

Flickr Fever

Local shutterbugs shoot Philadelphia's story one picture at a time.

by Natalie Hope McDonald

Published: August 5, 2008

Last month at West Philly's Studio 34, where yogis practice their downward dog in stocking feet, a contingency of local online photographers met face-to-face, many for the first time since joining Flickr.com. While some members prefer a solitary approach to online photo sharing (myself included), a few enthusiastic shutterbugs regularly step out from behind Internet nicknames like "Miss Plum" and "MikeWebkist" to trade secrets on the best locations to shoot, and accompany each other on urban treks throughout the city.

For last month's picture swap at Studio 34, the first of its kind in which an actual space was rented as opposed to meeting in parks and people's living rooms, more than a dozen local Flickr folks of all ages came prepared with lighting, latest prints and, not surprisingly, their digital cameras. (For most hardcore Flickrdelphians, leaving the house without a camera is akin to walking out the door without pants.)

With their work displayed on windowsills, tables and the floor, photographers swapped prints, each with contrasting and complimentary views of Philadelphia ranging from the beautiful to the sublime. According to a few of the attendees, it was like seeing the city for the first time through a dozen sets of eyes. "We thought it would be a great chance to invite all of our Flickr contacts to hang out," says Audrey Gray, a 39-year-old magazine editor living near Clark Park who helped organize the event. "It was like an über-temporary exhibit on-the-floor. Everyone went home with someone else's print." Gray admits many of the photographers also took the opportunity to shoot each other, making it one of the most well-documented meetups ever. In the days following, dozens of photos from the swap ended up online.

Like many photographers there that day, Gray started shooting film in her 20s. It wasn't until she bought her first digital camera at age 34 that she began sharing her often-romantic photographs online. "I got on Flickr in the early days," says Gray, "before it was sold to Yahoo! With Flickr, I could hide behind my own very individual definition of beauty. If people were drawn to some photo I took of curling guitar strings or of the morning light on a wrecked bed, those were the sort of people I might want to get to know."

Working with Gray to plan the meetup was fellow Flickr photog Addie Fuller, a 32-year-old Penn employee who also lives in West Philadelphia. Fuller and her fiancé, Seuss Hawkeye Metivier, 35, met at the first-ever Flickr meetup in Philadelphia several years ago. "No one who RSVPed showed up except for me and my now-fiancée, Addie," says Metivier, who, for obvious reasons, considers the event a mad success — they plan on marrying later this year.

The couple, who regularly photograph each other and their dogs, also traipse around the city documenting its often ignored urban landscape, focusing on Philly's homegrown grit and decay (a common theme among locals). With her Canon 40D in tow, Fuller says, "I tend to focus a lot on patterns, shapes and colors. I also love to shoot gritty, crumbling, abandoned places around the city." Fuller was one of many photographers who participated in a group show at Yards Brewery last year, showing her series of a dilapidated Divine Lorraine Hotel. Thanks, in part, to feedback from other Flickr users, she and Metivier have also since started their own photography business, shuttersquids.com.



Michael Penn

LAY OF THE LENS: Photog Michael Penn prefers to work at night, focusing not on its residents but the city itself.

[\(CLICK IMAGE FOR LARGER VERSION\)](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



Fuller has met upward of 50 local photographers since joining Flickr, including Michael Cramer, 35, from Northwest Fairmount. Cramer, a computer programmer who moonlights as a photographer, belongs to several photo clubs online and off, including The Lightroom, a co-op in Northern Liberties.

Cramer says Philly is many a photographer's muse, and for good reason. "It's a big, architecturally and economically diverse city," he says. "You go to New York and it's like, yeah, there are 10,000 pictures a day taken of the steaming coffee cup in Times Square. But a good shot of the rail yards outside 30th Street Station or Mustin Field down by the Navy Yard is unique."

Often joining other photographers for picture-taking treks and post-shoot beer, Cramer has documented everything from the now-demolished United States Gypsum Company plant in Southwest Philly to the abandoned Pennsylvania Avenue railroad tunnel. "Philly Flickr people always seem happy to wander around some run-down old rail yard," he says. "I'm just interested in how the past fits in with modern life. Not so much pining for something new or better, but accepting the city as it is."

Philly's character, in addition to revealing itself in images, also shows up in handles for plenty of Flickr-ites, like "Philly Penn," aka Michael Penn, a 39-year-old lensman in Old City.

"Being a Penn in Philadelphia was enough for me," he says, "but it has also been a race against time trying to capture the Philadelphia that I know before it changes too much." Diligence pays off: One of Penn's dignified photos of the Ben Franklin Bridge is being published in the September issue of *LensWork* magazine.

The Old City resident has spent much time shooting the bridge, including scenics from the walkway of the skyline, streets below and passing ships. "I always walk, and my average route is eight to 10 miles," says Penn, who prefers shooting at night without people in the scenes.

Unlike Penn, Jeremy Burger, a 33-year-old dog behaviorist and co-owner of The Philly Pack, prefers shooting solo in Center City. Burger, who works under the alias "Fen Branklin," has posted thousands of postcard-quality images of Philly online, everything from Independence Hall to the skyline and ordinary street corners. "The majority of my images are captured while walking my dog in and around Center City," he says. "I'd like to think that each image has its own story to tell."

Bruce Grant, a 60-year-old from Germantown, has also been chronicling Philly style. The former professor has been shooting for almost 40 years. "I post [on Flickr] pretty much every day," says Grant, who takes a morning train to 30th Street Station daily and walks back alleys and small streets hunting down his next photo series. For the past few years, he's been photographing air conditioners sagging on windowsills. He was attracted to them for their commonality and disdain. "They're unloved," he says.

Many near-obsessions create a pastiche of photographs that chronicle Philly. Images of South Philly row homes, canoodlers in Rittenhouse Square and the skyline all speak to Philly's past, present and future with a kind of quiet reverence. The sheer number of images taken by tourists and locals alike suggests a love for both Philly's public face and its prickly underbelly.

"I hope I give the impression that I see beauty in the city around me," says Fuller, "even when things aren't necessarily pretty. I think I could spend a lifetime shooting the city and not run out of fodder."



Seuss Hawkeye Metivier

[\(CLICK IMAGE FOR LARGER VERSION\)](#)

 [Click Here For More Images](#)



[\(editorial@citypaper.net\)](mailto:editorial@citypaper.net)

© Philadelphia City Paper