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GRAIN

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Photography magazine for contemporary photographers with analog souls

ANN LT

Focus and Click: A Passion for Photography and the Leica M Rangefinders

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Thank you, GRAIN magazine, for providing me with a platform to express my deep affection for the Leica M rangefinders. As a contemporary photographer with an analog soul, your magazine's tagline resonates with me on a personal level.

My Photography Journey: Origins and Personal Significance

My dad's passion for photography shaped my journey. He is the reason why I became a photographer. It all began at 16, when he gifted me a red Canon Snappy 20. I explored more with my first SLR, a Nikon N8008 (F-801), but the shift to digital in 2004 with the DSLRs, a Nikon D70 and later a D200, that I truly immersed myself in this art form.

Photography serves as therapy, offering an escape and creative outlet. It provides me with a unique way to frame the world, allowing me to be me at my truest and express myself most authentically. It is a testament to my life experiences, incorporating what I've lived, read, and witnessed while sharpening my perception and empathy towards my subjects. I am an observer of life; I find beauty in the mundane and see different faces of humanity scattered across the urban landscape. Through the viewfinder, I become a visual storyteller.

Leica X
23mm
f/3.5, 1/250°, ISO 400





Leica M10-P
Summicron 35mm
F/3.4, 1/750", ISO 200



Leica M8
F/11 . 1/350" . ISO 160



Leica M8
F/1.2 . 1/500" . ISO 320



During COVID, I prioritized safety and stumbled upon a unique shooting style - capturing photos from the car, with drive-bys and stop-and-shoots. I have adopted this method as an integral part of my shooting technique, as seen in all the outdoor photos featured in this article.

The Allure with Leica and its Mystique

After years of shooting with a DSLR system, I felt unfulfilled. This set up, though very capable, had become too cumbersome and intrusive. It weighed me down, both physically and creatively. It felt too automated, too fast, too effortless, and while the results were good, they lacked the soul I admired in the Leica M images I saw.

Furthermore, I repeatedly observed renowned photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Josef Koudelka, Saul Leiter, and Alex Webb favoring the Leica M. Their consistent preference for this rangefinder system intrigued me.

The rangefinder's unobtrusive, classic look, portability, and rich heritage captivated me.



Leica M8
F/13, 1/180", ISO 320



Leica M8
Voigtlander Color-Skopar 21mm
F/9.5, 1/750", ISO 640



Intrigued, I embarked on a quest to unravel the enigma of the "Leica mystique" and the sought-after "Leica look." What's the allure behind these cameras?

In 2007, in a brief encounter with a M7 + 35mm Summicron, clarity dawned. Beyond image quality, craftsmanship and beauty of design captivated me. Aesthetically, the M7, like all M rangefinders, is nothing short of an objet d'art. Holding and operating the camera was extraordinary, and the rangefinder focusing was a revelation. And so, it was only a short time later that I purchased this rangefinder and lens combo.

Shooting with the Leica M7

The rangefinder focus system, which superimposes two images to achieve precise focus, prompts me to take deliberate and mindful shots. This stands in contrast to the spray-and-shoot style often seen with SLR/DSLRs. For capturing candid moments, zone focusing lets me freeze fleeting scenes effortlessly.





Leica M7
Noodlux 50mm
F/11, Kodak Ektachrome E100VS



Leica M10-P
Leica Summicron-M 1:2/35
F/11, 1/90", ISO 400



While I have a preference for manually adjusting shutter speed and aperture, aperture priority mode saves from extra dial adjustments.

Without a mirror, I directly view through the rangefinder window, broadening my perspective and aiding in capturing the “decisive moment.” There’s no blackout, again, a common occurrence with SLR/DSLRs. Handheld shooting remains steady, even at 1/15s.

The camera’s near-silent shutter makes discreet captures a breeze. I can easily hold it with one hand; its natural feel and understated appearance allow me to get closer to subjects without drawing attention.

Shooting with the M7 reinforced my comfort with the rangefinder system—it’s like an extension of my eye. However, analog’s downsides—costs, lab wait times, personal scanning time—was a concern. In 2009, with the introduction of the M9, I acquired a Leica M8, the first digital M, when the price dropped.





