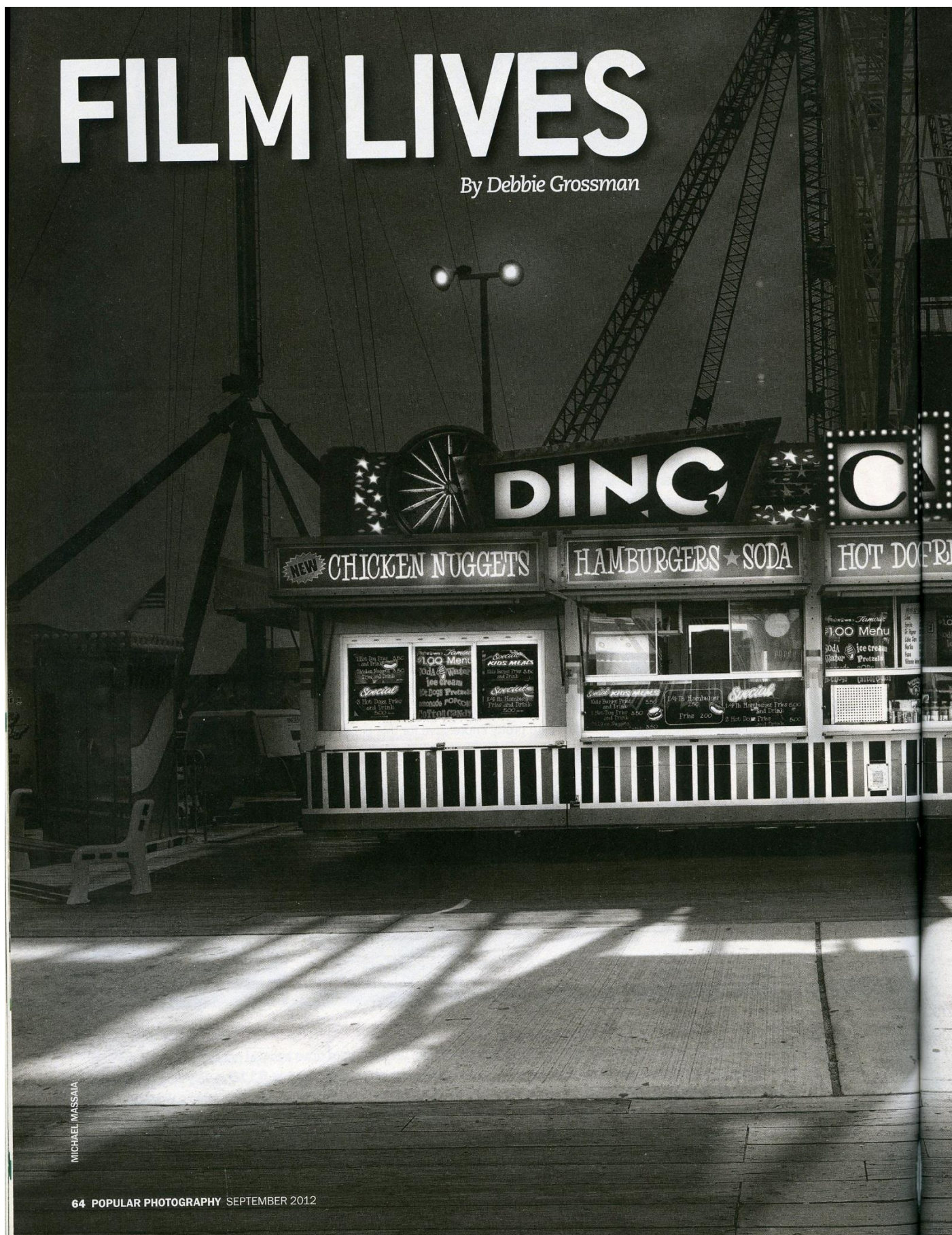
