

Loyola University New Orleans
Digital Humanities Studio

The Louisiana Art Project

Interview with Nicky Latino

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Interviewer: Tristin Gaspard

Abstract:

Nicky Latino of Bennett's Photo discusses the shift towards online sales and its impact on camera dealers, noting the decline of brick-and-mortar stores and the resurgence of interest in film development. He contrasts film and digital photography, highlighting their respective advantages and disadvantages. Nicky emphasized the unique qualities of film photography, such as its tactile nature and the ability to create a physical artifact. He also acknowledges the convenience and versatility of digital photography but argues that it lacks the emotional connection and artistic expression of film, all while discussing the film-developing industry as a whole as well as Bennett's individual experience.

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Nicky Latino (0:0): They were on Royal Street originally just for a couple of years in 1909. Then they moved to Barone Street. And Barone Street was the big store in the heyday. That's what most of the older generation would remember. Moved out on to Severn on up Severn, I don't remember the name of the street. But just a couple of blocks down from our location at 18th Street was there up until about four years ago, and about four years ago, industry changed, downsized and moved here. Well, back Originally, the main business was developing film. And as the years went on, began to sell equipment. So we went from Bennett's Photo to Bennett's Camera and started selling a lot of gear. And then video came on the scene, we came Bennett's, camera and video, video kind of went away with digital cameras, went back to Bennett's Photo or Bennett's Camera rather. And then cameras have kind of gone online. And now we're back to Bennett's Photo back to doing what we were originally doing. So the reasoning behind stopping selling cameras was change in the industry. So when the internet came on real strong, all the manufacturers thought it would be a good idea to sell direct to consumers online, which in and of itself wasn't a bad idea. But what ultimately ended up happening is there was a tax structure at the time where you could buy something on the internet and not pay sales tax. So they were able to buy it online cheaper than they could in a store, which put dealers in a pretty rough spot, because you know, customers would come in and talk to us about cameras, and we'd spent hours educating them. And then they would go buy it directly online and we would get nothing. So that was the first stumbling block. And then after that they the manufacturers began to sell online to consumers at the same price that they were selling to dealers, because they then had to charge sales tax. That was just the final straw. And I would say nine out of ten Camera dealers decided at that point that it was, obviously it was not profitable. And it just that was not a good business model most at that time just closed, just no more camera store at all. Fortunately for us, we were in a position to where we were doing a lot of processing. And we were able to do that some of the other dealers that have been able to to continue selling cameras have a huge used camera or camera repair facility. And they're able to make, Right exactly. So I know at least in a probably three state area. I'm the only one doing doing processing on site, I get, there's several dealers that send their film to me to develop and I develop it and send it back to them. And then so yeah, it's what I'm told. Yeah, just like I did 30 years ago, 40

years ago, actually, when I was in high school, I mean, with a tank mixing chemistry by hand. It's I tell people all the time, if, if you asked me forty years ago told me 40 years ago that I would be developing black and white film by hand, I would have thought that they had lost their mind. Here I am. Well actually, at one time, we had a black and white film processing machine. But Ilford was the company that we were using. They had the chemistry to run through a film development machine, they stopped making it just because there's not a lot of people doing it. So there was not enough call. And so they couldn't continue to process it. So I literally had a black and white machine that I had to take apart and throw in a dumpster. That was painful. Yeah. So at that point, I had to make a decision as to whether we were going to continue to develop black and white film by hand or not at all. So as well try it. And at that time, the film was on a downswing. So we were still, you know, it's very recently. Right. Yeah. So, you know, it was a, you know, half a dozen rolls of film a week, you know, so once a week, I'd go in a dark room and you know, develop a couple of rolls of film, you know, 2 to 10 depending on who's shooting and what not been in the industry since 1984. Generally, I'd say probably 20 rolls a week. Sometimes less sometimes more. Yeah, couldn't even Kandra a guess at how many hundreds of 1000s of rolls of film mean back in the 80s, when before there was digital, I mean, it was not uncommon to develop 100/125 rolls of film a day, six days a week. How long does it take to put a roll of film through the processor? 30 minutes for processing, and about another 30 minutes to 40 minutes for scanning. But you know, back in the day, when we had a staff of 25/28 people, you had, you know, three or four or five people working on the front counter taking film in four or five people that were going in the lab, doing film processing, doing developing and scanning packaging billing. Fast forward today, there's just two of us. So it's, it's hard to get the get the film out in a timely fashion. Sometimes, you know, if anything, we've seen an increase with the increase in enthusiasm for film developing and shooting and things. So, you know, for every one guy who wants to do it at home, you've got two or three more four people who are shooting who don't want to do it at home. And the guys that are doing it at home, for black and white, you can get some good results, you know, once you fine tune your process for for C 41. At home is hard to get consistency. You can't, I mean, the temperature can't vary more than a quarter of a degree before you start seeing changes in

