"You find yourself in a balancing act between control and luck."

TOSS YOUR CAMERA
AN INTERVIEW WITH CAMERA TOSSER RYAN GALLAGER

Ryan Gallagher is not the first person to open a shutter and toss a camera in the air. But he brought the technique to a whole new generation of photographers when he started the Camera Toss blog and Flickr group. He took time out of his busy schedule of displaying his work internationally and being interviewed by every media organization out there to answer some questions for us.

Please tell us about yourself.

My name is Ryan Gallagher and I am 28 years old. I am currently living and working in Austin, Texas. My backgrounds are in design and the arts, specifically lighting design for theatre. I often work as a lighting technician for theatre productions in Austin and it is still my primary occupation despite my growing interest in pursuing photography and my art more and more seriously. I had been exploring photography off and on with film equipment, but it wasn't until recently that I got my hands on some cheap digital cameras that camera toss experimentation became a more constant pursuit.

How did you get started with camera tossing?

I spent a lot of time awake at night around Austin, and capturing pictures at night was something my inexpensive digital camera was horrible at. But the one thing it could do was capture light-trails during exposure. I, like every photographer, had played with what is often considered "light painting." These images, although fun, really didn't hold any lasting appeal for me, but I continued to experiment with it and one day was throwing my camera out of my hands to achieve the motion. It was these first "free-flight" results that struck me as containing a representation of motion that was extremely compelling. There was something about the elegant lines that were only possible when the camera motion proceeded undisturbed by the photographer.

What draws you to camera tossing?

The fact that the physics of the flying camera can be captured so elegantly. It is this organic aspect of the camera toss photography, lacking in most light painting and long exposure work, that continues to draw me and keep me exploring it.

Why did you start the Camera Toss site and Flickr group?

The group and blog were a product of my interest in the dynamic way in which photography communities feed off each other, specifically on Flickr. I wanted to put the idea out there and see what the rest of the community (and now the public) would do with it. I think a huge part of any art is in the idea. And sharing the ideas is what leads to interesting development and application of the it.

The reactions from friends and most other photographers has been highly encouraging. The informal way in which the work can be viewed leads to some criticism from the traditional photography community, and some are just completely resistant to any abstract art or photography. But, on average, the response has been encouraging, even bridging into other disciplines. I am going to be working with the fashion designer Kristin Hensel on her next season. It is this type of response that I find the most rewarding and interesting.

What's the biggest misconception about camera tossing?

That camera tossing is a product of amateurish discovery of "classic" long exposure motion-blurred light painting techniques. I can't speak for everyone, but this is certainly not what drives my interest. There have even been experts quoted in the press saying they used to goof off this way too – get stoned and put the camera on the dashboard of a car, for example.

That's not why the original photographers or myself found it so fascinating. We had all done that before too, and it indeed was old hat. But the exploration of the idea involving a specifically a thrown camera was new enough, and results unique enough, that we felt there was a lot to explore. Just because a form of photography is fun should not prevent it from also being taken seriously. Working with light in such a direct way is getting back to the basics of photography.

This issue is all about happy accidents and serendipity. How does this theme apply to camera tossing?

Camera tossing requires embracing serendipity, chance, and pseudo-random processes as a tool rather than something to avoid. Gaining experience with the technique, you realize you still retain a great deal of control. It is not entirely as random as one might expect. Your environment can be manipulated just like any other photograph. Focus and depth of field still play a huge factor. And even exposure length matters a great deal.

Often people clump almost all longer exposures into one category, but with camera motion this rapid, subtle changes in exposure length have drastic results on the final composition. And it is really a camera toss composition that inherits most of the serendipity – you can throw your camera certain ways to give certain compositional flavors, but in the end there are just too many variables surrounding that action and timing of the exposure to consider it entirely intentional. Instead, you find yourself in a balancing act between control and luck.

What's next for you?

Camera tossing has been a fountain of inspiration for me personally. I have numerous other projects planned that involve investigating aesthetics in ways I never would have imagined prior to my experiences with this. Camera tossing has ignited a fire under my muse and there seems to be no end in sight.

