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Interview: J. Ross Baughman and Lois Greenfield discuss the transition from film to digital photography

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STEVE INSKEEP, host:

A few days ago we learned that as many as 15,000 workers will lose their jobs at the Eastman Kodak Company. They're victims of the digital photography revolution. Kodak, of course, is the world's leading film manufacturer, and Kodak is the company that made cameras an everyday product for the common man. And so the news of Kodak cutbacks got us thinking about the past, present and future for photography as an art.

We've invited a couple of practitioners of that art and craft to talk about the digital revolution. J. Ross Baughman is a photojournalist, and in 1978 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his photos of war in what was then Rhodesia. Today he's photography director for The Washington Times and is in our studio here in Washington.

Welcome to you.

Mr. J. ROSS BAUGHMAN (Photography Director, The Washington Times):
Good afternoon.

INSKEEP: And also on the phone with us is Lois Greenfield, who is perhaps best known for her images of modern dancers in motion. And I'm looking, actually, at a book of dancers undergoing amazing contortions and being captured by her black-and-white camera.

Welcome to you.

Ms. LOIS GREENFIELD (Photographer): Hi. Thank you.

INSKEEP: And let me ask you both, as professional photographers, how has digital photography changed what you do?

Mr. BAUGHMAN: Well, it certainly eliminated our wet darkroom. We've got quite a bit of floor space at the newspaper, where people are now perched in

front of computers. It makes it faster. Our filing needs are much smaller. I welcome it.

INSKEEP: Lois Greenfield, how has this changed your life?

Ms. GREENFIELD: Well, I've been very reluctant to get involved in this digital revolution because for the last 20 years almost people have assumed and, I felt, even accused me of digitally manipulating my dancers hurtling themselves in space and impossible positions. So I was the staunchest holdout. Now, of course, digital capture has separated itself from digital manipulation and, therefore, I feel more comfortable.

Mr. BAUGHMAN: I wanted to talk about the difference it'll make for ordinary folks taking pictures. We have, for a long time, had a price association with going to the drugstore and getting the film done and, 'Do we get multiple prints? And, gosh, that drawer filled up so quickly. That's hundreds of dollars of pictures, and I only like a few of them.' Now that psychological barrier will be broken. People will feel freer to record, to edit in the camera, to zero in on those particular moments that work well for them.

INSKEEP: You think that will change the kind of pictures that we take?

Mr. BAUGHMAN: Rather than having the family line up in front of the Grand Canyon and simply recording how their faces may have aged since last week's ritual portrait, instead I think people will realize that they can say, 'Grandma was never more alive'; you know, 'My son was dragging his feet and hated the experience.' And instead of photographing nouns, they'll photograph verbs. I think that that's the future of photography.

Ms. GREENFIELD: I do agree with Ross. It's going to make photography even more democratic because it's very, I think, result-oriented more than process-oriented. You don't have to make calculations and hope that it's correct when you get the film back. You kind of correct on the fly, which means you need to know less and you can shoot from the hip more.

INSKEEP: When there was a transition from vinyl records to CDs, there were a lot of people who said there's a certain quality that's lost, a certain depth of richness of sound that's lost in a digital recording. Is there any quality that is lost in a photograph that's digital instead of analog or whatever the old film would be called?

Mr. BAUGHMAN: Now we have been prisoners of the magic that happened as light struck the silver and then, particularly, all the quirks of our chemical process thereafter. With digital photography, we're no longer concerned about the ability of those pixels, those little, tiny, electronic sensors, to record the light.

They'll do just fine and go way beyond the ability of the human eye to discern those little, tiny flecks. And it's entirely the post-production work that allows us to assign any tonality, any contrasts, any haze that we care to, and that's all the creativity that will go into it afterwards. The digital revolution there is limitless.

INSKEEP: Lois Greenfield, what do you think?

