

FOTO **RE**VIEW





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Vol.1 Issue1
Published June 2019

foto:RE|VIEW
ISSN 2562-6221

foto:RE|VIEW is published four times per year (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter) by foto:RE and distributed throughout Canada. All rights reserved. Reproduction of any material appearing in this magazine in any form is forbidden without prior consent of the publisher.

Editor: Mark Walton
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Proofing: Andre Krnac

Printed in Canada by:
Pandora Press
13-330 Gage Ave, Kitchener
Ontario, Canada, N2M 5C6

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Thanks to Crystal Mowry and Shirley Madill of KWAG for their advice and support.

Based in Waterloo Region in southwestern Ontario, foto:RE is a photographic collective comprised of photographers from across Canada and the world.

For advertising opportunities contact info@foto.re

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This project was generously supported by the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund.

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ARTS FUND



WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN

MARK WALTON
TEXT BY: KARL KESSLER

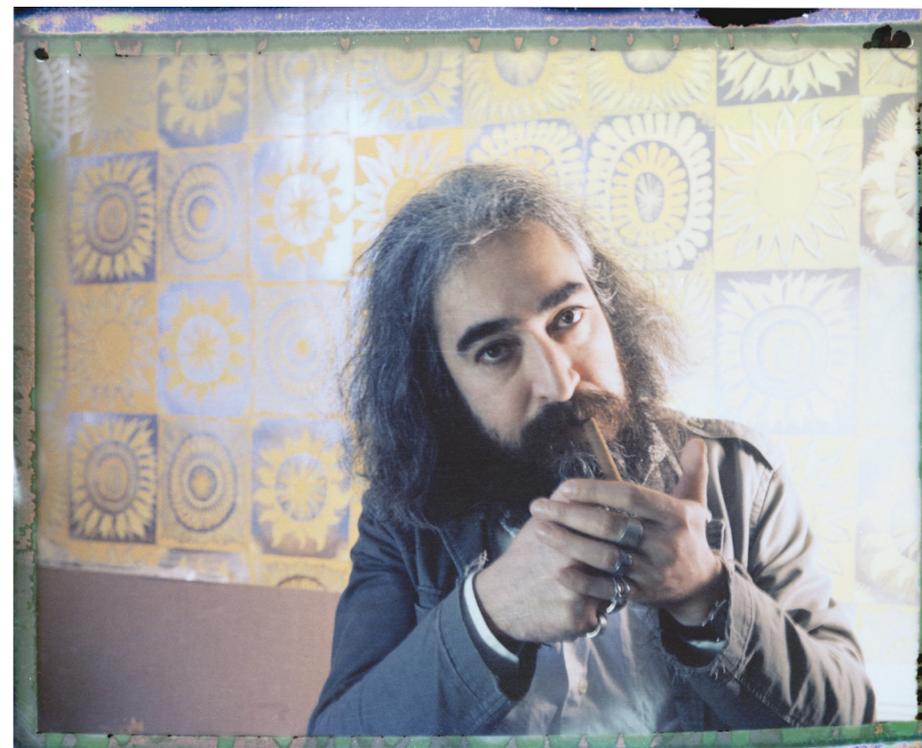
If you spent enough time scanning the radio dial a few decades ago, then you've heard it. An anthem to retrospection, its refrain a photographic metaphor: the vivid scenes we projected onto walls and screens and tacked-up bedsheets in darkened living rooms and basements; glowing signposts that sent us back into ourselves as travelers. Movie stars shone brightly in Technicolor, the rest of us in colour reversal film. Kodachrome. (Sometimes it was Ektachrome, but that just doesn't have the same rhythm).

No popular song ever immortalized Polaroids for making the world look better than it is, or for being truer than life. Polaroid instant photographs bounced back to us as echoes out of our recent history, recognizable, but attenuated and strange.

And yet slides, for all their magic, defied easy browsing, often paying the price by banishment into closets. Just as often, Polaroids found their way into photo albums – at least as often as they were deposited in those same closets, in shoeboxes full of interlayered snapshots, different eras burying each other like biographical sediment.

We got our hands on Polaroid cameras in the mid-twentieth century and fired them off in volleys, memorializing our way through the world eight or ten frames at a time, and reminding ourselves what had