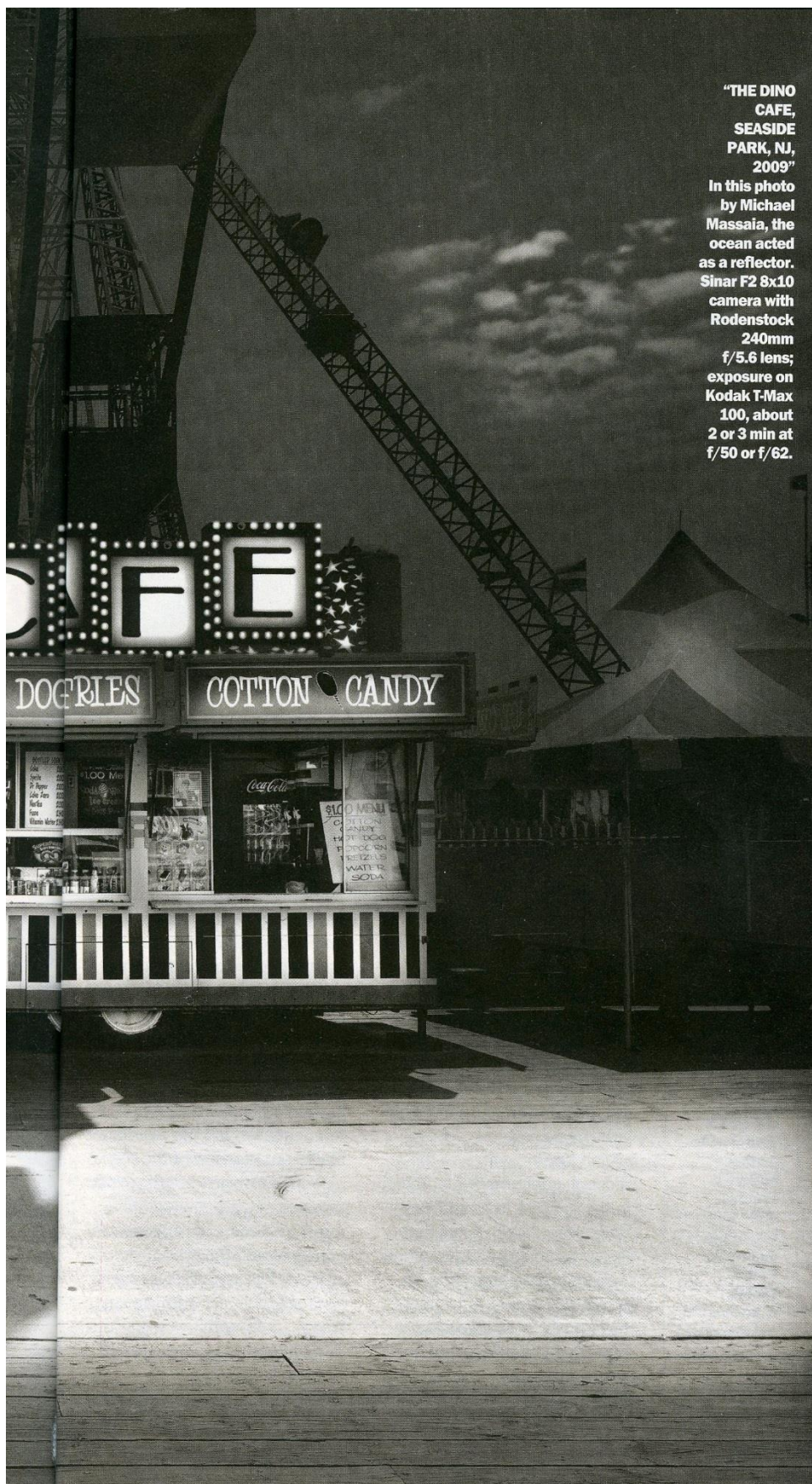


