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Rhythm and infrared

By Larry Thall

Photographer Marc Malin merges his love of music with infrared photography and hand-toned prints

The late photographer **Walker Evans** is often cited for being the “archivist of the ordinary.” His keen eye could lend visual dignity to “vernacular” architecture (ramshackle buildings), as well as to ordinary hand tools and kitchen paraphernalia.

Later, other fine-art photographers, such as **Minor White**, who taught at the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** in Rochester, N.Y., from 1965 to 1976, would use infrared film not only to validate the concept of everyday objects and landscapes as being the stuff of fine art, but also to add to this growing



“Pathway through the Bayou,” Jackson Square, New Orleans, archival ink print on Museo Silver Rag paper. By Marc Malin.

tradition by lending a surrealistic aura to such images, which could capture what he referred to as the essential spirit.

Marc Malin, fine-art photographer and gallery manager for **The Darkroom**, Santa Fe, N.M., has been adding to the infrared tradition for more than 20 years now, and his toned infrared images are receiving much attention.

His work was featured in the January/February 2008 issue of *Camera Arts* magazine, as well as in the April 2008 edition of *Focus* magazine. His large work, including his three-section “Aspens” – with each panel printed on canvas and measuring 80 inches long – is represented by **Calvin Charles Gallery** in Scottsdale, Ariz., where the prices for Malin’s large pieces currently range from \$4,600 to \$8,625. A one-man exhibition was held at The Darkroom Gallery in 2008.

Photo history

Malin attended high school in Rochester, N.Y. During his numerous visits to the **George Eastman House**, he absorbed many lasting memories of the 19th-century photographs he studied, and the distinctive tones of some long-dead photographic processes used to make them.

While using infrared film is a snap compared to coating glass plates with a light-sensitive emulsion while working inside a tent in the wilderness, it remains more challenging than, let’s say, shooting with an old roll of Tri-X. With the dark red filter



“Portrait of Marc Malin,” Jackson Square, New Orleans, archival ink print on Museo Silver Rag paper.

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required for black-and-white infrared photography, Malin is at times able to handhold his camera at 1/15 or 1/30 second; but he also needs at least a monopod for longer exposures.

"Simply loading infrared film into my camera must be done in complete darkness," Malin explains. "The light baffle on a standard film cassette isn't tight enough to prevent infrared film from damage."

Malin, who holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from **Tufts University**, Medford, Mass., and a Diploma in Art with a photography major from the **School of the Museum of Fine Arts**, Boston, Mass., has taught darkroom techniques and general photography in workshops, museum classes, and at the college level. He's spent considerable time in group darkrooms, where students worry about someone turning on the overhead lights without warning and fogging their papers.

"Ordinary ambient room light can fog unexposed infrared film," Malin says. It's a lesson he recently had to teach to airport security in Dallas, Texas.

"I was on my way to Costa Rica, and was carrying a brick of infrared film. While I had no difficulty in getting security guards to hand check my film, they wanted not only to slit open the cellophane and open a box, but also to open the protective canister. I was fortunate to finally convince them that such action would ruin my infrared film. They fogged six rolls before stopping."

Infrared challenges

In 2007, **Eastman Kodak Co.** announced the discontinuation of its HIE Infrared Film in 35mm rolls. While it's still possible to find a supplier here and there with rolls in old inventory, photographers who love the film for its aesthetic virtues, as well

as scientific applications, are also looking to new technologies to fill the void.

"I still have a small amount of infrared film, but it won't last much longer," Malin says.

After speaking about his work with a representative from **Fujifilm U.S.A. Inc.**, the company lent him a Fujifilm IS-1 DSLR, featuring a built-in flash, which provides a limited amount of infrared light and, with a filter over the lens, an opportunity to create infrared photographs.

The digital camera offers some advantages over film, such as never having to worry about airport security, the cost of film, or having to load and process it in total darkness. The camera can also be used for standard photography.

"So far, however, I haven't been able to achieve with digital capture the same luminescence in my photographs I enjoy from printing from film."

After applying for and winning a partner grant from inkjet paper manufacturer **Intelicoat Technologies**, South Hadley, Mass., maker of Museo Silver Rag and various fine-art media, Malin has been able to complete more large works, as well as other projects not necessarily gallery specific.

Inspirations

In addition to being a professional photographer, Malin also is a professional guitarist. He has enjoyed a lifelong love affair with New Orleans and its distinctive rhythm and blues. He continues to feel a commitment not only to the music, but to the musicians who play it in clubs and bars, as well as to the serious amateurs whose riffs can be heard throughout the neighborhoods at all hours of the day and night.