color. The same thing with your time, I mean, you have to be within 10 seconds, 15 seconds at the most you know going through that chemistry process before you start seeing density change and color shift. So, you know for artistic standpoint, you want to do it at home. Yeah, absolutely, you can get some really kind of crazy looking results. If you're really looking to get a well exposed good color balance, you know, image, there's just no substitute for a machine that's going to do it at exactly the same temperature exactly the same time, every single time. No questions. So price wise, it's actually cheaper to have it done here than it is to buy the chemistry and do it at home. Yeah, there's a couple of things. You know, we've tried to maintain a price, even through all the pandemic and everything, our cost went up substantially. And we had to go up \$1 per roll, which we hadn't raised our prices in 15 years. And we've always had obviously had price increases throughout the time. But this time, it was so drastic. So we went up a little bit. We get orders shipped in to us, literally every day, every day, the postman comes in, and I've got a package from you know, New York, you know, which I know there's film Labs in New York, Chicago, LA, I mean, I know they're film labs in those cities, but a lot of the kids, kids younger guys that have gone through college here and have had access to us and brought film to us have now moved back home. You know, wherever that is, and they still know of us, still like us, they still send film to us. So it's it's kind of fun. It's you know, Chris is fourth generation Bennett. So his great grandfather originally started the store it's always been a family business, it's always been, you know, customer relationship oriented. I would say out of the customers that come through the front door, at least half of them. I know by name by first name. The other ones I'll recognize most of them when they tell me their name, or if I see them on the street, you know, say hello, right. And when you start to do e6, you slide film. So at one point, I had three machines going good next to the artists kind of thing, they'll bring rule II six in and have me run it through C 41 process, because you'll get this real solarized color artsy looking thing. And it doesn't affect the chemistry at all. So you still get a negative image but but as far as like actually getting the slides that you put it a projector to project and I don't know of anybody that's doing that anymore. We can we can still develop anything that's c41, so 110 126 Anything. Now as far as negative carriers and being able to scan it, I can do 35 millimeter and 120. The 110 Negative carrier just as you know, there wasn't enough 110

film for the manufacturers to make a negative carrier. Film was probably about half. Yeah, maybe a little more than half because like it is on the uprise. But you think when you talk about a roll of film being you know 10 \$12 \$6 To develop versus a canvas print that's 200 you don't take long to make up the difference right? Same thing with custom framing and off the shelf frames and prints that can be ordered from your phone online. And the big thing about digital prints is people shoot so many more pictures today and phones have gotten so much better that people are getting some pretty good pictures and they want to print them they want to hang them on the wall so it's pretty good and now that they've put three different lenses on it and you got telephoto wide angle you don't have to crop and use less of the sensor you can get some pretty good images are even like the phones you know, it's like take that picture first then think about it. Yeah, you know, whereas with film you got to really think about it then take the pictures but it's it's you know, the film photography is similar to the old classic cars and LPs you know records and things you know this there's something about it that's pretty cool you know it's I can jump in my truck and drive from here to wherever and not even think twice about it. But I can I've got a 66 Mustang I can jump in that and it's a lot more fun to back out of the driveway in that thing Yeah, it's all mechanical and you looking at the Nikon FM2 fully manual second version, the Nikon FM2 the model number. The camera is mechanical like literally no battery. You can take it out change aperture shutter speed, everything all mechanically. No electronics. That's pretty impressive. You know Hasselblad same way all mechanical camera. We put negatives from literally from the 1900s people will come in and these old two and a quarter squares or four by five negatives with black and white negatives and scan em.