin tone is very smooth and continuous with great color. The iridescent colors are, in my estimation, very close to reality. The expert digital retouching provided by Willie of Cursor, Inc. in New York did not alter the initial color, and was restricted to complementing the creative aesthetic projected by the exotic beauty, Essi, from Elite Models N.Y.

Bravo, Kodak.

I shot with the camera tethered to the computer with a 14 ft., 6-4 pin firewire cable. It would be great if a longer cable (at least 25-30 feet) was available. Once I gray-balanced the camera with Gretag Macbeth's Color Checker DC using the "portrait reduced profile" on the camera, I was immediately impressed with the results. Kodak recommends the standard Gretag Macbeth Color Checker, but my recent experiences convinced me to go with the "digital" version. Kodak's new color space Profoto RGB is fabulous. Be aware, however, that a very big color space will challenge any output device, as well as CMYK conversions. Nevertheless, I love it so much, that I'm thinking of attaching it as an embedded profile to other images I have captured in smaller color spaces.

No system is perfect. I found the custom color balance option



to be unacceptable. The color chart lost both saturation and contrast. I stayed with the default profile, being careful to gray-balance at the onset. That is a "must" anytime there is a change in lighting.

The camera could be a little faster, an improvement I'm sure Kodak is working on. But all of the crunching of data and the limitation of the transfer rates and processor speeds make those future considerations. It is a small price to pay for this large file (48 MB) with its attendant quality. I definitely believe, at least in digital capture, that size matters. As that size increases, the digital curve becomes smoother, approaching the appearance of an analog film curve. Smoother transitions, better detail, less noise and moiré—the end result is a product that is getting very close to film. We are not quite there yet, but who said the race was over?

I typically shoot 10 or 20 rolls of film per shot. Nevertheless, with digital I can move on quicker, since I can see what I am getting. What a relief! How many times have we all heard "just one more roll?"

The still life of the flower was taken by my friend Billy Jim, who has managed Irving Penn's studio in New York for the past five years. I asked Billy to put the Kodak DCS Pro Back 645M to the test. Here are some of his conclusions:

On the positive side, Billy felt the battery-powered aspect was a big plus, together with the square sensor and the availability of different film "looks." He thought it would be nice if Kodak included "looks" for EPR, VPS and Kodachrome in the future. Billy also thought that the DCS Pro Back 645M was an incredible proofing tool, replacing Polaroids for fine-tuning exposure and lighting ratios, even when shooting film.

His wish list includes the following: 16-bit capture, allowing more headroom for Photoshop adjustments to avoid banding and combing in the histogram; the possibility of a cooled chip (like the one Scitex uses) to reduce even more noise; and the addition of 4-shot capability for true, uninterpolated color and elimination of moiré. In general,

Billy agreed with me that this digital back is an important step forward for high-end digital imaging.

The Kodak DCS Pro Back 645M uses Kodak's 16 megapixel (4080x4080) sensor, which can generate a 12-bit-per-color image resulting in a 16-bit linear, 96 MB RGB file. ISO range is from 100-400, with a long exposure capability up to 20 seconds. My experience with the Sekonic L-608 meter (which I consider to be quite precise) in incident mode leads me to rate the ISO range closer to ISO 80. The back will capture to compact flash or micro

drive and sports an LCD screen on the back to check exposure and composition if you are capturing remotely.

I do, however, have a minor complaint. For studio applications, I found the LCD much too saturated and much darker than the image on the monitor. This is a factor I would be cognizant of if I were to capture remotely and attempt to use the back as an exposure evaluator. As always, trust your meter!

The software that comes with the DCS Pro Back 645M includes Photo Desk, Camera Manager and Capture Studio. They are appropriate, with Photo Desk representing the simple approach, and Capture Studio making more controls available. I found Capture Studio quite user-friendly, with its option of making most decisions reversible after the fact by reverting to the RAW file. That's a great advantage until you get dialed in on the look or looks you like. Another preference of mine was to turn the sharpness off (default is low) and use Photoshop. I am not a fan of sharpening, and think the people who develop these technologies spend too much time cutting out paper dolls. Ana-

log or silver halide emulsions just don't have those sharp edges. But as Dennis Miller would say, "Don't get me started on a rant!"

Still, I do have issues here. It seems to be common for manufacturers—Kodak included—to market all of the forgiving qualities of digital technology. This implies that results will be fine with a two-stop latitude. What happened to the craft of photography, and taking readings with a handheld meter? Did it become unfashionable along with transparency film? If you are striving for a great quality image, my experience is that digital is no more forgiving than film. With all of the "sliding" and other Photoshop adjustments,

the best quality is still achieved at time of capture by a careful photographer. All my studio equipment—electronic flash, meters and camera exposure compensations—are worked out in tenths of a stop. If the equipment is capable of that kind of control, I feel I should be just as meticulous. Let us all think before we shoot.

With the introduction of the DCS Pro Back 645M, Kodak has certainly raised the "digital" bar. Coupled with the Mamiya 645AFD, the combination of price point and quality stands alone in the market, at least at this point. But close on its heels are new cameras from Canon, Fuji and Olympus. All are expected to put pressure on the higher priced digital solutions.

Change. One of the greatest aspects of all of this new technology is change, and at a rate never seen before in the history of photography. Innovations in cameras, scanners, computers, and printers, when combined, make the advances exponential. And the future promises more of the same. Let us all enjoy it. ■

Douglas Dubler III is a NYC-based fashion and beauty photographer who works on editorial and advertising assignments. His clients include the major cosmetic companies, fashion designers and fashion magazines. He is a staff member of The International Center of Photography, and is a consultant to numerous manufacturers. He's represented by Tom Farrell, 212-794-4671.

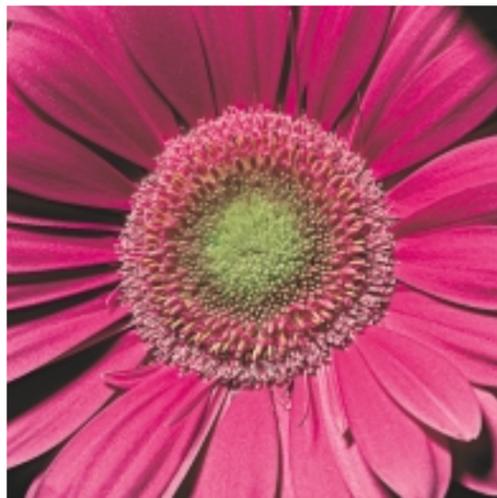


Photo Equipment List:

Electronic flash, Balcar Nexus 3200 wt./sec packs w/PrismaLights; Mamiya 645AFD w/ULD105-210mm f/4.5 lens; Digital-Kodak Professional DCS ProBack 645M; Apple Dual 1 gig computer w/ 1500MB RAM; 22" Apple Cinema Display (expertly calibrated by Russell Doucette using Gretag-Macbeth Eye-One and Color ProfileMaker 4.0); Adobe Photoshop 7.0. Shot at SoHo Studios, NYC.