# FILM LIVES

By Debbie Grossman



MICHAEL MASSAIA



**"THE DINO  
CAFE,  
SEASIDE  
PARK, NJ,  
2009"**

**In this photo  
by Michael  
Massaia, the  
ocean acted  
as a reflector.  
Sinar F2 8x10  
camera with  
Rodenstock  
240mm  
f/5.6 lens;  
exposure on  
Kodak T-Max  
100, about  
2 or 3 min at  
f/50 or f/62.**

**The medium that  
was left for dead  
takes on new life  
in the hands of  
contemporary  
photographers.  
They might just  
inspire you to  
dust off your old  
film camera.**

**SOME PEOPLE** might say that Michael Massaia is a little bit crazy. Six months out of the year, you'll find him lurking around empty piers and truck stops in the wee hours of the morning, toting a camera that wouldn't look out of place in the late nineteenth century. The rest of the year he is holed up in his basement darkroom, creating platinum prints the likes of which the world has never seen.

And though he's an extreme example, Massaia is not the only photographer who feels it is only through film that he can create the pictures of his dreams. In fact, he's part of a cohort of photographers who love film for many of the very qualities that caused so many of us to abandon it for digital: its slowness, its mystery, and even its persnickiness.

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## Recording on Film

As soon as the resolution of digital became close to that of film, most of us gladly gave up film for the instant satisfaction of digital. But it is, in part, that very slowed-down quality that the shooters featured here love.

Sure, Christaan Felber (shown on page 68) does use digital when he's shooting a dimly lit rock show, as does Erica McDonald (opposite page) when she's on a job that requires it. Commercial photographers both, Felber and McDonald see film shooting as something that differentiates them from the crowd and gets them hired.

Have a conversation with a film devotee about shooting, and (if you learned photography through film) it's difficult not to get nos-

**"TRENTON AND MADISON, TREECE, KS, 2010"** Just before the rain came, Dina Kantor photographed these children in their grandmother's backyard. Mamiya RZ67 with 65mm lens on Kodak Portra 160NC; exposure not recorded.

talgie. Words and concepts you haven't thought about in years come rushing back: the zone system, rating and pushing, changing bags and film stocks...

But what comes up the most is the difference in the shooting process. Portrait photographers say the medium allows a deeper and more intimate relationship with the subject.

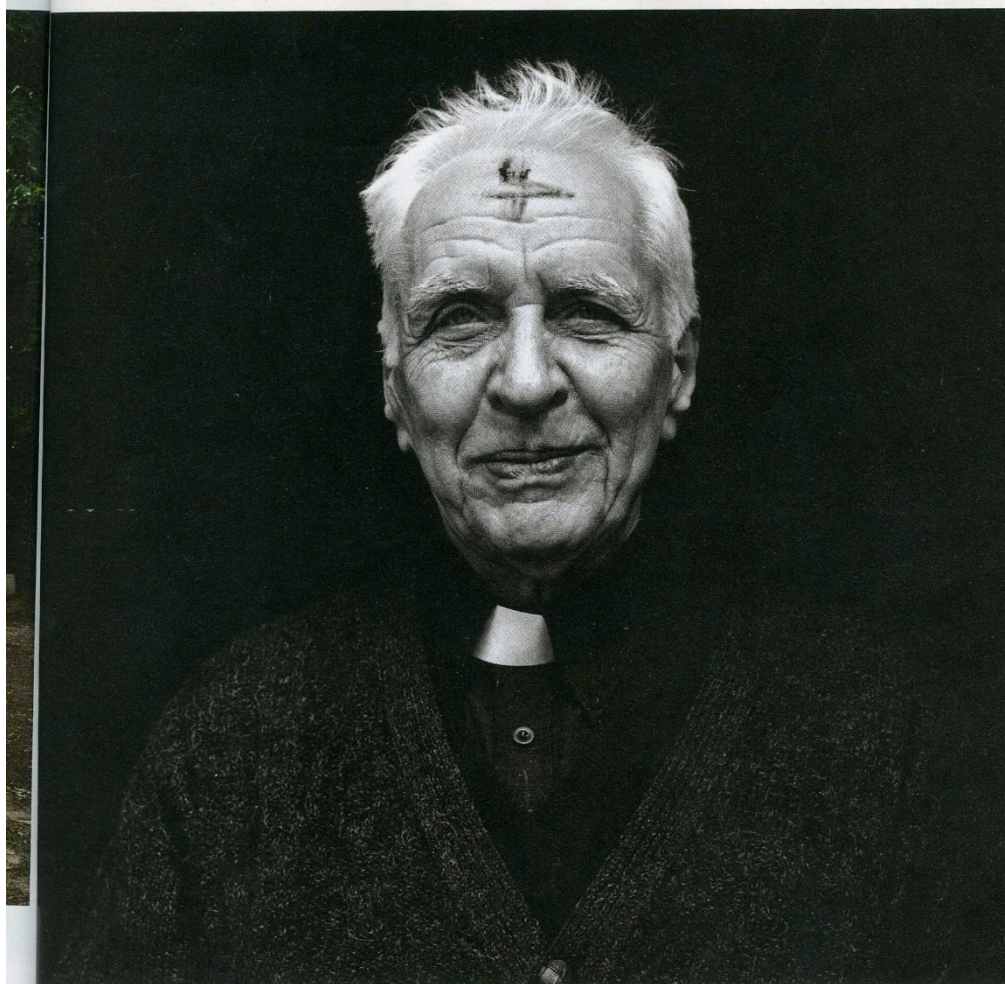
Dina Kantor, who is in the midst of a documentary project on the town of Treece, KS (an example is above), notes that film is particularly useful when she's photographing children, as they are very curious about the camera. They love looking through the viewfinder of her Mamiya RZ to see the world represented backward. The time