I had my first public solo premiere and sold my first prints due to camera toss, but what I value even more is that it has fueled my creativity and imagination. I can only hope it has done the same for all the others exploring the idea. ■
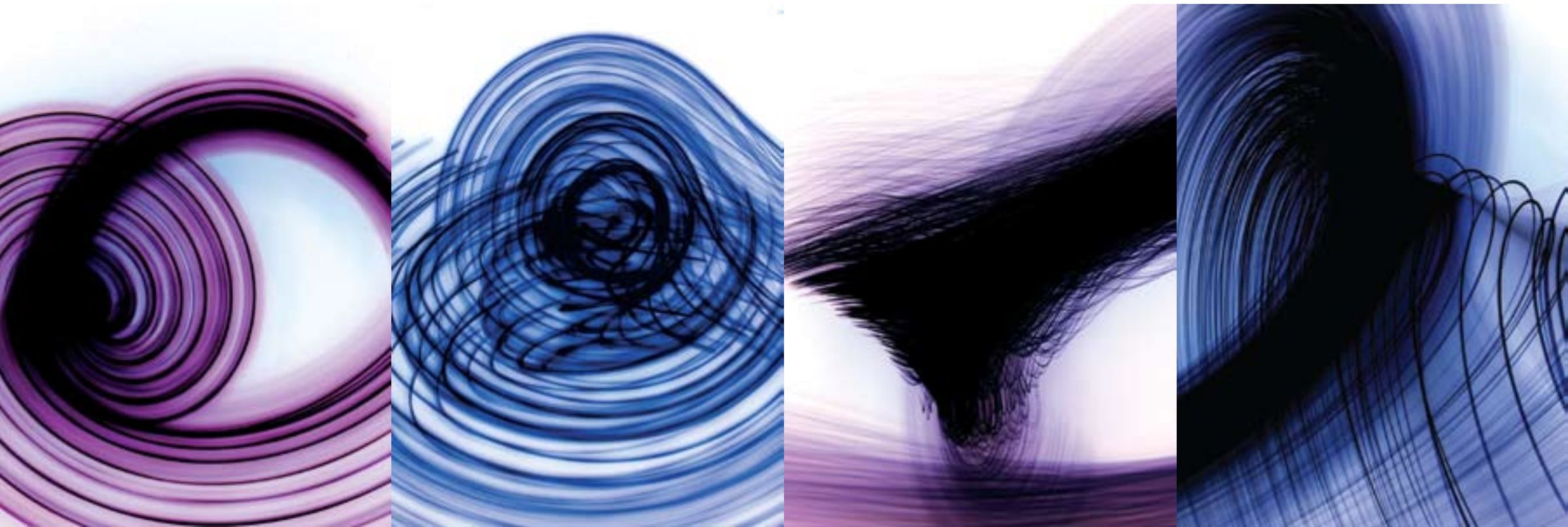
HOW TO CAMERA TOSS BY RYAN GALLAGER

It's simple! Just take pictures while throwing your camera. Use trial and error to hone your results. There's a whole spectrum of directions you can take it from there.

The Basics

1. Get camera (film or digital).
2. Find a subject (they are everywhere).
3. Use the timer function or a long exposure.
4. Depress the shutter button.
5. Throw your camera into the air just before the shutter opens.
6. Catch camera (optional).
7. Process film (if you're shooting film).
8. View and enjoy.

Why should you do this?

Logically, you shouldn't. But the world is not always logical. Here are some reasons why people enjoy camera tossing.

1. It's fun!
2. The results are often very pretty.
3. There is something hypnotic about the patterns it creates.
4. You never know what your photos are going to look like until you see them.
5. It's hard to understand without doing.
6. It often results in effects unattainable by any other photography technique.
7. Why not?

Camera Choices

Any camera is worth trying, and every camera will toss diff erently. Here are some good guidelines follow, but there are definitely exceptions to every rule.

