

# PHASE **ONE**



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## Terra Incognita

A book project spanning 15 years!

*or* Changes in the American Gulf coast  
and my journey from film to digital

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### *Introduction*

*For those of you who love great photography and have an interest in our environment, Richard Sexton's book, Terra Incognita offers a glimpse of what is really happening to our world as only an artist could record. The devastation to the environment is staggering and all the more powerful and yet beautiful, especially through Richard's eye. This work, most importantly, is about passion and purpose. I am proud to have Richard's book as part of my photography library. At the end of this article we have included links to galleries offering Richard's book and prints as well. It's important for us to support efforts on this level and I am sure that many of you will find Richard's work a tribute to the craft of photography and an inspiration.*

Walter Borchenko, *Editor*



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In mid-summer of 2005 I made a proposal to my primary publisher, Chronicle Books in San Francisco, for a fine art photography book of black and white landscapes. This book would focus on the gulf coast, a geographic region of the country not widely known nationally. Then in August and September of 2005, hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit. Suddenly there was international interest and Chronicle agreed in the fall of 2005 to publish *Terra Incognita*. International media focus was primarily on the devastation to the city of New Orleans, but there was also an underlying interest in the geography of the region

and particularly how increased storm activity and global warming were impacting the gulf coast.

This project began in 1991, long before any of us had any notion of digital capture. These early images had been made with two camera systems — a square format Mamiya 6 rangefinder and a 6x12 panoramic back on my 4x5 view camera. I liked photographing with the Mamiya 6 because it was like a big square format Leica. Many of my images featured a single primary subject and the square frame worked beautifully in these situations.



“For the final six months of the project I shot with the P 20 back, producing some of the most successful images in the series, including the front and back covers of the book.”

The project would need new photography, particularly post-Katrina images. I had about 40 to 50 images in the collection and we needed closer to 80 images to complete the book. I had six months to produce more work. I wanted to have a consistent look and feel to the imagery. Since early 2003, I'd been shooting my commercial projects digitally, first with a Canon 1Ds and then a 1Ds MKII. However, I continued shooting landscapes with black and white film. But, I wanted the new images in the series to be captured digitally. It would save film costs and of equal importance, scanning time. I didn't want to shoot DIN proportion (35mm) with a DSLR and then crop the photos square. I wanted a system that would allow me to frame the image in the viewfinder as a square and that would yield a final image at full sensor resolution. I decided

to purchase a Phase One P 20 back to use on a Mamiya 645 AFD camera platform. This would be the closest digital capture system to my Mamiya 6.

A lot of photographers may not appreciate my decision because of the \$10K cost of the digital back alone. But before rejecting the idea on financial grounds, you have to ask yourself some questions: Over the life of the camera and over your life span in photography, how much film are you going to shoot, and what's that going to cost? How much time and money will go into scans? Is the quality of digital capture comparable to what you would expect with film? Can the quality of your chosen digital solution handle your output quality requirements? Does the equipment you choose change how you shoot? For this project, I needed to replicate digitally the



consistent look and feel of the film imagery and I needed to match the quality of the gallery print I could produce from film. I also had to mix film and digital capture together with consistent quality on the printed page.

In my case, this was a practical decision. That's something I don't feel many fine art photographers and others recognize. When you're spending more for film and processing, when it's taking you more time to create images than you would like, then you have to realize this is the cost-effective point to consider a transition to new technology. That's

the only way you can be cost competitive and as productive as everyone else in the industry. This important point tends to get overshadowed by how much digital backs cost. An ostensibly cheaper solution, whether its continuing to shoot film or buying a digital system that doesn't fit your needs precisely and makes more work for you, isn't really cheaper, is it? It's a different scenario entirely if you're a hobbyist. Oddly enough, in my capacity as a professional spokesperson for Ebony view cameras, I deal with a lot of people in the industry. It's interesting that many of the photographers I talk to who are using medium format backs are



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actually hobbyists. I know the big studios and the major media photographers use them, but it's an interesting phenomenon that serious hobbyists use them as well.

The final six months shooting for *Terra Incognita*, I used the P 20 back, producing some of the most successful images in the series, including the front and back covers of the book. I finished up the project with digital capture because it was the most cost effective solution. I also was confident I had the digital skill set to produce comparable results to 6x6cm and 6x12cm black-and-white film. Though a 645 AFD is heavier and bulkier than a Mamiya 6 rangefinder, for this project it was a more effective camera system with a wider range of lenses and more precise framing.

Medium format digital photography provides a different experience than shooting with a DSLR. My favorite feature of my medium format digital back platform, however, is modularity. The camera body, lenses, film, and digital back can all be interchanged and upgraded independently of each other.

When I do shoot with a DSLR, I no longer shoot with a Canon 1Ds series camera, but use a 5D instead. Not only is the 5D smaller, quieter, and offers superior image quality at high ISO settings, but it's a cheaper more logical camera considering its probable lifespan. I fully expect that when the 5D successor comes out, I'll upgrade and the cost of this transition will be far less than with a 1Ds series Canon. I've come to regard DSLRs as virtually disposable cameras. With a medium format system it makes more sense to invest in a rugged, pro grade camera body because if you upgrade the back, you don't have to simultaneously upgrade the camera body. I also believe that Phase One's open-platform philosophy fully supports this modularity and is the only logical approach to medium format digital capture.

