

By Douglas Strahan >> Photography By Arthur Meyerson

(O)ne of the most respected and sought-after commercial shooters around, Arthur Meyerson has been in this game for more than 30 years. The consummate professional, Meyerson takes his craft on the road, producing commercial work for a variety of companies and clients. Between shooting gigs and a pair of ambitious book projects, he also maintains a busy teaching schedule, educating up-and-coming photographers as they struggle to find their place in the photographic firmament. What we found surprising about Meyerson and his images, however, is the fact that he continues to shoot almost all of his commercial work on film.

Says Meyerson, "It's a comfort-zone issue. When you're working for a client on location, you better get the shot, and I'm more comfortable doing that with film. In fact, I've turned down jobs when the client needed 100-percent digital work because I simply wasn't confident in my ability to deliver up to my standards."

Mixing It Up

The path to a completely digital workflow is a unique journey for every photographer.

Arthur Meyerson's road traverses the world as he looks for the graphic, visually captivating images his clients have come to expect.





Arthur Meyerson's imagery falls into two distinct categories: commercial work and personal projects. Although he has differing approaches to each, at a glance you can see a common visual sensibility running through the photographs. Meyerson produces rich, graphic and strongly colored pictures, and his ability to do so consistently—no matter where he travels or for whom he's working—keeps his phone ringing with job offers.

While this surprised us at first, of course, it makes perfect sense. Meyerson was brought up with film and he has mastered its subtleties to the very highest level. As he works to migrate to digital, a full shooting schedule, combined with clients that continue to ask for film, keep him from diving headfirst into a full digital workflow.

Discussing his work, Meyerson says, "It's hard for me to sell [my clients] on digital, particularly when I'm still trying to figure it out for myself. My personal work has been

moving heavily digital for some time. I'm fortunate to be working closely with people at Nikon to help me become more proficient. On a personal level, I want to experiment, but not for the work that pays the bills. I want and need to be completely comfortable."

There's much more to digital than the capture side, of course, and when Meyerson says he's working to become more proficient, he's most referring to work with a digital camera. Once he shoots film for a client, depending on who



Considering himself a picture-taker rather than a picture-maker, Meyerson arrives at a job without any preconceptions as to what he'll find there. He relies on his ability to see a photograph in what he has been given rather than constructing an image that was preplanned and could have a forced feeling. Meyerson's simple compositions have an immediate impact on the viewer. While he works primarily with film capture for commercial work, he's doing most of his personal images with digital capture. Between his clients and Meyerson's own comfort zone regarding working with a completely digital workflow, he hasn't shaken film for the work that pays the bills.

the client is and what they need, he's just as likely to scan the images and send CDs as send the slides as they are.

Meyerson is constantly traveling on assignment. "Ninety-five percent of my work is on location," he says. "I shoot with a variety of gear, letting the nature of the work dictate the tool I use. I have everything from Nikon digital SLRs to Nikon 35mm SLRs to Hasselblads and even an 8x10 view camera. Because I'm not fully up to speed on digital, I'd need to have the budget to bring a digital-savvy assistant with me if I was shooting the job digitally.

However, when I travel on assignment, I always try to do some personal work and for that I bring a digital SLR. The digital camera allows me to experiment in a way I can't with film. I think that's the greatest single thing about shooting digital—the instant gratification of being able to see what you get as you get it."

Particularly on location, Meyerson refers to himself as a picture-taker rather than a picture-maker: "I'm more involved with capturing what's in front of me than creating something that's not there. That's just how I like to work."

Following in that vein, Meyerson admits that he isn't heavily involved in large-scale Photoshop manipulation. He uses Photoshop as a tool to bring an image to what he saw rather than trying to build an image that was never there.

Meyerson's approach as a picture-taker stems from the route he has taken to get to where he is now. As a journalism major in college, he was forced to take a basic black-and-white photography class. For the first time, he learned the depth of photography and the technical aspect of crafting an image in the darkroom. Combined with his exposure to the great photography magazines of the time (*Life* and *National Geographic*), a fascination with photography took root in Meyerson, even though it wasn't what he was doing to make a living.

After this period, Meyerson met a man who would come to have a major impact on his life as a mentor and friend, Ernst Haas.

Recalls Meyerson, "I took a workshop from Ernst in Japan and it was a life-changing moment for me. Haas was a philosopher, an artist, a poet and a photographer, and he was able to bring all of these disciplines together and present ideas photographically."

After the workshop, Meyerson and Haas kept in touch and maintained a friendship that lasted until Haas' death in 1986. "I try to carry on a lot of what I learned from him," he says.

Speculating on how Haas would have felt about digital, Meyerson notes, "He would have loved it for the ability to make affordable, archival color prints at the fine-art level. In Haas' time, top-quality color prints were made with dye-transfer, which was simply out of the reach of almost everyone. Haas also used to say that you shouldn't judge a photographer by the film he uses. While he was speaking about the debate between color versus black-and-white, this same idea carries through to digital. It's not about film or digital being a better medium; it's about using the best tool for your vision."

It's clear that Meyerson's adherence to film isn't out of loyalty to the medium as much as it's about using the tool with which he's most comfortable. That said, there's also another issue involved.

"You can get on the digital highway, but if you don't



Whether he's shooting personal or commercial images, Meyerson's approach remains the same. He always brings all of his artistic talents to bear on a project. In this way, he's not an automaton, cranking out formulaic photographs. It's his sense of pure seeing that keeps his clients booking Meyerson for work, and that's a responsibility he takes seriously.

know where your exit is, you can end up staying on it forever,” says Meyerson. “Jay Maisel refers to this manipulation phenomenon as digital’s slippery slope.”

It’s all too easy to get caught up in the process of digital and lose a sense of what it is you’re trying to achieve. Photoshop offers so many incredibly powerful tools that you can end up doing things with the software for

their own sake. When that happens, you’ve lost track of what it was that you were trying to do in the first place. Before you know it, you’ve spent hours, even days, taking an image on a road that has no end.

To avoid being sucked down that vortex, Meyerson prefers to do as much as possible in-camera. “Getting it right in-camera is a very difficult thing to achieve,” says Meyerson. “It’s about great seeing.”

By getting the shot right when he presses the shutter button, he avoids the fallacy of “fixing it in Photoshop.” Meyerson happily uses Photoshop, but not as a crutch to repair images that he failed to get right when he was on location. He uses the software to make his image look like the scene he originally wanted to take.

As for his style of photography, Meyerson says, “More and more, I’m trying to simplify. Sometimes, I have to create something on a shoot, but I much prefer to take what’s given. I also try to avoid preconceptions. Often, after you arrived, you’d be disappointed when a location doesn’t match what you expected. I find that I can do better by evaluating what’s given to me and then doing my best with that.”

Beyond the constant flow of commercial work, Meyerson continues to produce a broad array of personal imagery as well. He’s in the process of bringing out a pair of books—one on working cowboys, the other a mid-career retrospective of color photography. While Meyerson believes that the pro has a responsibility to bring all of his or her artistic talents to bear on a commercial job, he’s also a believer in balancing commercial work with personal work, such as his cowboy project.

Arthur Meyerson is a perfect example of a respected, working professional photographer who’s at a crossroads. While he continues to shoot film for clients like Coca-Cola and Nike, he’s increasingly moving toward digital in his personal work. He’s working hard at becoming more proficient with digital capture and a digital workflow, but his uncompromising approach to his work has kept him in the business of working with film for now. For each photographer, the move to digital is a different journey, and Meyerson is taking his time merging onto that highway. **DPP**

To see more of Arthur Meyerson’s photography, visit www.arthurmeyerson.com.