1. Small and compact means easier to catch (if you intend to catch).
2. Inexpensive is good, considering the risk involved to the equipment.
3. Support of long exposures (aka "night mode") is desirable if you intend to capture more of the motion.
4. The ability to manually set exposures and other functions such as focus and aperture size allow for more specific technique and experimentation, but are not required.
5. Cameras with protruding lens barrels are more prone to being damaged, even with careful landings.
6. Battery and memory card compartments should be relatively shock-resistant. Many cameras exhibit shutdown problems due to loss of power when they are jolted too hard.
7. A timer function or noticeable shutter lag are useful features that allow you to get the throw off in time before the exposure starts. This can apply to both digital and film cameras.
8. The camera must complete the exposure, even if your finger leaves the shutter button. Bulb settings don't work.
9. If you intend to use a the camera's strap to prevent it from falling, make sure it is attached to a very strong part of the camera. These often aren't designed for preventing intentional throws, just accidental drops.
10. The lens' location will affect the images it creates. The more centered, the tighter your loops and spirals can be. More offset lenses will produce more wobbly, but equally interesting, results.
11. The ability to disable the flash is important if you intend to do night throwing without draining your batteries. If you can't turn it off, try covering it with tape.
12. A whole spectrum of compact digitals have been tossed successfully: digital SLRs, hybrid DV camcorders, and a smattering of film cameras including Lomos and even a Polaroid! Every camera has its own quirks and benefits.

Remember: the best cameras to toss are ones you can afford to destroy. If you undertake this activity, you are playing with fire. Eeventually you *will* drop your camera. Whether it survives or not depends largely on the equipment and conditions.

Throw and Motion Styles

The object here is not height. Camera Toss is about applying motion to the camera that is otherwise impossible if you keep it in your hands. A short wildly spinning throw is one good example. Experiment with as many types of throws as your camera seems to allow. Some common ones are: flipping end over end where the lens sweeps a full 360 degrees or more, spinning on the lens axis facing the subject, chaotic (a mixture of motion), and flat (simple up and down with as little rotation as possible).

Also consider that lateral motion plays a part, simple up and down throws are a good starting point, but other results are possible if the camera and lens are traversing a subject while spinning. For serious traversal throws, a partner might be needed for catching, or a very soft landing zone so that you don't have to chase the flying camera. A little bit of traversal goes a long way!

Fluidity and Non-Fluidity

Perfectly fluid patterns in camera tossed images are a beautiful thing, and this is a result of your hands not affecting the camera's free motion while it is flying during exposure. For truly fluid results,

I CAMERA TOSS BECAUSE ...

Manual cameras are all about control. Controlling the situation, controlling the light, controlling the final outcome. Throwing the camera in the air releases all of that control and allows for some wonderful spontaneous photos that most people are too controlling to get.
– Heather Lickliter
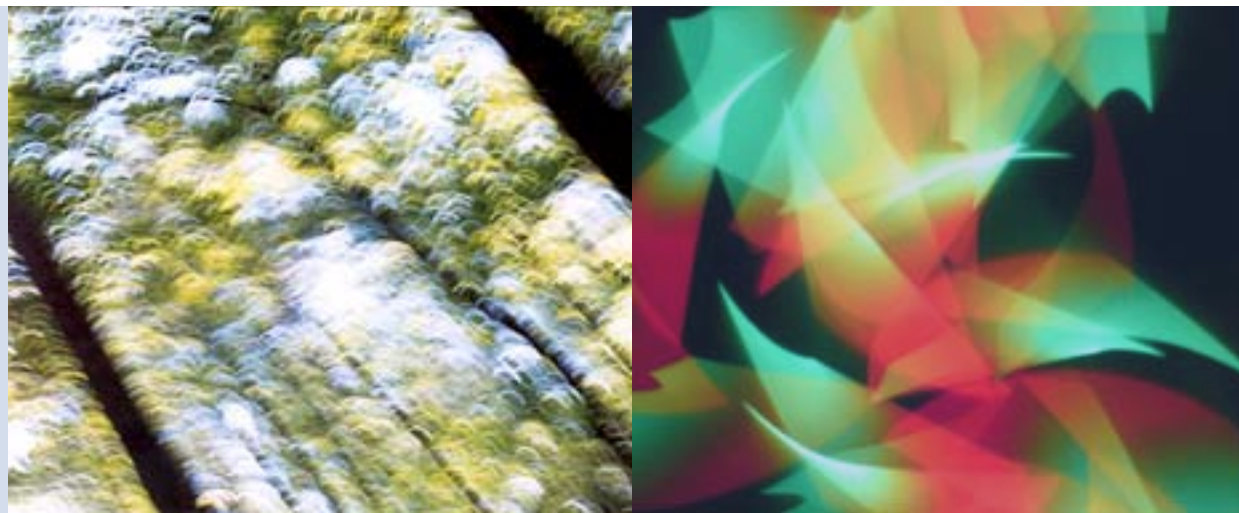
I had a half-broken camera which would have gone unused otherwise. I gave it a go and got hooked. It was like no other photography I'd ever experienced. There is a tasty and unpredictable element to it. I can try my hardest to conjure a particular image I have in mind, yet I'll find something more random and more beautiful in the process.
– Raymond Watson