Image quality is the primary consideration, I feel, for choosing a Phase One back and a medium format system. For about a year preceding my purchase of a P 20 back I'd been shooting with a Canon 1Ds MKII. The pixel count for both products is effectively the same. I noticed right away that the P 20 was capable of higher resolution, however. I believe that higher bit-depth, larger pixel size, Capture One





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software, and using the central coverage (sweet spot) of the medium format optics are all part of the reason. But, there are aesthetic considerations to medium format digital capture that are equally as important as image quality and modularity. During the film-only era of photography, photographer's chose between a wide range of film formats—DIN proportion (35mm format), square, the so-called “ideal” format, 645, 4x5, and 8x10, and then there were a wide variety of panoramic formats that offered aspect ratios from 1:2 to 1:4 and even greater. The pervasive DSLR format that has defined

the beginning of the digital era, offers photographers DIN format capture only. I know, you can always crop the image, but in the process you throw away precious pixels and can severely limit the size of print reproduction when you make extreme crops.

My philosophy, which has been guided by over three decades of shooting experience, is that it's always best to compose and print using the format that works best for a given subject. I work methodically, compose in camera, and crop the image after the fact only when I have to. One of the classic

“What was most beneficial for me as a photographer was the way that Phase One equipment and workflow allowed me to transition to digital capture and yet maintain a style and photographic approach for a project with which I had a fifteen year history.”

formats of film photography was the square and photographers tended to love it or hate it. Medium format photography, whether with a Hasselblad or a Rollei twin lens, or any number of other MF systems, tended to be defined by square format. For certain subjects and certain shooting situations, this format offers unique compositional opportunities and when I first started shooting digitally, one of the things I missed was the ability to shoot in a wide variety of formats, a luxury I had always enjoyed when shooting film. The P 20 back, with its square format sensor, gave me the option to continue to shoot in a style that I'd adopted years earlier. Using the Ebony SW45 view camera and a Phase One FlexAdapter, I can stitch two frames together to achieve the 2:1 aspect ratio of a 6x12cm back.

Once I started using Capture One DB as my raw converter I decided to upgrade to Capture One Pro so that all raw conversions for DSLR captures, as well as the P 20 captures, could be converted in one application. I liked the fact that Capture One Pro handled tethered shooting, image editing and tagging, and raw conversion within a single, intuitive software application. I also performed several comparisons with Adobe Camera Raw. I found that

Capture One's white balance tool worked more effectively, yielding a more neutral gray value and more accurate color across the spectrum. Capture One Pro did a better job with shadow transitions. There was less noise in the shadows and smoother transitions between areas holding shadow detail and black. Adobe Camera Raw tended to have splotchy transitional areas in the shadows where there was no photographed detail, but the pixel values weren't black either. Capture One Pro also did better with the highlights with less posterization between blown out areas and those highlights holding some tonality and there was a smoother transition in these areas. In the last couple of years, of course, Adobe Camera Raw has seen significant upgrades and with the introduction of Lightroom, Adobe now has an image editing and raw conversion tool that's more competitive with Capture One. Personally, I consider Capture One Pro the progenitor of programs like Lightroom and Aperture. Everyone in the industry copied its approach and features.

What was most beneficial for me as a photographer was the way that Phase One equipment and workflow allowed me to transition to digital capture and yet maintain a style and photographic approach



*Terra Incognita* exhibition  
Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans

for a project with which I had a 15 year history. It's not apparent to anyone who peruses *Terra Incognita* which shots were made on film and which were captured digitally.

The release of the book was accompanied by an exhibit of the same name at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans. The images captured with the P 20 back were enlarged to as much as 22" square for the exhibit and they held up beautifully. Even at this scale, distinguishing between film and digital captures was virtually impossible. But, more importantly it wasn't something the viewer even thought about. The work was consistent technically and thematically from beginning to end. No one really thought about all the technological changes in photography over the course of the project. This is the way it should be for photographers and their audience. New equipment and new technology should allow us to do what we've always done, but do it better and easier.

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Richard Sexton is a noted fine art and media photographer whose work has been published and exhibited worldwide. *Terra Incognita* is his eighth title with Chronicle Books. Sexton's work is included in the Historic New Orleans Collection,

New Orleans Museum of Art, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, and numerous private collections. His multidisciplinary studio is based in New Orleans. Additional information is available on his web site: [www.richardsextonstudio.com](http://www.richardsextonstudio.com)

If you're interested in purchasing the book *Terra Incognita* or prints from the project, use the following links to Richard Sexton's gallery representatives:

A Gallery for Fine Photography, New Orleans  
[www.agallery.com](http://www.agallery.com)

Richter Gallery of Photography, Nashville  
[www.richtergallery.com](http://www.richtergallery.com)

whitespace, Atlanta  
[www.whitespace814.com](http://www.whitespace814.com)

To Richard's Ebony review go to:  
[www.luminous-landscape.com/reviews/cameras/digital-ebony.shtml](http://www.luminous-landscape.com/reviews/cameras/digital-ebony.shtml)

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If you have any thoughts or comments you would like to share about this article, please feel free to email us at [editor@phaseone.com](mailto:editor@phaseone.com)

# PHASEONE

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