

PLASTIC CAMERAS

*To Ike Royer and Mary Ann Lynch
who harassed and inspired me in my
journey and made all of this possible.*



Ike Royer, 1932–2008, © Michelle Bates. Image of Ike made in his office at Freestyle Photographic, with a Lensbaby lens on Nikon DSLR.



PLASTIC CAMERAS

Toying with Creativity

Second Edition

Michelle Bates

Foreword by Mary Ann Lynch



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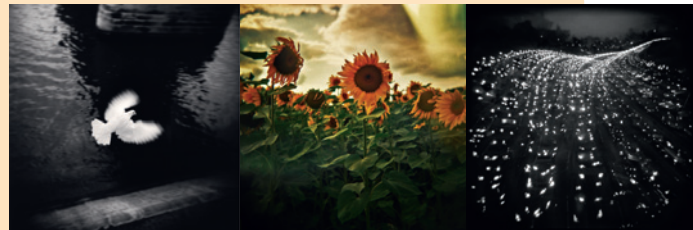
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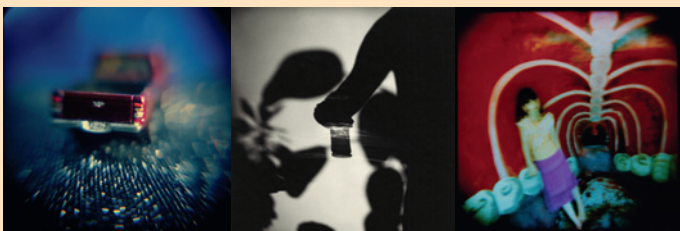
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foreword

When a *New York Times* reporter asked Albert Einstein to comment upon one of his books, Einstein replied, “What I have to say about this book can be found inside the book.” Unlike erudite texts aimed at academics, or handbooks that bombard the senses with visuals, *Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity* has as foundation the spirited voice of its author, photographer and plastic-camera evangelist, Michelle Bates. As for this New York-born, Seattle resident’s unquenchable enthusiasm while leading the tour of the low-tech world—if at times it seems over the top, this can be forgiven. View it as a concession to the energy that drives her—that of the importance of play as a vital ingredient of both culture and creativity.

Once seduced by the unexpected delights of affordable, uncomplicated camera equipment, there’s usually no forsaking it. Think of high-tech versus low-tech as the difference between piloting a jet aircraft and hang gliding: There can be times for both. Bates had a 35 mm camera in college and still uses both film and digital Nikons for certain assignments, but it was a Holga plastic camera, in 1991, that unleashed her passion for photography: Ultimately it led her away from her career as a bio technician, to become a fulltime photographer and teacher. Knowing that the parallel plastic subculture is still virgin land for many, Bates has made it her self-appointed mission to introduce others to the joy of using plastic cameras. In sharing her bliss, and even trade secrets, Bates offers an alternative to what she refers to as “those cultural tapes people have running in their heads about what makes a photograph good.”

Those who pick up plastic and toy cameras are ready to push boundaries, disregard rules, experiment, intermingle low-tech and high-tech equipment and simultaneously move in both analog and digital worlds. Plastic camera images created as fine art and for other professional uses are widely embraced by photographers and educators, though no parallel critical attention has yet evolved. *Plastic Cameras* serves many audiences and uses by comprehensively covering both a wide range of imagery and cameras along with history, the diverse styles of profiled photographers, technical tips, and resources. It may also be a nudge to those who write about fine-art photography to seek out excellence within this realm, while considering the influence of that work upon the larger art world. This is fascinating territory ripe for exploration.

There’s a second aspect to the appeal of these cameras, which accounts for the swelling numbers of their users: Communities form around them, and globally active ones at that. Unlike complicated equipment that can confound the brain and cost thousands of dollars, plastic cameras free up the spirit to let loose and play, to see what gifts the universe

may bestow. Those hungry for a social scene can find them in this subculture. Groups spring up overnight, blog, exchange images online, or arrange daylong shoot-ins and all-night screenings, such as those infamously held by the Lomographic community. If this book had a mantra, it would likely be “Let’s toy with creativity.”

As for those photographers not seeking communities, but working with plastic cameras for fine art and professional uses, in 2008 Holga Limited created the *Holga Inspire* initiative, sponsoring traveling exhibits of works by selected photographers to educate the public on artistic possibilities using their cameras. Moreover, in dire economic times, what could be better news than the existence of affordable cameras, whatever their intended use? In many areas, this includes teaching photography to children. The influence and appeal of toy cameras is also spreading to other realms.

Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity, when first published in 2006, soared out of the gate, garnering sales, enthusiastic press, and fan mail from throughout the world. Bates had broken new ground in contemporary photographic literature and found a ready audience. With the combined efforts of her book, workshops, lectures, and personal appearances, she helps to propel this dynamic subculture, where taking a break from “the tyranny of technology” is not just okay but healthy. *Plastic Cameras* is still the only comprehensive book that, with its content, makes a convincing argument for placing the low-tech and high-tech photography worlds on equal footing—so far as their possibilities for personal pleasure, commercial, professional, and artistic expression, and fine art. Whatever the camera, the outcome ultimately depends upon the intent, vision, and capabilities of the photographer.

When Bates approached me about working on the first edition, I agreed, knowing her to be the ideal author for this book. She is of the Holga tidal wave, still surging, but her purview grows to encompass new developments. This expanded second edition is another knockout. The present tsunami, of course, is digital, which is rapidly pulling many away from film (analog) completely, whether done with low- or high-tech equipment. And yet, there are increasing numbers of 21st century photographers who switch easily from analog to digital, valuing their respective social virtues and different characteristics. More and more of these semi-Luddites are bound to be pulled into the plastic camera camp, and as long as cameras such as the Holga, the newly reintroduced Diana+, and other toys offer opportunities for shooting film, that intimate golden-lit darkroom will still await those who choose to do their own developing and breathlessly wait for the image to appear.

Mary Ann Lynch
July 2010

acknowledgements

My ride in the world of plastic cameras has been tons of fun since it began in 1991. In addition to playing with the cameras, getting to know so many wonderful people has kept me going.

In the early days of my interest in photography, my parents, Mimi and Harold Bates, Richie Lasansky, Jim Hogan, and the Maine Photographic Workshops got me on the road to life with Holga by my side.

Over the years since, many people have been my companions and mentors, supporting my endeavors, including Ludmila Kudinova, Larry Busacca, Ike Royer, Llyle Morgan, Elizabeth Opalenik, James Wood, Richard Newman, Victoria Haas, Jennifer Loomis, Patrick Dellibovi, Marita Holdaway, Ray Pfortner, Angela Faris Belt, and Ctein. Freestyle Photographic Supply (Ike, Patrick, Geri Carmeli, and many others) has helped me more than I can say, and it's been great working with them.

This book, in its first and second editions, was made possible by my editors, Diane Heppner and Cara Anderson St Hilaire, Paul Gottherer (who came back for seconds!), and many other people at Focal Press.

Many people have lent technical advice, shared tips and favorite photographers, and given me cameras, among other things. My gratitude to Randy Smith of HolgaMods, Christine So and Don Knodt of Holga Limited, Cameratechs, Michael Barnes & toycamera.com, Nic Nichols, C Gary Moyer, Liad Cohen of the Lomographic Society, Nick Dangerfield of Superheadz, Mark Sink, Connie Begg, and many others. It's been especially thrilling to work with Holga Inspire and Christine. Mary Ann Lynch has contributed to both editions most generously by sharing photographers, advice, and her invaluable expertise in reviewing, editing and fine-tuning the manuscript and proofs; I can't overstate how appreciative I am.

I love teaching and speaking, and am thrilled to have had the chance to spread the Holga love at photographic schools and centers, bookstores, and conferences nationwide. Thanks to all of them, especially my home base, and the place where I first taught, Photographic Center Northwest, and to James Wood for helping me find my voice.

Thanks for the support of my family and community: Dad, Rob, and the Susans, my dear friends in Seattle and beyond (Mik, Tiberio, Peggy, Andrea, and so many more...), and to Tim Furst, Lighthouse Roasters, and Office Nomads for creating comfortable spaces to be and to work.

Thanks to all the photographers who contributed images to this book. I am in awe of what they create and am thrilled to have the opportunity to show their work to a wider audience.

And, most of all, my dad, who is always behind me 1000%.



Helter Skelter, © Michelle Bates, 1991, at the Skowhegan State Fair, Maine. This was made with my first Holga. I made my hand-cut cardboard negative carrier for this photograph so I could include the entire image in the print.

introduction

Since the publication of the first edition of *Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity* in 2006, the world of these playful cameras has not only kept growing—it has exploded. At the time the first edition was done, it was meant to be a comprehensive collection of the cameras, photographers, publications, and exhibitions that had made up the genre to that point—and we accomplished that, without feeling we had omitted a vast amount of information, in terms of what had happened up to that point.

However, a brief 4 years later, so many people have fallen in love with the magic of low-tech photography that it would be impossible to even touch the surface of all the articles, books, and exhibitions throughout the world that show off the work of photographers who travel this jaunty plastic path. While the first edition stands as a snapshot of the history of plastic cameras to 2006, this updated edition is a survey of what led us up to today's exhilarating times. The heart of the second edition is a sampling of some of the best work being done with plastic cameras right now. There's also a snazzy collection of the most interesting and popular cameras on the market, a guide to shooting with plastic cameras in general, and specific Holga-related information, tips, and modifications.