required for preparation and setup, and the conversations that happen then, are crucial for Kantor in developing a rapport.

McDonald counts on her twin lens reflex Rolleiflex 2.8 FX for portraits because she can keep an eye on the scene as she works. Unlike with SLRs, when shooting with TLRs there's never a moment in which the viewfinder blacks out her view of the scene.

"You can always see the exact moment you are photographing—the camera isn't between your eyes and the eyes of your subject," she says. This is crucial because, "if you're trying to create a connection with a person, you don't have to take your eyes off them at any time."

Film isn't only beloved for por-



# A VISITING PRIEST, ASH WEDNESDAY

For her project *40 Days*, Erica McDonald stood outside a Brooklyn church and made quick portraits as her subjects left mass each day during the Lenten period. She shot with a Rolleiflex 2.8 FX on Kodak Tri-X 400 film pushed to 1600; exposure, about 1/60 sec at f/5.6.

traits. Massaia, who shoots exclusively with 4x5 and 8x10 cameras, uses film not for the process but for the results (pages 64 and 102). Knowing he wanted to capture serious detail, he started shooting with medium format, thinking that would be big enough.

But it wasn't long before the self-described obsessive photographer went straight to 8x10. It is only with large format, he says, that he can capture the "three-dimensional quality" of the pictures he plans in his head.

He also loves his view cameras for their ability to correct and control perspective. Massaia adores symmetry and perfection,

and, he points out, we are so used to seeing photographs that are distorted that an image with correct perspective looks alien to us.

Richard Rothman, like Massaia, counts on the incredible detail and the perspective control of a large-format camera. For the photo on page 69, from his book *Redwood Saw* (Nazraeli Press, 2011), Rothman carried a good 15 pounds of photo gear (not counting lunch) though the woods.

He uses his Arca Swiss 4x5 camera in a process that he has come to think of as "the wilderness version of street photography" because he has such a short time to capture the light in such

dense foliage. (For digital shooters: "Fast" translates to about 5 minutes in the large-format world, though this exposure was about 1/8 sec at f/22.)

Digital shooters frequently rely on their LCD screens to check composition and lighting, consult the histogram to find out if they have an accurate exposure, and review to see if they've captured the moment sufficiently to move on. But these film shooters love the absence of that screen. Felber feels that the lack of feedback forces him to push his work farther—because he's never sure whether he's gotten the shot, he keeps working the scene.



### After the Shoot

What photographer who grew up with film can forget the frisson when peering for the first time through a loupe or opening up an envelope of prints? McDonald especially treasures the gap between shooting and viewing that using film creates. She was taught to read the negative to see what image was good before she even created a contact print.

A teacher herself, McDonald points out to her students that they only have one chance to see their pictures for the first time, and that they should treasure it and pay close attention. She says, "There's a lot you can learn in that first viewing. You can feel in your gut if something is successful; if it's a great picture, I'll notice my breath will stop for a second."

When we shoot digital, of course, the first time we see what we've shot comes a moment later.

**THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S SISTER**  
**Christaan Felber**  
 shot this scene with both film and digital cameras; he often brings multiple cameras along on a shoot. For this version, he used a Canon AE-1 Program with 50mm f/1.8 Canon FD lens; exposure on Kodak Portra 400, 1/250 sec at f/2.8.

It's interesting to consider what might be lost when the picture we just took, rather than the subject itself, informs the next one.

To get from latent image to negative, these photographers take varying routes. None of the black-and-white shooters we talked to trust their negatives to a lab. McDonald has a close friend and dedicated darkroom geek who processes her film; both Rothman and Massaia do it themselves in their darkrooms. Former film junkies will remember how crucial the development process is to the character of b&w images, and once you get to know the relationship between a particular film stock and a developer, this knowledge becomes deeply connected to the shooting process.

