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**Joseph Rodriguez turns his lens on social issues.**

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## FILM & FILM CAMERAS

# JOHN SANDERSON: WHY LARGE FORMAT FILM IS ESSENTIAL TO MY WORK

June 10, 2019

By Holly Stuart Hughes



© JOHN SANDERSON

“South Dakota Central #103 C, Murdo, South Dakota,” from John Sanderson’s “Locomotive” series. Sanderson prints his images himself, sometimes in sizes as large as 40 x 50 inches.



### FILM & FILM CAMERAS FUJIFILM UNVEILS NEW NEOPAN ACROS 100 II BLACK-AND-WHITE FILM

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Fujifilm is resurrecting its Acros black-and-white film in the fall, roughly a year after it was discontinued. The Acros II won't be precisely identical to the original, either in terms of its manufacture or its characteristics. In a release posted to its Japanese site, Fujifilm described the Acros II as “an ultra-high-quality black-and-white film with the world’s highest level of...  
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### FILM & FILM CAMERAS NORMAN JEAN ROY ON THE MAGIC OF SHOOTING FILM

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“When you’re shooting film, you’re the only one seeing it. That sets the tone for the entire shoot,” says celebrity portrait photographer Norman Jean Roy.  
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A lot of photo editors want film, Crew says, and most will even cover the costs.  
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**Pocket**

Fine-art photographer [John Sanderson](#) documents American landscapes and landmarks of American infrastructure that have significance to the country’s political and social history. For his series “Railroad Landscapes,” which follows the tracks of once essential interstate rail lines and smaller commuter rail lines, Sanderson, who is based in New York City, carried 8×10 and 4×5 film cameras to tunnels cut into buttes and to the train platforms that are now abandoned or overshadowed by more modern buildings that have grown up around them. For his series “National Character,” he captured structures across the U.S. His photos of old smokestacks and water towers, made during the golden hour, recall paintings by Charles Sheeler.

“When I am out photographing, I take photos when I respond strongly to the place,” he says. “I like to go out in certain kinds of light and weather conditions in these places. That’s an important element in the photograph.” Sanderson believes the deliberative process of shooting with large-format cameras enhanced his observation. “I felt myself dwelling in these places longer, and letting the experience sink in,” he says. “Working with large format, it slows me down and I make work that has a depth to it that I haven’t really gotten with other formats.”

Sanderson, who has been shooting professionally since 2008, was first introduced to large-format photography in high school art classes. Over the years, he has worked with Horseman and Ebony cameras, but has settled on using an Arca-Swiss camera. “It’s a traditional monorail camera, but light enough for what I need.” His goal when he looks through the groundglass is to capture detail in every part of the frame. “That’s one of the things that’s instrumental in working with these cameras. I find myself noticing details that I would miss in smaller formats.”



“Explorers, Egmont Key, Florida,” from Sanderson’s series “National Character,” which he shot on a large-format monorail camera. © John Sanderson

He shoots both color slide and color negative film. “If it’s a very flat scene, with not much range, in terms of contrast, then I’ll shoot with a slide film, just because it gives me a little more contrast in the photo which I like.” He typically uses Fuji Provia slide film. He uses color negative from Kodak, he says, for images “with a wider exposure range, like a silhouetted tree.”

On his road trips, he enjoys “the suspense” of waiting to see how his photos turn out. To process his film, he uses Duggal in New York City. He does his own scanning, using a Howtek 4500 drum scanner. Scanning “can be a challenge and time consuming,” he says.

Sanderson also does his own printmaking—which he enjoys. “I really feel akin to the printmakers of the past and the idea of the fine-art print as the final statement of the artist,” he says. When he’s adjusting color or contrast in the print, he revisits his memories of the place he photographed: “These include how I felt at the time, the perception of contrast, colors and even the difficulties of the process,” he says. “I try to stay true to the naturalism of the place.” He sells editions of his prints in sizes that start at 17 x 20 and go up to 50 x 60. For an exhibition of “Railway Landscapes” at the New York City Transit Museum, he made several 40 x 50-inch prints and two panoramics at 30 x 80 inches.

**“I find myself noticing details that I would miss in smaller formats.”**

— John Sanderson

While film is essential to much of his fine-art work, Sanderson has been using digital cameras for certain projects since 2017, when he worked for six months as the official ranch photographer at Brush Creek Ranch in Carbon County, Wyoming. He had been an artist-in-residence at the ranch two years earlier and was eager to return. Photographing animals and people at the ranch, “I needed instant feedback and didn’t have time to process film,” he explains, so he started shooting with a Sony mirrorless camera. Back in New York City, he’s continued to use it to do street photography and a new project he’s begun on the Staten Island Ferry. When shooting digitally, he says, he sometimes turns off the camera’s live view. “If I’m looking to the camera’s screen, I become disconnected from making photographs,” he says. “Large-format photography taught me how to see a scene before photographing it.”

This spring, Zatarra Press is publishing his book on [Carbon County](#), which will include both his film and digital images. “It mixes images with the speed and quickness of the small camera and the detail of the large format,” he explains. He observes, “The great thing about photography is you have all these different tools you can use for different subjects.”

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