The Holga is what launched me into the world of photography, nearly 20 years ago. I was first handed a Holga in 1991 at the Maine Photographic Workshops, now Maine Media Workshops. It was there that I created my own vision through the plastic lens, aided by a negative carrier that I self-fashioned out of cardboard, to allow printing the whole of a Holga image. I continued to shoot with my Holga after that summer in Maine, and, before long, I started exhibiting my Holga work, publishing Holga images in weekly newspapers, and even had an image on a CD cover.

In those early years I first met Mary Ann Lynch, Mark Sink, Gordon Stettinius, and Ann Arden McDonald, along with many other Holga and Diana photographers, at the openings of group exhibitions we all were in. At that time, the toy camera community was small, and it was always exciting to meet other people with similar interests and the inspired enthusiasm that characterizes all of us.

Socially, as well as professionally, the plastic camera culture has changed greatly now that the Internet allows us to connect from the comfort of home. Low-tech photography lovers have, since the early days of the Internet, taken advantage of its wonders to share work, advertise competitions, and meet one other. I found many of the book's contributors by tooling around the web, Googling, following links, and perusing many of the toy camera websites listed in the Resources section.

Ever since publication of the first edition, I've had the immense pleasure of taking my toy camera show on the road—teaching workshops and lecturing around the country. In fact, I went back to Maine Media Workshops after 15 years to teach at the place that gave me my start. I have also taught my toy camera workshops at many other art and photography centers and schools and have sat in with university photography classes. I've lectured at bookstores, photography conferences, photographic art centers, and other venues for photo fanatics and have juried toy camera exhibitions. While of course I love showing my own images, I especially enjoy opening my audiences to new outlooks on creativity by showing them the wide variety of works of photographers from *Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity*. Lecture attendees and workshop participants are wowed by what they see people doing with these simple instruments and are often inspired to pick up a plastic camera and take it for a spin.

It's an exciting challenge for me to entice photographers away from using only the latest technology and to instead take a photographic journey with the simplest of film devices. These toys become tools for them to learn, or perhaps relearn, the basic principles of photography, the art of composition, and how to create a cohesive body of work. Oh yes, some of them will first need to learn how to work with film, as a whole new generation of photographers has grown up using only digital cameras; our plastic cameras are firmly planted in the analog realm.

The awareness of toy cameras has reached far beyond the world of fine-art photography in the last few years. It is only recently that friends and people I meet have any idea what a toy camera is all about. Now it's common for them to even interrupt me as I'm explaining, with, "Oh, you mean the Holga?" After so many years in a plastic camera arena that was, to most outsiders, obscure, it still surprises me when this happens.

This revised edition is meant for two audiences, both those new to the world of these cameras and those who have already spent time with them and might already own one, or even a whole collection. The detailed history and technical information in the following pages will be of use and enjoyment to both newcomers and more experienced photographers.

This updated collection adds a large assortment of new material to the previous one. Images in these pages represent some of the most outstanding photography being done today, along with compelling images of historical interest, especially some from the earliest days of the plastic camera uproar, in the 1960s and 1970s. The photographs herein represent not only fine-art images, but commercial, wedding, editorial, and documentary photography, as well as photojournalism. This edition also highlights some newly added photographers who use plastic cameras almost exclusively, including Brigitte Grignet, Jennifer Shaw, Thomas Michael Alleman, and fotovitamina, as well as those who use them as just one photographic tool among many, including photo luminaries Sylvia Plachy, Michael Kenna, Nancy Siesel, and Louviere + Vanessa. All are stellar additions to the group of photographers we began with in the first edition, such as David Burnett, Teru Kuwayama, Pauline St. Denis, Ted Orland, Franco Salmoiraghi, and Harvey Stein.

Among all the photographers who make up this edition, there's great diversity in their work: Some create imagery in a straightforward manner, while others combine technologies, manipulate prints, or otherwise mix things up. In this world of alternative technology, there is no right way to go about any stage of the process; it's all about experimenting and finding your own artistic vision.

Plastic Cameras: Toying with Creativity can be read straight through or perused as needed when looking for specific information. Chapter 1 starts things off with a history of the genre, with examples of some of the earliest toy camera images made with the ground-breaking Diana cameras. Chapter 2 features 30 portfolios, with work from the 1960s to today, covering a wide range of styles and subject matter. Chapter 3 is a guide to the cameras, old and new, and Chapter 4 discusses film options. After that, the book is a guide to image making. Chapters 5 and 8 are specific to the Holga, while Chapters 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 cover shooting, processing, printing, and presentation with any low-tech camera. Finally, the Resources section provides information to help you continue your creative journey in the world of plastic cameras. Enjoy, and happy shooting!