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Alternative Approaches

See bw-photography.net for more alternative approaches.

Although the preceding chapters cover the most common black-and-white techniques, processes, and materials, there are still numerous, less widely used approaches. Most are for those times when the photographer wants to achieve an uncommon look by trying something different. This chapter describes several of these alternative approaches.

Infrared Film

Infrared film was originally developed for industrial and scientific applications, but it is now used mostly by creative photographers who like its unusual visual qualities, variously described as surreal, dreamlike, ethereal, and otherworldly. Although sensitive to visible light much as traditional films are, this film also is exposed by infrared—radiation that is not visible to the human eye. The resulting images show the subject fairly realistically, but with distinct differences. For instance, vegetation and organic materials have a lot of infrared, so are rendered with more density on infrared negatives, making these areas light on subsequent prints. The effect can vary widely depending on the subject's infrared content, the type of infrared film you use, and the filter you have on the lens when taking the picture.

Infrared films are used primarily for their unique look.

The infrared results are strongest when you use a filter. An opaque gray #87 filter is especially effective because it blocks most of the visible light. However, if you are using this filter on an SLR camera, you have to remove it so you can see well enough to compose and focus the subject, and then replace it to take the picture.

Filters: pages 101–8

Many photographers use a #25 red filter instead. Although this filter is dark, it is not opaque and usually does not have to be removed to compose and focus your image. Other filters that work less dramatically with infrared film include the #58 green and #12 yellow.

Perhaps the most difficult thing about using infrared film is establishing the correct exposure. Light meters read visible light, not infrared, so the reading they provide is an estimate at best. Furthermore, different brands of infrared films have different sensitivities to light and infrared, and your choice of filter also will affect exposure. With Kodak infrared film, for example, you can try

setting your meter at ISO 100 and exposing the film as you would any other. Or just use these exposure settings with a #25 filter on your lens:

Hazy sun	f/11 at 1/125
Normal direct sun	f/11 at 1/250
Very bright sun	f/11 at 1/500

Bracketing: page 89

Check the instruction sheet that comes with the film for more specific exposure recommendations, but, if possible, bracket to guarantee at least one well-exposed negative; for example, make an initial exposure at f/11 at 1/125, then make bracketed exposures at f/8 at 1/125 and f/16 at 1/125 (or the equivalent).

Depth of field: pages 49–53

Focusing with infrared film presents still another challenge. Since infrared is invisible, the lens doesn't focus the same way it does when focusing subjects for traditional photographs. One solution is to turn the lens slightly after focusing, so it is set to focus a little closer than it otherwise would. Or you can use a small lens aperture (f/5.6 or smaller) or a wide-angle lens to increase the image's depth of field to compensate for focusing discrepancies.

Infrared film requires extra care because it is heat- and light-sensitive and vulnerable to physical damage.

Infrared film is processed and printed in much the same way as any other film. Check the instructions packaged with your developer for film developing times. However, you will have to handle infrared film with extra care. The film is heat- and light sensitive, so you should store it in a refrigerator before and after it is used. Take it out of the refrigerator about two hours before use, and return it to its original container after use and refrigerate it. To prevent condensation from forming and possibly ruining the film, always leave refrigerated film in its original packaging until it reaches room temperature before using it.

Infrared can penetrate the felt strips of the film cassette that houses 35mm film (or the paper backing of medium-format roll film), so load and unload the camera in darkness. Infrared film also is especially vulnerable to physical damage, such as scratching, so handle both processed and unprocessed film by its edges and with great care.

High Contrast

High-contrast prints are those with black shadow areas and white highlights, with few or no gray tones. High contrast is used for visual effect, rather than to accurately describe or document a subject. The results are generally stark and graphic—and often dramatic. The primary factors influencing print contrast are the subject's inherent contrast and subject lighting, as well as how you process your film and print your negative.

Subject contrast. Some subjects have inherently more contrast than others, such as a black dog against a white wall or a white dog on a dark couch. The first and simplest tactic to achieve high contrast is to photograph this type of subject.

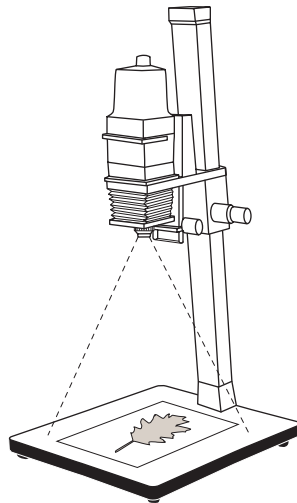


Russell Hart, *Untitled*, 1983

Some photographers work with special films that have distinctive visual characteristics. Hart used infrared film for this beach scene to record visible light as well as infrared, which is imperceptible to the human eye. Because the chairs and people radiate more infrared than other parts of the scene, they take on an eerie glow. © Russell Hart; courtesy of the artist.

Photogram

To make a photogram, you don't use a camera. Instead, you place objects between a light source and photographic paper or film and make your exposure. For maximum control, use light from an enlarger with a timer (left). In this paper photogram (right), areas that received a lot of exposure darkened; areas where the leaf partially or fully blocked light rendered light.



Photogram made by placing objects on paper.

Photograms are photographic images made without a camera.

photographs ever made were photograms. The results are an often-surprising blend of shapes, forms, and tones that vary widely depending on the types of objects, how they are used, and their relative transparency.

If you use an opaque object to make a photogram, it blocks all light from reaching the paper or film, and thus is rendered as a silhouette. Translucent objects usually work better, because they allow various degrees of light through and render as one or more gray tones. Also, try laying the object against the paper or film so it doesn't lay totally flat; this can produce gradations in tones that have a somewhat three-dimensional quality.

Correct exposure may be difficult to judge; you can expose photograms in many different ways and still be happy with the results. A long exposure, for instance, will allow more light to travel through translucent objects, and produce a different look (darker grays, less white silhouettes) than would a shorter exposure.

You can use a wide variety of objects and techniques to make a photogram. Patterned fabrics and objects from nature, such as leaves, vegetables, feathers, and so forth, work particularly well. Painting shapes and forms on a piece of glass offers still another option. Place the painted glass over the paper (or even place it in the enlarger instead of a negative carrier), and treat it like a negative to make a print.

Henry Horenstein,
Longnose Skate,
Raja Rhina, 2000

A photograph's impact comes not only from what it depicts, but also from the choice of techniques and materials used to make the print. For this picture of a one-week-old sea creature, Horenstein used black-and-white film, but printed on paper intended for color photography. This combination enabled him to finely tune his monochromatic choices. © Henry Horenstein; courtesy Sarah Morthland Gallery, New York, NY.

