

The Digital Age

Jeff Cutting ARPS

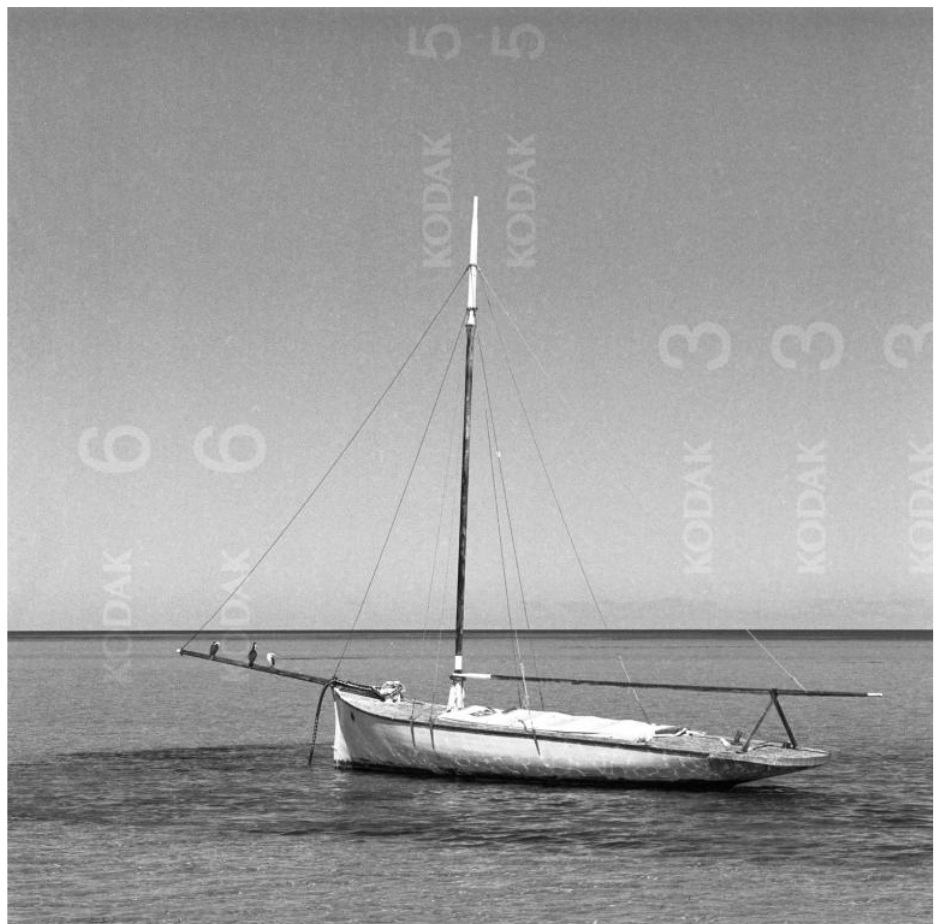
- a revolution in photographic technology and personal thinking . . .

This is a story of an epiphany – and a resolve to fully adopt digital photography, having dragged my feet for many years in the grey area of mixed analogue/digital photography, with many tortured results. To be sure, it was a succession of problems with analogue black & white films that tipped me in favour of going primarily digital, particularly after testing a high resolution Nikon digital camera that was fitted with modern high grade lenses.

Photographers in the digital age do not have the problem of "shoot and wait (for however long) to see if and how images turned out" to see the processed results. This was the bane of all photographers in past times using film and waiting, sometimes hours or days. Recently however, for some photographers still using monochrome films and waiting for the processed results, this anxiety was ratcheted up a few notches with the emergence of a watermarking problem with Kodak's premiere film, T-Max 400 Professional 120 roll film, marketed as *the World's Sharpest moderate / high ISO film*.

I stumbled upon this problem when processing thirteen "round Australia" T-Max films, which was done over one dedicated weekend.

With fresh chemicals I processed one test film first to make sure that my technique was working - which it was - and found to my dismay that Kodak branding with frame numbers appeared in all the frames. Perplexed, I immediately thought that the films might have been heat struck - as I had travelled in the tropical zones for many weeks, causing the backing paper words and numbers to somehow imprint on the developed emulsion. Nevertheless, I set about processing the other twelve rolls and found the problem



Vintage pearling lugger anchored at Denham, WA by Jeff Cutting ARPS

Rolleiflex SL66E with Kodak T-Max 400 120 roll film

throughout my entire set of T-Max negatives. I then processed the sole *Ilford FP4* 120 roll film taken on the trip and found no such problem.



After searching the Internet I turned up a number of photographers' posts, disillusioned with the same watermarking problem with Kodak T-Max films, some having ruined images on (unrepeatable) wedding assignments, heavily impacting on their professional reputations.

Storms over the Nullarbor Plain
by Jeff Cutting ARPS

Rolleiflex SL66E with Kodak
T-Max 400 120 roll film

Recently a similar problem surfaced when I processed a large batch of *Ilford 120 roll films* (FP4 and HP5). Many of them showed extensive image mottling and spotting right throughout the films, seriously degrading the images. All things considered, I realised that there seemed to be lapses in quality control procedures during the manufacture and selection of the backing papers used for mating with sensitized 120 roll films with both Kodak Alaris and Ilford films. These problems are in the manufacturers' court to fix. However, whatever the fix, no replacement of the faulty films will ever compensate for my lost images and those unrepeatable assignments for professional photographers.