After the worst of Hurricane Katrina abated and the effects of the vast devastation were being tallied, Malin created a set of note cards featuring black-and-white photos of musicians, with each being selected from the vast body of work he's been accumulating from decades of visits to the city.

All proceeds were donated to the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic**, as well as 50 percent of print sales on selected images made during a fundraising exhibition. This charitable work made it possible for Malin to receive an official press pass to the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festivals held each spring.

A musical metaphor

Ansel Adams, the iconic figure of American Western landscape photography, once quipped, "The negative is the equivalent of the composer's score, and the print the performance." Adams was an accomplished classical pianist, who decided to scrap a career in music for a life of "making" photographs.

When Adams created a negative, it remained as fixed as the musical notation on a printed score. The "performance," in the



"Aspens Tryptic," Jackson Square, New Orleans, archival ink print on Museo Silver Rag paper. By Marc Malin.

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form of a photographic print, was where the artist could modify the nuances. Malin's toned infrared images are the "scores," and the "performances" are in print form.

After processing his infrared film, Malin uses a silver-halide paper to make an exhibition-quality 11-by-14-inch print. Depending on his choice of toners, he often uses **Seagull** papers for basic cold tones, or an **Ilford** warm-tone paper.

He then applies fast-drying masking fluid to the print, using mostly Q-tips, sticks, and other wooden kitchen tools, as well as various ceramic implements to mask the areas of the print he doesn't want the toners to affect. It generally takes Malin three to four hours to mask a print.

While brushes of different sizes might seem the better choice, Malin says their deficits outweigh their gains, first because they are quickly ruined by the fluid hardening the bristles, but also – and more important – making it too easy to virtually repeat.

Using implements never designed for the tasks Malin employs guarantees each silver-halide "master" print he makes from a given negative will be slightly different, making each print one of a kind.

After the toners on the print are dry, the masked areas can be easily rubbed off, in much the same way as working with rubber cement.

"People sometimes ask how long it takes me to mask a mural-size print. They assume the photograph hanging on the wall of a gallery was enlarged straight from my negative and later toned," Malin says.

"Not only would that method take forever to finish, neither a 35mm negative nor a medium-format negative could be enlarged to such proportions without image degradation from grain and other factors."

Instead, Malin digitizes his 11-by-14 toned prints on a high-quality flatbed scanner, and his images are printed from the huge image files saved in RAW format. The digital files soon exceeded the storage capability of his Mac G5, and additional hard drives are a regular line item in his capital expenditures.

Malin says he shoots with a **Nikon F3** SLR for 35mm work and a **Bronica SQA** for medium-format camera work. He uses Ilford Delta 100 roll-film for noninfrared work. In addition to teaching and print sales, Malin also had a commercial studio and corporate clients for much of the 25 years he lived in Massachusetts after graduate school.

Malin also works as a freelance photographer; and his work has been published in numerous publications, such as *Town & Country Magazine* and *Boston Magazine*.

"I made my first darkroom in the basement of our house when I was about 16, and learned the basics of film processing and making silver-halide prints on standard photographic papers. I still think of myself as being an opened-minded traditionalist."

Malin first began using infrared film in a serious way and



"Jazz Parade," Jackson Square, New Orleans, archival ink print on Museo Silver Rag paper. By Marc Malin.

making toned prints about 40 years ago. The allure of the tinted photographs he viewed in high school resurfaced as an influence, as did the widely published infrared photos of teachers such as the earlier-mentioned Minor White, whose infrared images would be published in such influential publications as *Aperture*.

The toners Malin uses, including selenium, sepia, gold, and others, are readily available today; so mixing chemicals and perhaps creating fumes the manufacturers never endorsed is easily avoided.

Many fine-art photographs give their prints a selenium bath, because it increases the archival quality of fiber-based black-and-white paper. This benefit occurs much sooner than it takes for the selenium toner to affect the color of the print.

Though many of his best-known images are of stationary subjects (such as Buddha), Malin characterizes his photographic technique as being closer to that of a street photographer than large-format view-camera photographers such as Adams and **Edward Weston**.

"None of my photographs are contrived. When I'm photographing, I try to keep my mind open to all possibilities. In doing so, I rely on intuition to guide my subject selection, as well as its suitability for enhancing the image with selective toning." ■