

The View Camera - A Nice Alternative

Some images are missing from this text.



Quite a few years ago, when digital photography was but a few years old and many people were hesitant to take that leap of faith and there was also an unfair push into the suggestion that film photography was no longer required or viable, (still a bit the same unfortunately) I was sent a piece from an unnamed source suggesting that there was a new kid on the block which rivaled the new fang dangled digital sensor.

It made claims that each capture unit could be handled separately and had a whopping 30 to 120 mega pixels of information plus many other attributes that would put the new digital capture to shame. The capture unit had a working name of Fast Image Light Management or FILM for short. I of course played along a little during the time that piece was circulated and even wrote a supporting piece as to my findings on the “new” system.

Well although everyone had their tongues firmly planted in their cheeks the phones rang hot for a few days and in my case I had to placate a few people who had just invested thousands in the new digital system or were about to and wanted to know more.

The good news is that this system, FILM, is still viable and flexible with individual control, especially when using the view camera as a capture medium. Apart from the fun and joy of using one of these cameras, the versatility you have with composition and the processing of the film is just fantastic.

The beauty of the view camera is that it allows you to be more flexible with lens movements so as to overcome some difficulties that are sometimes faced. Probably the most common movement for landscape photographers is the tilt mechanism where the lens is tilted (usually forward) to obtain focus with the background and foreground objects. This allows you to focus the near and far in a scene to obtain sharpness without having to stop the lens right down to its minimum aperture. There is centre axis tilt and base tilt. In my opinion the former is easier to control than the latter.

The next most common movement is the rise. We have all seen those photographs where buildings or trees merge together near the top because the camera has been tilted up. By doing this it means the subject is no longer parallel with the film plane and so convergence sets in. The more you tilt the worse the effect. With the rise capability on the view camera you keep the lens and film plane parallel with the subject and lift the lens till the top of the building or trees come into view. Of course there are limitations as to how far you can go, but used wisely it works a treat.

Probably the third most used movement is the swing. Used when say a building wall fades off into the distance and you want to control sharpness along the length of the wall. This is assuming you are photographing a wall that is close to you and it moves away from you on the same side of the frame and it is continuous. It is really like the tilt, but just on its side.

And lastly, lens shift is like rise and fall again only on its side. If you are employing back movements they are pretty much the same as the lens movements, but given you are shifting the film area around you will distort the image that is recorded on the film. The only movement that you do from the back that wont distort the subject matter is rise and fall. All others will.

When I first got interested in photography, mainly because of car racing, all those years ago, I remember the thrill it was when I bought my first camera. Just holding it was even fun let alone using it and producing images that probably today I would be embarrassed to look at let alone admit that I took them. But we all must start somewhere even if it is from the back of the grid or even the pit lane. (Petrol head talk) The novelty soon wore off and it became just an instrument to record images with.

Years later when I graduated to the view camera that joy of actually using the camera for what it is returned and it is still with me. Setting the camera up, selecting the appropriate lens, composing the image, applying movements if necessary, taking a light reading, applying a filter, again if necessary, setting the lens, placing the film in the back of the camera and then pressing the shutter to reveal one of the greatest sounds in photography (that's if you have set the shutter speed to 1 second) - the sound the shutter makes as the shutter releases. It is just a joy to use let alone making a remarkable image from this apparatus. Just as some cars are more fun to drive than others, some cameras are much more fun to record with than others. The view camera is one.

The one thing you cant do with the view camera is rapid fire photography. Using one of these instruments forces you to slow down and so you concentrate more on the image, more on the composition and more on it's relationship with its surroundings to convey how it is you feel about it.

An interesting statistic that has emerged over the last few years is the big increase in view camera sales. Many manufacturers of view cameras now have a waiting list and even the second hand market is very healthy. Apparently in 2006 more view cameras were sold than in the previous 3 years and in 2007 the number surpassed the total sales for 2006. Still waiting on the 2008 figure, but really it doesn't matter because for some strange reason there has been a renaissance with the view camera so perhaps we will see another Michelangelo appear in the next few years.

There are of course view cameras and there are view cameras. Some are most definitely worth avoiding as well. Make sure whatever you buy, if you do, that the bellows draw is adequate for the lenses you have. As a starter for view cameras it is a bit hard to beat the Linhof Technika. I have owned both the Technika IV and the Technika V and can highly recommend either of them.

The second hand market is the only place to find these and sometimes they are sold off at quite a reasonable price.

The images I have shown here have had movements applied to them. I thought about going down the before and after shots, but there are enough books on view camera technique or articles on the net that you can easily find. Some of the best books that I remember purchasing when I first bought a view camera almost 15 years ago are:

Using the View Camera by Steve Simmons, View Camera by Jim Stone and if you can still get it which is doubtful is the excellent Kodak publication Photography with Large Format Cameras.

There are numerous diagrams on tilt, rise, shift and swing movements explaining what they do and when to apply them. At first it may seem a bit daunting, but really it is quite straight forward and with just a small amount of practice you will be fine. In fact as a rule when you buy a view camera they come with no instructions. If it is the folding type they will give you a sheet showing you how to undo it and do it up, but that's it, so you see it can't be as confusing as some of those manuals that arrive with a digital camera. If you can memorize all the functions on offer you are a better man than I Gunga Din.

Apart from lenses you will need a dark cloth that you can disappear under when you are composing and focusing. Easily made from material that is dark on the inside and opaque. My first dark cloth I made from a rubberised material which was not only opaque but water proof as well. Size-wise you need something about 1200 mm square. To buy made up about \$40 to \$50 or home made about \$10. You may of course come up with your own design that works for you, but as a starter the square model is perfect.

A 4x(times), 5x or 6x loupe for critical focusing. One of these is usually adequate and better than anything stronger which will usually show the grain in the ground glass which makes it much harder to focus. Another good addition is a "Bright" screen. This is to replace the original ground glass and will give you another 2 stops of light which is just fantastic when the light starts getting low. Once you've had one you will never go back to the other.

The down side of these screens is that they are quite costly. More than \$400. Sometimes some justification is required before the purchase is made, but if you consider yourself to be a bright person then that is reason enough, is it not?

And lastly and definitely the most important is a good and sturdy tripod. To hand hold one of these babies in the wild is bordering on lunacy. However for artistic rationale one could be adventurous!

I would think that a view camera is very useful for those who suffer from self esteem and find it difficult to start up a conversation with strangers. Once you set up one of these cameras they will attract a crowd wanting to know what it is and making comments like "Oh you're a **real** photographer!" Here the assumption once again is that it is the camera and not the operator seeing the image. Oh well make the most of it and have fun with it if you go down that path.

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Images with text.

Church Door, Chusa San Vito Di Cadora, Italy

A small amount of rise has been applied to the lens just to get the balance right above the wall. If I had tilted the camera up the tops of the trees would start to "bend in". Also I have stopped the lens down to F64 to maintain sharpness. Tilting the lens in this case would not work as the top of the trees would be thrown out of focus. The more you tilt in this case the further down the trunk the lack of sharpness would move.

Diggers Creek, Kosciuszko National Park

With this image the lens has been tilted forward a little to maintain focus near and far. Once the focus is as close as I can get it I will then stop the lens down to F32 (just in case) to increase depth of field.

Tesselated Pavements, Eagle Hawk Neck, Tasmania

By way of example here the lens has been tilted forward till the near and far come into focus. This is usually done with the lens wide open and then I would stop down to F32 and then make the picture.