pinhole

Los Angeles Revisited

By Ethan & David Malykont

In April 2008, the Ferris wheel at Pacific Park went up for auction on eBay.

Our memories of the Santa Monica Pier as children are a blend of flavors, smells and sounds. Back then, there was a fish-and- chips store that had the saltiest, greasiest and somehow crunchiest fried potato slices we can remember. Our father would drive us to the coast with these "chips" in mind and we would walk the planks up and down the pier until our fingers were covered in oil and sodium. Once in a while we would take a detour and try our luck at the bumper cars, which were a thrill for kids who were terrified of roller coasters.

There were aspects of the pier though—perhaps an underbelly of sorts—that indicated a portentous presence. Under the preserved planks it was dark and gritty, and as youngsters it was a place we would never dare to go. As with most things in Los Angeles, eventually the pier changed—the fish-and-chips store disappeared, the bumper cars were replaced and the people who visited were more diverse.

Right: *Ferris wheel capture. Film type: Fuji Velvia 50; rated at ISO 32; Polaroid Type 79; exposure time (film): 36 seconds at f/128.*


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On July 4, 2000, a friend called to tell us that a gunman had taken people hostage in the arcade at the end of the pier. By the time the altercation was resolved, four people had been injured, three of them police officers. It was as if the darkness from under the pier had snaked onto the upper deck and transformed it into the monster we had feared as children.

This is the stark contrast of Los Angeles that only becomes palpable to people after they have lived here for some time. The palm trees and sun can, at any time, give way to something more sinister. That's why, unsure of what to expect, when we heard that the Ferris wheel was going to be replaced with a newer, safer model we resolved to capture its original image before its imminent removal.

After parking on the roof at the promenade, we made the short walk to the Santa Monica Pier and set up our camera. Right on cue, a security guard approached us to ask us what we were doing. We told him the truth—that we were LA natives who wanted a picture of the wheel before it was replaced. All aggression faded from the man's eyes and he nodded with understanding and returned to his station.

Behind us, a group of younger people were setting up their own photo shoot—but it was a very different situation. A young blonde in a bathrobe, a bleached-blonde surfer type and a photographer were looking to start their careers in the entertainment industry. A short 50 feet away, a man on a walkie-talkie quietly reported them to the soon-to-arrive patrol. As we loaded film and switched out filters we watched as the local law enforcement instructed the other group to pack up their gear and leave.

Above: *Hollywood. Film type: TXP 320; rated at ISO 320; Polaroid Type 55; exposure time (film): 1 second at f/128; filtration: red #25; processed: +.25.*

It was a moment that almost felt like vindication, a small reassurance that somehow our love of Los Angeles outstripped vain attempts at self-promotion.

Walking back across the pier with the blazing toxic skyline behind us, we spoke of family and friends and the time we had spent in this dark paradise.

We couldn't help but think that maybe this sprawling epicenter of culture represented the flawless balance of light and dark interwoven into the fabric of humanity.

The Pinhole Camera

After experimenting with building a new pinhole camera, we decided to look into a company named Leonardo. This

Top: *Griffith Park. Film type: Fuji Velvia 50; rated at ISO 32; Polaroid Type 79; exposure time (film): 6 seconds at f/128; filtration: 81A (warming filter).*

Bottom: *Los Angeles Metro. Film type: TXP 320; rated at ISO 320; Polaroid Type 55; exposure time (film): 47 minutes at f/128.*

company's Calumet-distributed cameras are constructed out of wood with quality seals to prevent any light leaks. Also integral to their product is a brass disc that bears a pinhole through it, which acts as the camera lens.

The box of this camera type varies; its depth determining how wide the angle of coverage will be. The deeper the box (the farther the pinhole/lens is from the film plane) the less the angle of coverage will be. What this really means is that the three-inch-deep box we chose acts as an extremely wide lens—equivalent to a 20mm for a 35mm camera. The other camera we acquired is five inches deep and equivalent to using a 50mm lens on a 35mm camera. The thing that really impressed and excited us about the camera was that it was made to hold 4x5 sheet film; our favorite! The rollers on the back of the camera are crafted in such a way that they allow for the use of standard film holders, Kodak's Ready Load Holder or Fujifilm's Quickload Holder.