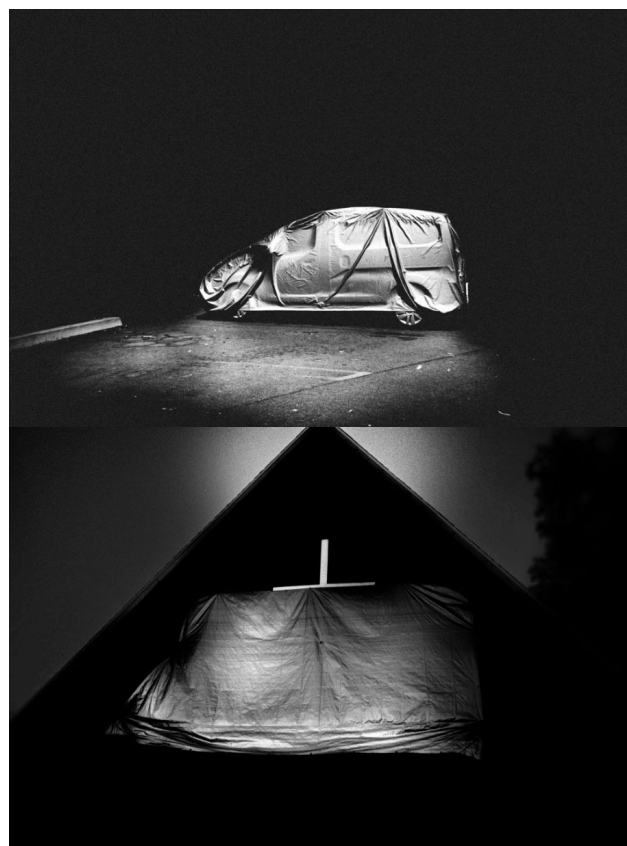


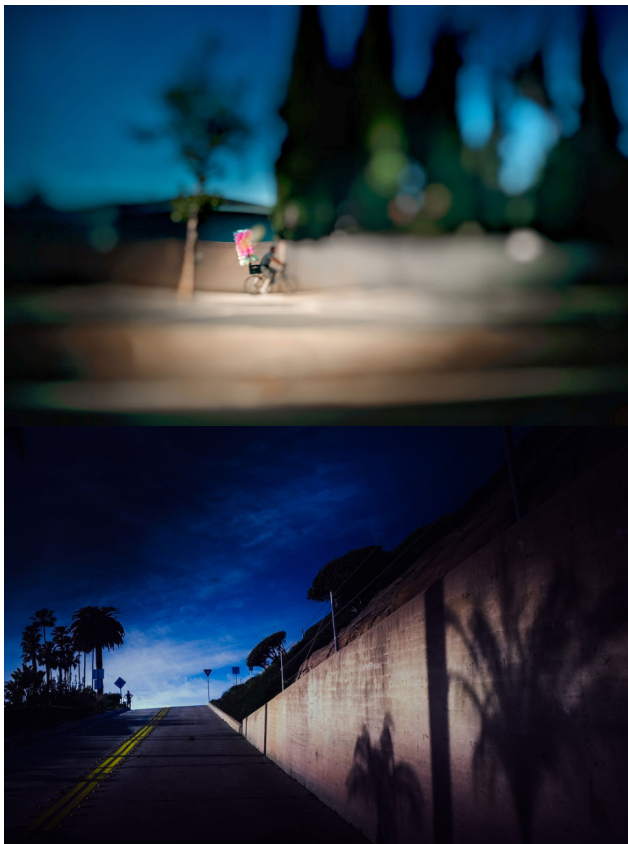
Shooting with the Leica M8

Debuting in 2006, the M8 is the first digital Leica M. In terms of digital technology, this 17 year old camera is beyond ancient. Yet it commands respect today, having clearly stood the test of time. Even with its numerous quirks and limitations, I find immense pleasure in using it to this day.

Proudly wearing its limitations as strengths, the 10.3 MP M8 houses a CCD sensor that imparts unique qualities. There's a distinct digital 'grain' that pleasantly evokes the feel of film. These characteristics are very organic and don't look artificial. The camera excels in capturing vibrant colors reminiscent of Kodachrome film as well as rendering impressive black and white images. Imagine shooting an endless roll of Kodachrome or Tri-X; I certainly have no reason to complain about that.

It excels at low ISO settings, particularly around 160, but its performance dips above 640. I've learned not to fire more than two continuous shots due to the frequent buffer overload, requiring a battery pull. The infamous infrared issue becomes irrelevant with a UV/IR filter. The 1.33x crop factor isn't problematic. Without an AA filter, resolution is very impressive.