Stand of senescent snowgums, Gudgenby, 2022 by Jeff Cutting ARPS
Ilford FP4 6x9 cm, processed in *Ilford Ilfosol 3* developer.
Sky toned down to show mottling effect.

UK's Ilford manufacturer released a statement regarding defects found on certain 120 medium format photographic film products stating:

"Over the last couple of months, we have noticed an increased number of customers posting their concerns on forums and social media channels relating to our 120 roll films in which spots / mottle have appeared on the negatives."
Furthermore: "We pride ourselves on our high quality and consistent production and want to assure you that this issue is being fully investigated as a matter of priority. We appreciate this will be of little comfort to those who have experienced the issue and for that we offer our sincerest apologies."

With some 50 years experience with wet photographic processing which includes both monochrome and colour with formats ranging from 35mm to 10 X 8 inch sheet films I was quite confident, after retiring from the Federal Public Service, about continuing to process black and white medium format films at home for my landscape photography. The economics were predicated by the rapid oxidation of opened developer stocks, so that films had to be processed in large batches, usually some months after image capture. Selected negatives were then scanned to high resolution with a *Nikon Super Coolscan* and filed in TIFF format for latter processing and printing via *Photoshop CS5*. This procedure underpinned my monochrome photography of landscapes, until recently.

Notwithstanding the watermarking and mottling issues, I will say that otherwise I found the quality of these modern black & white sensitized materials to be very high and easily home processed. Logically I would expect this backing paper issues to be resolved by now. However, one problem remains, and that is that large stocks of the faulty batches are still likely to be held in commercial warehouses around the world and may not be withdrawn from sale. This seemed to have been the case with the Kodak dilemma.

An Epiphany – or now the penny dropped . . .

For colour work I was using a *Nikon D810* full frame digital camera with legacy lenses, 28 mm and 50 mm Nikkors plus a 105 mm micro Nikkor lens, dating from the 1960s, which were not autofocus and relied upon my - now not so acute - eyesight for focussing, with some fuzzy results. One day a friend loaned me a high resolution *Nikon D850* camera fitted with a modern autofocus *Sigma 50 mm Art* series lens. The results were stunning: clean, crisp results and it was easy to use, far out performing my treasured old Nikkors.

Further exploratory work with autofocus *Sigma Art* lenses revealed much better results with my preferred subjects - landscapes. This was the Epiphany. So it came down to making some hard decisions. I was using a *Rolleiflex* twin lens reflex, a *Fujica 6X9* and my trusty old *Rolleiflex SL66E* for monochrome work. These now seemed redundant. So I sold the first two cameras and kept the *Rolleiflex SL66E* with its set of lenses, in the hope that in time my confidence will be restored in black and white films.

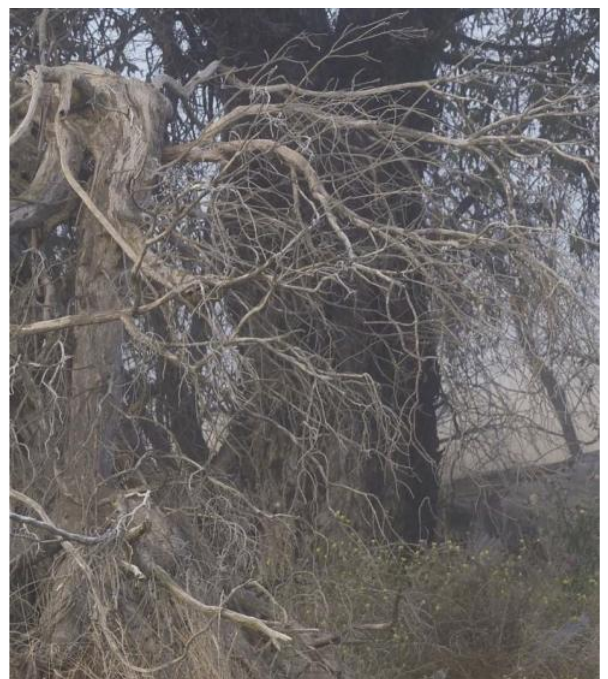
After purchasing a *Sigma 50 mm Art* lens then a 24 mm wide-angle Art, I did further testing to confirm the outstanding results I was getting by shooting in RAW format and converting to TIFF files. This then led to the purchase of a *Nikon D850* camera and a 135 mm Art lens, giving me a set of prime lenses.



*Snowgum stand
Gudgenby, 2023
by Jeff Cutting ARPS*

Nikon D810 digital camera with 50 mm Sigma Art lens.

When shooting with the *Sigma Art* lenses, I found that the large amount of glass in these fast optics and therefore bulk (heft) added weight and stability, particularly when pressing the shutter release, thereby minimising camera shake. Also I found that by using an ISO value of around 200 keeps the shutter speed up, while at the same time keeping to a moderate aperture of around f8. This is giving me the optimum lens performance, so that my daylight results so far are much sharper. When processing some landscape colour images in Adobe Photoshop, I have dropped the colour data out, to produce excellent monochrome images. These appear to have higher resolution, less noise and grain texture than black & white negatives of the same subject.



Detail from the above image

My personal photography of landscapes shows *f64 School* tendencies - images must be critically sharp when printed onto A3 or larger papers, sometimes with textured paper stock. To this end I do not use zoom lenses, as these can cause confusion when framing images and are not as critically sharp as fixed focus, i.e. prime lenses.