On an average Sunday, we headed for downtown. When we first set up the camera, we considered how enjoyable it had been capturing images as teenagers and how every time the film came back from the lab something turned out a bit different than expected. The colors, motion and even the contrast levels with black and white were only controllable within a range, creating varying results. All of pinhole photography is a series of tests to determine how to compose and expose film properly, and until these things are established, your creativity reigns beyond your control.

After securely attaching the pinhole camera to the tripod and estimating the field of view, we attempted to visualize the composition. The camera has no viewfinder, so one must estimate the angle and composition of the scene. There is definitely no preview mode, so determining exposure is tricky. If you have a light meter or a spot meter you can use this to get a general reading, or you might even employ the "Sunny 16" rule (which states that in

Right: *Fox Theatre. Film type: Kodak 100T; rated at ISO 64, Polaroid Type 59; exposure time (film): 4.5 minutes at f/128; filtration: 80B (blue shift).*

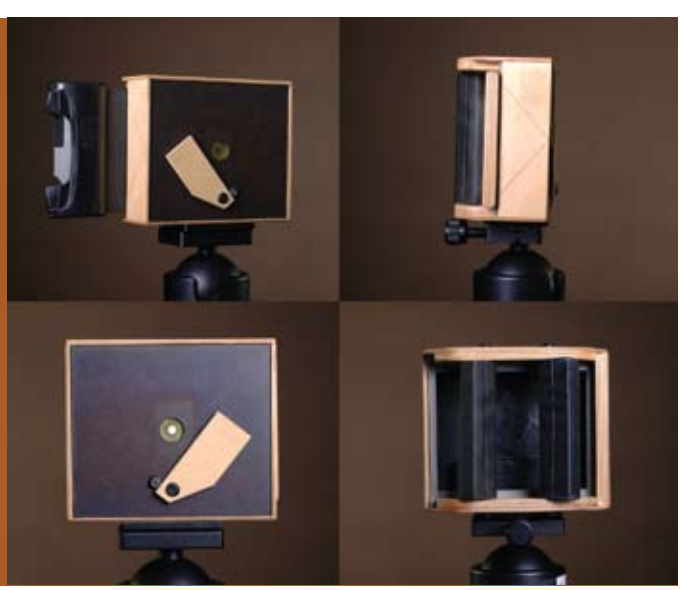
intense sunlight the shutter speed is set to the inverse of the film's ISO and the lens aperture is set to f/16) and go from there. The pinhole lens on the camera has an f-stop of f/128 and no shutter speeds; only a mere cover to open and close. Consequently, in bright sunlight, the basic exposure is around one second at f/128 with ISO 50 film.

With a red #25 filter in place, which is useful in black-and-white exposures, the exposure time has to be increased by two stops. The first exposure is usually around four seconds at f/128. With Polaroid Type 55 pos/neg film gone, getting things zeroed in is a little more complicated. We recommend shooting quite a bit of film to get a range of framing as well as the proper exposure locked in. Shoot several sheets of each composition. If you do your own processing, develop only the first sheet and make sure everything looks right. If you take it to a commercial lab have them do the same. This will save you time and money as well as allow you to see what's happening to your film. Experimentation is the order of the day with the pinhole camera and this type of photography.

For more information, please email ethan@fakeco.net.

Technical Data

- Leonardo Pinhole camera
- Bogen Tripod model #3021
- Polaroid back
- Kodak Readyload back or Fuji Quickload back
- Watch with a second hand
- Kodak contrast filters
- Kodak 85B filter
- Kodak T Max 100 (rated at E.I. 64)
- Kodak EPY 64T (rated at E.I. 40)



Ethan Malykont began his collegiate career at U.C. Riverside, spent a year at the University at Westminster in London studying film and returned to finish his studies at U.C. Santa Barbara. His career continued in 1994 when he signed on at Great Oaks Production, John Hughes production entity. Soon thereafter, Ethan migrated to the video game industry and worked as a designer and art director for companies like Crave Entertainment, Take-Two Interactive, Natsume Union Entertainment and others. In addition, Ethan has worked with groups like the J. Paul Getty Trust, Global Green and DreamWorks Music.

Training as a photographer/filmmaker at Brooks Institute of Photography and finishing with a degree in multi-media, David Malykont immediately went to work for Warner Brothers Television. The years following he successfully built a client roster that sweeps from high-end conceptual advertising to automotive and fashion. His name can be seen in such books as Face Forward, *by the late acclaimed makeup artist Kevyn Aucoin, and he was commissioned to photograph the launch campaign for the MINI-Cooper convertible.*