Rothman relies on an old standard developer, Kodak Microdol-X, with Ilford's HP5 Plus film. Since he knows this relationship

so well, and shoots using the zone system, he can capture the tonal range that he envisions for every shot. Unfortunately for Rothman, he found out too late that Kodak had discontinued Microdol-X, and he had to scour the internet to buy remaining stock from as far away as Europe. He did find an old publication from Kodak disclosing Microdol's formula, and he plans to try to make it himself when his supply runs out.

Even more archaic is Massaia's developer. He relies on Pyro, a staining developer which he describes as mostly abandoned nearly a century ago because of its extreme toxicity. When asked how he handles it, Massaia quipped: "With no gloves and no mask." Pyro lets Massaia drastically overexpose his Kodak T-Max 100 film and, using a formula he spent years perfecting, develop negatives with grainless high-



lights and lots of shadow detail. The process is slow, though. The development of each sheet of film takes about an hour.

Color photographers have it easier—if they can find a good lab. Felber and Kantor both point to the longstanding and supportive relationships they have with their labs. They both work in New York City; photographers shooting medium format in smaller towns and cities might need to mail their film out for development (see sidebar, page 102).

### Making Prints

Photography has always been a highly technical field, but, as Felber laments, photography these days forces you to “become a computer nerd, whether you

like it or not.” So much so does Felber feel the need for a mental cleanse after editing his photos on the computer that he retreats to working on his vintage 1965 Honda CB-77 Superhawk motorcycle. But for him, as well as many film shooters, computers are crucial to their photography.

Instead of going into an enlarger in a darkroom, their prints start with a scan, whether done on an über-expensive Imacon or a high-end flatbed. Inevitably there is dust; Kantor can spend hours zoomed in on an image in Adobe Photoshop, obsessively removing specks from every inch of her scan. Color-correcting comes next, and, depending on the photographer, a degree of retouching.

**REDWOOD SAW**  
Rapidly changing light meant that Richard Rothman had to think fast as he set up his Arca Swiss 4x5 with 90mm f/5.6 Schneider Super Angulon lens. Shot on Ilford HP5 Plus 400 rated at 200; about 1/8 sec at f/22.

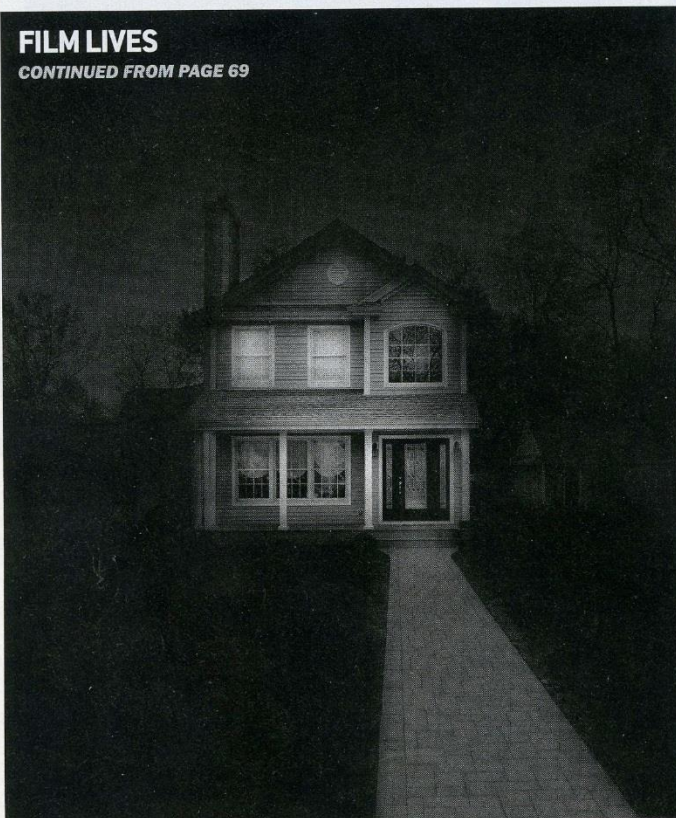
For Rothman, the *Redwood Saw* project represented his first time choosing digital output over darkroom. He wanted to challenge himself and see if he could make a digital print good enough to satisfy him, and he wanted to print larger than 20x24 inches (traditionally the maximum darkroom size). The most interesting surprise? He prints with an Epson Stylus Pro 9900 printer, and he found that Epson’s Advanced Black and White software, coupled with Hahnemühle’s Photo Rag Smooth paper, was the best way to get a beautifully toned black-and-white print.