Moreover, with a rapid $1/8000$ sec, it's the fastest among Leica Ms. This enables shooting wide open, a substantial advantage, particularly when paired with my Noctilux f1 for sunny day bokeh.

Fast forward to today

This month, September 2023, the Leica M8 turns 17! This juncture appears to be the opportune time for a dual celebration: commemorating its birthday while also embarking on a significant digital upgrade. Opting to incorporate the M10-P feels incredibly fitting. Marking the occasion in advance, it joined my M family this past July, transforming it from a duo to a trio.

Shooting with the Leica M10-P

Leica introduced the M10-P, with its 24 MP CMOS sensor in 2018. Ergonomically, it feels like the M7. With the Thumb Up hot shoe thumb rest on both, they bear a striking resemblance. Its size matches that of the M7, effectively making it a digital counterpart to the M7. The controls are almost identical, and I hardly realize that one is digital, the other film.



Leica M8
F2.8, 1/500", ISO 160



Leica M8
Nodulux 50mm
F1.4, 1/6", ISO 320

In terms of aesthetics, its all-black design, and omission of the classic red dot, makes the M10-P the stealthiest among my M trio. Impressively, it boasts the quietest shutter in the M lineup, digital or analog.

This camera is my go-to for full-frame capability, high ISO performance, and continuous shooting mode. The touch-enabled LCD screen adds convenience, and live view is handy for when I opt for viewfinder-free shooting. Focus peaking further improves its functionality, and the touch interface is valuable for capturing and reviewing photos. Although Wi-Fi capability is available, I rarely use it.

Embracing the Film Aesthetic

I'm drawn to the visual aesthetic of film, valuing its imperfect and authentic qualities over the overly polished look of digital. Handling film, with its limited exposures and the anticipation of development, adds a layer of nostalgia and mindfulness to my photography. The charm of its grains and tones, along with these imperfections, akin to life's complexities, contributes to its allure.







To recapture film's essence, I post-process digital images, preserving sentiment while embracing technology.

Regarding Film Stocks

Film photography is undergoing a resurgence, reclaiming its popularity once more. A notable sign of this revival is the introduction of new film stocks and the resurgence of older ones. I'm lucky to possess a fridge drawer filled with expired film I bought over 20 years ago, particularly given the considerable rise in film prices.

While I enjoy shooting with different film stocks, my favorites are Ilford XP2 and HP5 for black and white, as well as Kodak Tri-X. For color, I prefer Fuji Velvia 100F, Kodak Portra 400VC, Ektachrome E100VS, and Elite Chrome 200.

I love the unpredictability of expired film, often experimenting with both push processing as well as cross processing.



Leica M8
F5.7, 1/350", ISO 160



Regarding lenses

I've collected these lenses over the years: Voigtlander Color-Skopar 21mm f/4, Leica Summicron 35mm f/2, Summicron 50mm, f/2, and Noctilux 50mm f/1.

For candid photography, the 35mm and 50mm Summicrons on the M7 and M10-P are my go-to choices, occasionally paired with the Noctilux for added bokeh.

On the M8, the 21mm lens has become my favorite. The crop factor of 1.33x on the M8 essentially turns it into a 28mm lens on a full-frame camera. And my 35 mm Summicron becomes roughly 50mm.

Final Thoughts

Shooting with the Leica M7, M8, and M10-P fills me with immense joy, as each camera offers unique advantages. I'm thankful for discovering the Leica M system, and ever since embracing this rangefinder method of shooting, I've found a deep sense of fulfillment.

Leica M8
Voigtlander Color-Skopar 21mm
f/9.5, 1/750°, ISO 160







It's a personal pleasure akin to being in love - my first encounter with the M7 was an instant connection. Over time, my love for the Leica M system remains unwavering. It might be irrational, but it's all about that "feeling." Simply feeling good when I pick up one of the cameras. This sentiment has not only driven me to photograph daily, but has also honed my skills as a photographer.

Opting for near new pre-owned Leica gear has proven to be wise. The quality remains notably superior. I look forward to a long-lasting love affair with my beloved M trio.

Text and images: Ann LT (Ann Luu-Trong)



Leica M10-P
Summilux 35mm
F/6.8, 1/250", ISO 640

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