Ms. GREENFIELD: Well, it's interesting. The whole vocabulary of talking about digital images is different from the analog images, which, by the way, you know, we think of now as natural. It's natural that we should see green. But there's nothing natural about photography. There's nothing natural about fracturing time and rending it in two-dimensional space, which doesn't even exist. So I think we're going to start to romanticize the film-based photography when it's, really, not necessarily any more natural than the pixels.

The whole vocabulary involved with digital is very scientific. It's data. It's file sized. You talk about conventional photography, you're talking more of those emotionally, artistically tinged light and shadow and depth, and it's just more arts speak rather than techno speak.

INSKEEP: Well, do you miss something there?

Ms. GREENFIELD: Well, you know, I'm still on the cusp. I haven't, you know, jumped on the digital and thrown away my film in any way. And I'm of the generation that is going to still retain the early infatuation with the media. And I'm really never, I think, going to be involved that technically anyway. For me, it's just a means of accomplishing the picture I want.

INSKEEP: Ms. Greenfield, you just said that you are not getting rid of your film camera, though.

Ms. GREENFIELD: No.

Mr. BAUGHMAN: Neither will I.

INSKEEP: What are you using the old-style film for, if anything?

Ms. GREENFIELD: Well, I'm still used to it, first of all. It's actually easier for my studio setup to use conventional film. But I suspect that will change.

INSKEEP: What are you using a film camera for?

Mr. BAUGHMAN: My most personal, ongoing projects were started with film, and I mean to continue them with film. There's also a bit of creepy urban folklore out there that even the stability of digital images is not guaranteed. So while you

could look in your drawer and find a color negative from 1953 that's starting to turn on you, the same may be happening as we hopscotch from one digital format to the next.

INSKEEP: Your most precious personal photographs you're putting on film.

Mr. BAUGHMAN: Yes.

Ms. GREENFIELD: I am, too. And I have that same fear because we really don't know how stable the technology is. And, also, I mean, the gelatin-silver prints, the darkroom print, is an absolutely unique object. You know, every time the printer goes in there and waves his or her hands onto the enlarger, every print is slightly different. On the other hand, it's security for a photographer who could scan all their negatives and know that, God forbid, their, you know, studio or archive burns down, you still have a highly reproducible facsimile of your original image.

INSKEEP: So digital photography, in some ways, changes how you produce pictures. Does it also change the way that people look at them?

Ms. GREENFIELD: I think more and more people see my pictures on my Web site than on a piece of paper hanging in a gallery or reproduced in a magazine. So I think that, definitely, it's changing the way we will be viewing pictures. I think the fact that there's a video output, besides connected to 35mm digital cameras, is saying that people don't want little photo albums. They want to show pictures of their trip to friends on their television sets and squirt it through the computer, JPEG it, you know, via e-mail.

Mr. BAUGHMAN: I think people are still going to want, though, something permanent enough that they can attach to their refrigerator with a magnet.

INSKEEP: I'm just thinking about the fact that the way that I run across family photographs or old photographs of mine are that I'm cleaning the house or something like that and come across something in the closet. I'm not going to do that with digital photography 20 years from now. If I don't do a search for it, if it doesn't occur to me to look for it, I'm not going to find it.

Mr. BAUGHMAN: It's still very satisfying, though, to create collections, gatherings of photographs that can become little altars that we use to recall a family tree, loved ones. And so, for instance, the framed picture recalling a wedding day, I think, will always have a very valuable association for people.

Ms. GREENFIELD: We are, though, getting away from the artifact of the photo. We can disseminate it, we can broadcast it instantaneously, we can hit millions of people, you know, the second after we shoot it. But then do we really have it?

INSKEEP: Lois Greenfield is a well-known photographer of dancers.

Thanks very much for speaking with us.

Ms. GREENFIELD: Thank you.

INSKEEP: J. Ross Baughman is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist.

Thank you for coming by.

Mr. BAUGHMAN: Thanks.

INSKEEP: And you can hear more of our conversation and also see photos by going to our Web site at npr.org.

(Soundbite of music)

INSKEEP: From NPR News, that's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Steve Inskeep.

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