Massaia, however, is so devoted to the darkroom that he spends six months of the year print-

**CONTINUES ON PAGE 102**

## FILM LIVES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69



ing. His are among perhaps the largest platinum prints ever made; the process requires that he create the emulsion for his 35x45-inch paper himself. We don't have enough space in this magazine to explain the whole process, but suffice it to say that it requires mixing \$1,600-an-ounce platinum powder with palladium and other chemicals, plus distilled water, then applying it in multiple, careful coatings to paper. Despite working hard and skillfully to develop a formula that allows him to make prints with remarkable density, Massaia says, "I make tons of mistakes, which is not a fun thing because it's really expensive."

And it takes a long time for this perfectionist photographer to be satisfied. For the image on the opening spread, he says, "I printed that for years and years before I learned how to print it. I took that negative in 2009 and I figured out how to make a good print of it in 2011. I probably made 100 pieces of garbage with no redeeming qualities at all."

Needless to say, if you get a chance to see one of his prints in person, do so.

## The Value of the Past

In many ways, the embrace of shooting film is reminiscent of the back-to-craft, made-by-hand, artisanal movements that are driving people to can and pickle vegetables, sew their own clothes, and sell one-of-a-kind goods on Etsy. The digital era has made shooting so easy and democratized that photographers are seeking ways to make pictures that remind them more of creating an artwork by hand and less of working in an office.

There is usually something to be learned by attempting a greater understanding of methods proven by history. And if shooting film really is an entirely different way of being a photographer, it behooves all of us—especially those who have grown up with digital—to slow down and to take a series of pictures uninterrupted by a feed of digital information and the glow of an LCD. Remember what it's like to make pictures when there's nothing in the world but you, a quietly receptive machine, and your subject.

**"WAYNE FLOOD ZONE - 4am"**  
Massaia's 2011 photo is richly printed in its original form. He used a homemade platinum/palladium emulsion to print the 32x42-inch image. To watch a brief documentary about his creative process, use our new PopPhoto Interactive smartphone app or go to [PopPhoto.com/massaia](http://PopPhoto.com/massaia).

## FINDING FILM

And the cameras to put it in

● **FILM** Fujifilm, Ilford, and Kodak all make conventional black-and-white films in 35mm, medium, and large formats. Fujifilm and Kodak make color-negative (print) film in both consumer and pro types. Kodak has now fully withdrawn from color-reversal (slide) film, although some existing stocks may still be found at retailers. This leaves Fujifilm as the major source for slide films. Both Ilford and Kodak make chromogenic films, which are black-and-white films designed to be developed in color-negative chemistry. Other brands such as Efke, Foma, and Rollei are also still available.

● **PROCESSING** There are still many labs around the country that develop and print negatives. Even if you don't live near one, there are plenty that do mail-in services. Of course, if you're looking for quick results, CVS and Walgreens are always viable options for color-print service. Crowdsourcing on photography forums is a good way to find recommendations for reliable labs.

● **CAMERAS** For 35mm film, a number of pretty good to very high-end SLRs and rangefinder cameras are in production: the Leica MP and M7, Nikon F6 and FM10, Vivitar V3800-50, Voigtlander Bessa series, and Zeiss Ikon. Both medium- and large-format cameras and film backs are also still in production. Fujifilm, Hasselblad, and Mamiya (among others) continue to add new features and make improvements to their larger cameras. And, of course, you can find many film cameras used.

● **SCANNERS** Instead of outsourcing to print your film or get digital versions put on a disc, a film scanner can be a worthwhile investment, especially if you plan to shoot more than the occasional roll of film. Prices vary, and although spending less than \$100 may be tempting, we suggest shelling out a little extra for greater speed and clearer images. Plustek's OpticFilm 7400 (\$278, street) provides good results without maxing out your credit card. If you're able to spend a lot more, Pacific Image makes the PrimeFilm 120 Multi-Format CCD Film Scanner (\$1,649, street).

—Sonia Weiser