it is important that no light reaches the camera before it's airborne. If possible, adjust exposure times accordingly or experiment with using your hand to cover the lens before launch. This technique has been used to produce fluid results with exposures as long as 15 seconds, granted the actual time light was entering the lens was much shorter.

Non-fluid elements can create interesting effects, too. Often the beginning or end of the toss are apparent as anomalies in the otherwise fluid image. Other strange things can cause anomalies, such as hanging on to the neck strap while throwing or the camera bouncing off the ceiling accidentally.

Another interesting example of mixed fluidity is the "delayed throw." Using a relatively long exposure, start as if you were taking a normal picture, but somewhere during the exposure send it flying! This often has the effect of capturing a bit of unfocused reality while still providing enough airtime to get an image based on chance results.

Similar but much more dangerous is to leave the flash on. The flash will capture an instant of reality in the middle of the fluid blurry smear, but catching a camera that has just blinded you can be very difficult.

Just Catch It

If you have a camera you don't care a whole lot about, just toss and catch it. Being able to do the simple throw and catch confidently enables you to explore this technique while you are out and about, not just in prepared environments at home. Practicing with non camera objects may actually help you with this. I imagine that part of my early success was due to that I am also a pretty competent juggler, certainly a wonderful training exercise for all this.

Alternative Landing Zones

A functional approach is to set up a soft landing surface like a bed. This allows you to ignore catching entirely and just focus on the throwing. Outdoors, tall grass has been employed as a precaution, but often leads to very dirty optics and cleaning between shootings.

Use your imagination! There are lots of ways to create a portable system for safe landings. If you have friends with you, try stretching a blanket between them to catch the camera.

Landing or Crashing

Regardless of your method for catching, there's always some strain applied to the equipment. How this affects the camera depends on the model.

Doing this successfully is about using equipment with as few structural weaknesses, and employing a method that stays below the threshold of "crash" relative to what that equipment can take. Cameras certainly were not designed for this, and even in doing it safely it's likely you will notice slight design flaws. But no camera designer really expected anyone to put them through these extremes.

If you use your most expensive equipment, take as much care as humanly possible. Use a polarizing filter to protect lens glass, perhaps even leave the lens hood on to provide a first impact surface other than the optics. On single lens reflex cameras the lens mount is probably the weakest point, and long heavy lenses should be avoided.

What to Shoot

Experiment! Often things that don't seem particularly interesting can produce lovely results. Here are three ideas.

1. Lights in the Dark

A bright light in a dark room lends itself nicely to long exposures that produce sweeping fluid lines and smears. The structure of the toss can often be revealed through repetitive or linear light sources. Try rope lights or neon tubes at night.

2. Daytime Scenes

More and more camera tossing is being done in daylight, too. There is a different effect achieved by a rapidly spinning camera and much shorter exposures. On some digitals, especially the DV camcorder and camera phones, an insane degree of image warp results, separate from any blur, if the rotation of the optical path is fast enough.

3. Other Subjects

Worthy subject matter is evolving as we speak. Once you've learned the effects of tossing your camera more and more things come to mind that might be worthy exploring. The general rule is that the composition is controlled by physics, but you have direct control over the palette available when it comes to color, texture, and even very slightly the forms that result. So look around you, try to think about things not as a picture, but as a painting created from just those aspects.

I did it! Now what?

Enjoy the results! And if you like them, we encourage you to share them in the Flickr Group (*flickr.com/groups/cameratoss*) and visit the Camera Toss blog (*cameratoss. blogspot.com*) for news and updates. ■