

RESOURCE MAGAZINE

For the Professional Photo Productionist

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INTERVIEW:

Craig Strong

Emily Ann Epstein | Photo by Craig Strong

Tupperware. Vacuum hoses. Photography. To Craig Strong, inventor of Lensbaby lenses, it's all a part of the job. Before his custom kit took on a life of its own, this MacGyver of the industry shot for newspapers and was an award-winning wedding photographer. His creations, the Muse, the Composer, and the Control Freak, have been lauded for inserting the organic into our digital age. *Resource* chats with the innovator about Lensbaby, his passions, and, of course, his other children.

What was your first camera? Did you tinker with photo equipment from an early age?

My first camera was a Mamiya 500TL SLR with a 50mm f/2 lens. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. My father gave it to me for graduation from eighth grade and I immediately took on the identity of "Photographer."

As a kid I took apart everything I ever owned, and shortly after getting that camera it got drenched on a camping trip, so I took it apart piece by piece. It was bittersweet, as I never got it to work again. Most things I took apart never worked again, but I sure loved seeing what was inside.

I understand you used to work in photojournalism. How did working in that field affect your understanding of photography?

When I was sent on an editorial assignment, I had very little time to make the images I was expected to bring back. This pressure, and the knowledge that whatever I brought back would have my name under it, pushed me to know my equipment, to always be ready to shoot, and to anticipate moments before they happened. Shooting hundreds of photographs a day allowed me to improve my photography skills very quickly. This was in the late '80s and early '90s, so film was the only option. Shooting that many photographs was a luxury limited to those who had time and money, and those of us who were paid to photograph. I was also privileged to learn a great deal from the photographers I worked with. Photojournalism can be very competitive, but getting sage advice and candid feedback while working on staff was something I grew to value highly.

What was your kit like back then?

As a photojournalist I used Canon L-Series zooms and the brightest Canon prime lenses I could afford. I tended to be much more concerned about the lens quality than the

camera I was putting those excellent lenses on. I preferred prosumer cameras that often had features that the top end cameras didn't have yet. I didn't have to worry about the lower priced cameras nearly as much as I would have with a camera body worth three or four times as much money.

For diffusers, I would go to Goodwill to buy half a dozen Tupperware containers, and I would hack the lids up into just the right shape so I could pull out the exact flash modifier I needed for any situation. Using strobes in a way that complimented the subject matter while not distracting from the scene was very important to me. Everything I used on a typical photo shoot could be contained in a bag I could strap around my waist. Two bodies, a strobe, and three or four lenses was all the gear I needed.

How did you come up with the lenses?

A friend of mine had a gallery show featuring 16x16" prints of images she'd created using a Diana camera and slide film she'd cross-processed. I had spent years working to make my images as perfect as possible, in a National Geographic sense: being an invisible observer, working to ensure that my personal artistic style wouldn't distract from the subject matter at hand. I was shocked that these motion-blurred, unfocused, contrasty, highly saturated images impacted me so strongly. The artistic style was obvious, yet the images were stronger because of it. They were full of life and increased my vision of how a powerful photograph should look and the process required to make it.

When I got my digital SLR I started experimenting with alternative lenses. I did it just because I could [without costing me much of anything]. I put lenses on my Canon D30 that were intended for camcorders, or were fifty to a hundred years old, and made photographs for my clients and for myself that

we loved. Before long I was buying vacuum cleaner hoses at Home Depot, machining holes in body caps, buying cameras off eBay, pulling the lenses off, and using the optical elements from these lenses to put the earliest Lensbaby prototypes together for my own personal and professional work.

How did you construct the first Lensbaby lens?

The first Lensbaby was made with a piece of ShopVac hose, a body cap with a hole cut in it, and a 101 mm Kodak lens off of an old Speed Graphic camera that had been sitting as an ornament on my bookshelf.

How do you incorporate the lenses into your personal and professional photography? When I'm on a job, I'm looking for a way to document what I am seeing, always striving for the goal that my style compliments the subject matter. I want whatever lens I use to be such a good fit for the subject that it helps me communicate to the viewer what I see. I use Lensbaby lenses for about 5% of the images I shoot at weddings, often a higher percentage for portraits. One client hired me exclusively for my Lensbaby photos, and I shot weekly assignments for them over the course of three years using only Lensbaby lenses. For my personal photography, I use whatever prototype I am getting ready for the next batch of Lensbaby accessories, or Lensbaby Optic Swap optics, etc. This means that my family photos have a very different flavor from one year to the next. Most recently I have been photographing with the Soft Focus and Fisheye optics that came out in October '09. Trying new things has become an obsession.

Do you ever wish you could re-shoot past stories with a Lensbaby lens?

The images I shot prior to creating the first Lensbaby came from my photographic vision at that time. My photographic vision is different today, so I don't really wish I had had

the tools I have today back then.

Photojournalism is about recording history. Seeing my style change through the years is part of that history. I am most interested in going back to Peru to be with the beautiful elderly couple I spent time with in 1995 so I can tell more of their story. When I go back I'll surely take my Lensbaby lenses, but probably most of the images will be made with prime Nikon glass (I switched to Nikon several years ago) and complimented with images that the Lensbaby optics are uniquely suited to capture well.

Do you identify yourself mostly as a photographer, a businessman or an inventor?

How do you satisfy each of these identities?

I have to say that fisherman was my first identity, even before photographer, and that one has endured and become a big part of my relationship with my kids whom I take fishing as often as possible. When it comes to my career, I'd have to say that photographer is the identity that makes businessman and inventor possible, and being a photographer is the place where I feel most at home. There is no time when I feel more comfortable in my skin than when I'm photographing a wedding. I treasure the process of creating something new and photography allows me to do that a bit faster than inventing so, yes, photographer it is. You talk about how a Lensbaby lens is a way for photographers to be creative without using Photoshop. If we think of Photoshop as a digital darkroom, how to you feel Lensbaby fits in the analog vs. digital realms of photography? Have you gotten feedback from film photographers who use it?

Lensbaby adds an organic element to normally sterile digital photography, but some of the most amazing Lensbaby images I've seen have been shot on my favorite film, TMax 3200. I love what a Lensbaby lens can do on film; the layering of the organic grain with the depth of field effects of the Lensbaby is a stunning combination.

How do you feel a lens affects a photographer's process?

I see things uniquely because of my familiarity with each of my camera lenses and knowing the kinds of images each is capable of capturing. This vision is dramatically different with Lensbaby lenses. Seeing in a new way is profound—in photography and in every aspect of life.

LENSBABY

Learning any photographic tool has the effect of opening up visual possibilities. I love this about photography. Learning new things and changing how your camera sees can change what and how you see. This is one of the biggest joys I experience in being a photographer, and I look forward to experiencing this kind of learning for the rest of my life.

When I look at Lensbaby images I feel like they zero in on moments closer and more intimately than other lenses. Is there a different photographic philosophy when one shoots with a Lensbaby lens?

That's a great observation. I don't know if the photographic philosophy is different.

I do know that I see certain things through my Lensbaby that I don't see through my other lenses.

And finally, which one of your Lensbaby images are you the most proud of and why?

The image that I'm currently most proud of is one of my son, Mac, holding up his catch of a rainbow trout in front of a lake on the Oregon Coast where we had spent the day fishing. It's my favorite Lensbaby image because of the day we had together and how proud I am to be his dad.