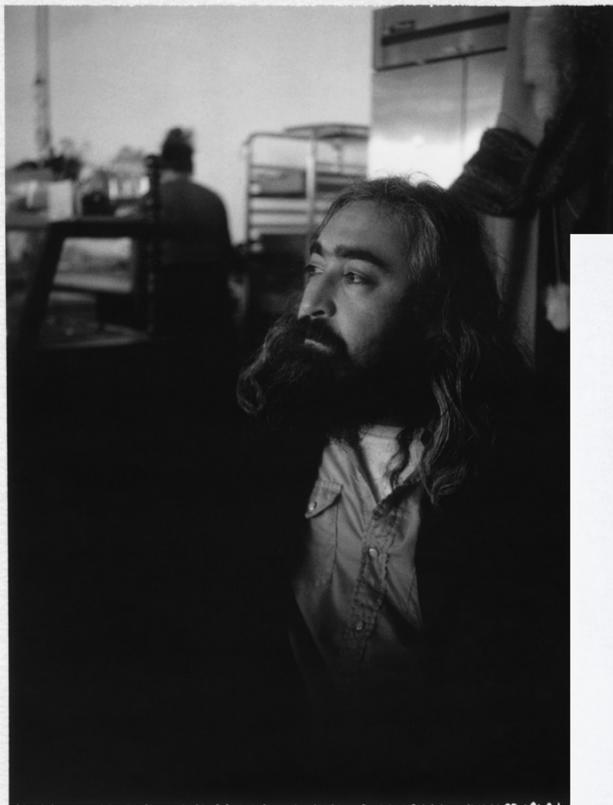


happened only seconds earlier, as though we shouldn't have believed our eyes. As though we might have been unreliable witnesses to our lives who needed our memories jogged to get the story straight. The pictures we made using disembodied lenses were entangled with the memories we made using our embodied senses. But within this tangle, the artifice of the photograph unraveled, and became real.

'All the modern conveniences' included 'instant' products that promised immediate fulfillment, and some picture takers, at least for a while, preferred the speed and novelty of instant film over the waiting and reproducibility of negative film. Although many instant films did yield a negative along with each positive print, the neg was not intended for reuse, and usually was thrown away. What we really wanted was that one-of-a-kind print, a little mirror doubling us back into the same time and place where we had been and where we remained, like the woman pictured on the Droste cocoa tin who holds a miniature of the very same tin, as though she had peeled away from its tiny surface and stepped out ahead of herself, into the future.

In its popularity and speed, and in the unique positives it produced, mid-century instant photography resembled the tintype. In its ease of use and multi-frame film, it was like the flexible negative and reversal films that made an adequate picture-taker out of almost anyone. Now almost everyone carries an instant camera, built into a phone that's used as a camera nearly as often as it is a phone. Seeing and creating photographically have become everyday experiences, handling a photographic print has become a rare pleasure, and – as ever – we're told the state of photography has never been worse and also that it has never been better.





The word Polaroid signified the procedures, quirks, and predictions that spilled over its sides, preceding the actual photograph. If it was a packfilm camera, someone – probably the family camera hog, insisting they knew how to handle it – loaded the film, cocked the shutter, looked through the viewfinder, focused the camera, pressed the button. The exposure was automatic, the aperture fixed. Then we stood by, waiting for an image to resolve from the alchemy beneath a small blank rectangle, before it could be peeled apart for the big reveal. Integral film cameras, which spit out one-piece instant prints, hit the market ten years after packfilm. With these, the apparitions took form before our very eyes.

In either case, prior experience tempered our expectations. We understood that the fragile document cradled in our hands was a concession to imminence. If it was poorly exposed, or not perfectly focused, or blemished by artifacts, we could try a few modest adjustments and shoot again. Significant improvement wasn't guaranteed.

But a Polaroid, although conspicuously not the pictured thing itself, contains an essence. Its built-in chance and imprecision work against specificity, turning over a clean page to collect the viewer's version of the story. With visual media now capable of revision and hyper-realism that sometimes seems bent towards deception, an instant photograph's clear constraints imbue it with the fidelity of a painting, or a poem. It's trustworthy; a reliable witness.

For photographers and viewers with control issues, this is a gift, steering them away from perfectionism. Skill helps express a vision, but perfection is a mirage; when it shapes our aims, it falls short of its promises. Ceding a good measure of control to the medium reminds us that the photograph is material bound. That its mediator is a machine. That part of its creation is its viewer. That its photographer's feet were on the ground. That there are limits, but that collaborating with them creates something more satisfying than overworked exactitude. It creates surprise.

We each carry the baggage of our visual experience, always full, making it hard to see much that's new in any picture. And yet, in engaging with a once-common photographic form that has moved towards extinction, its newfound freshness can transfigure a subject, for viewer and photographer alike.

With these instant photographs, Mark Walton reaches into our baggage and pulls out something we didn't know we had in there: one surprise after another.

They began as sheets of instant packfilm, pulled one exposure at a time from the back of Walton's fifty-year-old Polaroid 250, and then separated, negative from positive. Each finished image was produced in one of several ways – and sometimes more than one. A black-and-white exposure yields a positive print and a paper negative. Both can be scanned and edited; the original print can also stand alone. Likewise with colour, but the negative is transparent with an opaque coating that must be chemically removed before scanning or darkroom printing.

The process is, by its nature, experimental. But packfilm was discontinued years ago. The remaining stock is expensive, depleting with every shutter click, raising the stakes. Stewardship enters the picture. A Polaroid photographer is part conservationist.

Portrait, landscape, still life. Walton's instant photographs are interrelated through his forthright approach and evident trust in the materials, but they are also kin to ones of our own; related through everything we know, think we know, and don't realize that we know about Polaroids. These are familiar people we have never met, familiar places we haven't been, familiar things we haven't seen. A picture is telling – we feel it, and, through kinship, what it tells can be told, beginning to end, in a single frame.

This is why you can see a certain, strange Polaroid for the first time and get the feeling you might have been there before. Because, in a way, you have been there, doing something you won't soon forget.



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FOTO **RE** **VIEW**

Front Cover: Jennifer King
Back Cover: Mark Walton

ISSN 2562-6221



9 772562 622006