

FEATURES

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Through a plastic lens softly

The Blackbird, fly appeals to lovers of toy cameras who relish photographic serendipity in a digital age

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The latest digital cameras include models that can shoot high-definition videos, produce portraits that instantly slenderize the subject and have three-inch-wide LCD screens with ultra-high 920,000-dot resolution. The recently released Blackbird, fly, on the other hand, is made out of plastic and offers two aperture settings — one for sunny days and another for when it's cloudy.

A growing number of photographers, however, are reaching for the latter. The Blackbird, fly is one of the newest toy cameras — a somewhat misleading term for very basic but functional cameras that have developed a cult following over the past half decade.

Designed by Tokyo-based Superheadz, the diminutive Blackbird, fly is a twin-lens reflex camera whose boxy appearance hearkens back to vintage cameras made by Rolleiflex and Yashica. Unlike the cameras of yesteryear, the Blackbird, fly is made almost entirely of plastic and uses readily available 35mm film. Its sleek design (the camera comes in black, deep turquoise blue or bright orange) is also thoroughly modern. Photos taken by the Blackbird, fly, which is named after the Beatles song, have a hazy, dreamlike quality, with rich colors and vignetting, or shadowing, on the edges of the frame.

The first camera designed by Superheadz, which also runs a music label and publishes art books, was the bite-sized Ikimono, which uses 110 film cartridges and was released five years ago as toy camera photography began to soar in popularity. Superheadz was also the first company in Japan to import Holgas, one of the models that launched the toy camera trend. Hideki Ohmori, the founder and chief executive officer of Superheadz, connects the popularity of toy cameras to the resurgence of interest in film photography.

"I find it quite natural to see that young people that have never tried film photography are attracted to this medium, as it is quite a different experience from digital photography," said Ohmori in an e-mail. "As film becomes harder to find, it will end up being at a comparable level to vinyl records versus CDs, but it will always be around."

Toy cameras have, by definition, very few functions and are usually made of plastic or other inexpensive materials. The very basic lens, lack of settings and occasional light leaks in many toy cameras give their photos a distinctive look, which can include either soft or hyper-intense colors, optical distortions and vignetting. While the results may be somewhat unpredictable, the limits and quirks of toy cameras serve as a kind of muse for photographers.



"I think there is something to be said about imperfection and the surprise you can get from the imperfect process of framing and taking a shot with a toy camera," says Cameron Stephen, a Melbourne-based toy camera enthusiast who runs a Web site called The Plastic Lens (www.theplasticlens.com). "It's almost zen in the fact that you have to let go of your expectations."

Many of the "classic" toy cameras like the Holga and the Diana, which was first produced in the early 1960s, were manufactured as promotional giveaways or cheap alternatives to pricier cameras. Photographers developed a taste for the offbeat, serendipitous images shot by these cameras and began hunting them down on eBay and in flea markets and secondhand stores.

Eventually companies like Superheadz and Lomography Society, which now makes Diana and Holga cameras, began creating new cameras for devotees, many of whom discover toy cameras through photo-sharing Web sites like Flickr.

"Cameras like the Diana, Holga and Blackbird, fly have made people more aware that you don't just have to get a digital point-and-shoot," says Stephen. "There is something magical about having your film developed and getting it back from the lab."

Retailing for about NT\$4,500 at Page One bookstores, the Blackbird, fly is on the higher end of the price range for toy cameras, but designed for ease of use and consistent image quality. The camera produces "really nice sharp pictures, but the photographs still have a toy camera feel," says Stephen. "It's one of those things that are hard to describe."

A twin-lens reflex camera has one lens through which to view the image and another one that exposes the film. The Blackbird, fly takes photos in three formats: rectangular, square, or with a fully exposed frame that shows off the sprockets of the filmstrip. As with twin-lens reflex cameras of yesterday, photographers hold the Blackbird, fly at waist level to peer through the top viewfinder at their composition, which appears reversed, creating a novel experience for those accustomed to composing their images on the screen of a digital camera.

"With the Blackbird, fly our only message was to ask people to take their time when taking pictures," said Ohmori.

The allure of toy camera photography in a digital age "is about the unpredictable results, about the randomness, about the softer image quality, about the strange connection that the images make to our nostalgic soul, a certain fleeting sense, a melancholy," Ohmori added. "They are as imperfect as we are."

The Blackbird, fly and other Superheadz cameras are sold in Taiwan at Page One bookstores. For more information, visit www.superheadz.com/bbf.

Left: The Blackbird, fly twin-lens reflex camera. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES
Below: Photographs taken using a Blackbird, fly by Cameron Stephen, who runs toy camera photography Web site www.theplasticlens.com.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAMERON STEPHEN

