

FAKE IT LIKE A POLAROID PICTURE

Apps enable anyone to be a "retrographer" today – making photos with an artificial veneer of soft-focus nostalgia. Is retro the true future of popular and fine-art photography?

No doubt you've seen it, and maybe you've even done it. On the internet, at the bar, in the club – smartphone owners snapping happily away, and then networking their sepia, analogue-effect creations onto Facebook or Flickr. Instagram and Hipstamatic are the two most popular apps that enable users to create their own retro images at the touch of a button. Increasingly popular with millions of iPhone, Blackberry and Android owners worldwide, the devices offer the opportunity to fake a nostalgia that was never present in the image to begin with.

And while not to detract from his other achievements, you could call it the Ryan McGinley Effect writ large. The 35-year-old American photographer forged a considerable career out of creating nostalgic, romantic visions in celluloid. With his use of filters, double exposures and beautiful young models, McGinley's work successfully recreates moments that most of us probably wished we'd experienced at some point in our youth: sun-bleached, dreamlike, hedonistic and carefree.

In contemporary photography practice as in mass smartphone usage, he's far from alone. Debora Mittelstaedt, a German fashion photographer living and working in Brooklyn, infuses warm tones into her work

to create a breezy, summer-in-the-Seventies feeling. There's Stefanie Schneider, a German photographer working between Berlin and Los Angeles, who applies a retro, analogue optic to her work in order to give the impression of faded film stills. In her series "Suburbia", the filter of nostalgia is so emphatic that it's almost impossible to determine, at first glance, which decade the images came from.

The same applies to the work of the Danish photographer Adrian Delafontaine, whose works recall those of the early Larry Clark: fed-up-looking friends who appear as bored with the subculture they are part of as much of the rest of their life. His untitled 2009 image of a long-haired young man on a bed could have come straight out of a Seventies midwestern photo album.

There's something similar at work beyond the fields of documentary and youth photography, in landscape work: Neil Atherton's spotty film project "Speckled", which was shot on out-of-date Polaroid, successfully turns contemporary images of bleak, grey blocks of buildings into a romanticised vision of the Eighties quotidian.

It's an irony that photography's recent mania for the retro optic is inspired by analogue technologies that

are themselves fast disappearing: earlier this year Kodak filed for bankruptcy, having sold its last roll of 35mm film in 2009, just when the last plates of Polaroid were also sold (The Impossible Project, a Netherlands-based start-up, recently bought Polaroid machinery and now offers a range of the film to celluloid retrography connoisseurs). Yet the analogue effect – the urge to retrofit images with a romantic history that never happened – is stronger than ever, regardless of the technologies that enable it.

It's understandable: the contemporary urban world is bleak and difficult to look at, never mind live in. To coin a phrase, the pretty, romantic past is a nice place to visit – and an even better place to be a photographer, pro or am, analogue or digital, smartphone or neo-Polaroid. There is, after all, only so much brutally-exposed, camera-verité work our future-shocked eyes can take – *Sleek*



Clockwise from top left: STEFANIE SCHNEIDER, *very berry cosmo*, 2004. *untitled*, 2004. *girl friends 2*, 2004. *bourbon*, 2004. *wedding day*, 2004, 50 x 60 cm. *untitled*, 2004. All other images 60 x 80 cm, editions of five each, from the series *suburbia*. © VG BILD-KUNST.

