

CatLabs X FILM 80 II Review:

My first impressions of this film were unexpected, a new film, well new to me and a great film. The best I can find out is the film first hit the market, in 120 only, in 2019. There is almost no information available for this film. In this day of instant digital gratification, I do find it refreshing to find a new film being manufactured. Well, is this a new film, or is CatLabs film a rebranded film placed in CatLabs box?

The reviews of others, some good and some bad suggest this film is nothing more than a rebranded cheap Chinese film. So I searched the Internet for another 80 ASA film, sorry, too old to say ISO. The only 80 ASA film I am aware of is Agfa's Aviphot 80s film used in aerial photography. We know this film as Rollei Retro 80S, CatLabs 80X film certainly isn't Retro 80S as 80S film has a good deal of infrared sensitivity. I exposed 80X through a R72 infrared filter, the film after development was blank, and no infrared sensitivity. That said, the film does have some extended red sensitivity; reds photograph lighter as compared to Ilford's HP5, Delta or Kodak's Tmax films. With portraits, if a 25 red filter is used the flesh almost glows; I know of no other film, other than infrared, that causes this glowing. After processing, when I am dumping the used developer, the water is a very bright almost fluorescent green; I know of no other film with anti-halation dye waste that is this color.

So, in my opinion, I think I can categorically state this film isn't a rebranded film, rather it appears from my research and film testing that this film is indeed as advertised, a new film brought to market by CatLabs. Yes Catlabs needs a film manufacturer to produce the film for them, however, this is their film manufactured to their standards.

So is this a newer generation film, Tabular, or Cubic, like Tmax and Delta films or is this an older generation of film? This film certainly isn't a modern Tabular or Cubic film but an older style of film. In my testing this film has a look all it's own. The advertising states the film is based on Kodak's Panatomic-X film, which I can't verify, as I don't have any Panatomic-X film to test 80X against.

What I can state is this isn't a cheap Chinese knockoff or a cheaply manufactured film intended for budding photographers. I have tested 80X film extensively and find the film capable of the highest level of quality, good tonal range and fine grain. The statements from the manufacturer are very fine grain with lower contrast and wide tonal range; Panatomic-X film had fairly low contrast for a low speed film. In my testing this film like all other low speed films has a short toe on the characteristic curve and fairly sharp shoulder. The short toe and sharp shoulder create a film with more contrast than faster films like Tri-X or HP5. More contrast but controllable contrast. I find the grain on 80X to be fine not very fine; Tmax 100 has finer grain. I would place this film in the grain category of Pan-F or just a little bit more.

I hesitated testing this film as the samples I saw online had very high contrast with almost empty shadows. My testing shows 80X film when properly exposed and

properly processed to be very capable of creating high quality photographs with fully rendered highlights and shadows; very easy to use expansion and contraction controls. 80X film is a quality film suitable for any photographer wanting to use a slow speed film with fine grain. With all of my testing I did not find any coating errors or dust and lint imbedded in the film. I loved Efke films and very sorry they are gone, however Efke films did have, from time to time coating errors. I need to test further and will report my findings as I do so.

What bothers me about this film is there is absolutely no technical information from CatLabs about this film. After receiving my first 4x5 box of film I expected to find a technical information sheet in the box. When in the dark, as I opened the film, I felt a piece of paper that I thought was the technical sheet. However, when the lights were turned on the paper I felt was a sticker with CatLabs logo on it stating to shoot more film. This is certainly cute but not the needed technical information.

The information I was looking for was what is the spectral sensitivity of the film and how to correct for reciprocity failure? Is this a purely a panchromatic film or what is it an orthopanchromatic film. After exposing a sheet of film to a Kodak Q14 color step wedge I have found the film is neither panchromatic nor orthopanchromatic. Orthopanchromatic films like Efke's have a lower sensitivity to red. 80X shows a little more sensitivity to red as compared to current Kodak or Ilford films, hence the glowing of portraits with red filters. The film has virtually the same light sensitivity to tungsten light as it does to daylight.

What were my testing parameters? To test the actual ASA of the film, I placed my Wisner 4x5 camera on a tripod, evenly lit a Kodak gray card with daylight filtered tungsten spotlights and exposed 4 sheets of film to Zone 1, five stops underexposed, then bracketed by 1/3 stops. This is the threshold of the film and when read on a densitometer will determine the proper light sensitivity of the film. After testing I have determined the proper ASA, now called EI or exposure index of the film to be 64, 1/3 stop slower as compared to CatLabs information.

Next, how to process the film? The information that CatLabs does supply on their website is processing times for their film. I chose Rodinal at 1:50, as this slow film should look exceptional with the sharpness of Rodinal. I chose to hand process so I used Jobo's 4x5 film reels but used hand inversion not rotory; 3 gentle inversions for 10 seconds every minute. This is important, I process for scanning not printing in a darkroom, there is a significant difference between the two. It is my opinion that film scanners add contrast to our black and white films. For this reason I change my processing times to reflect a scanners contrast not an enlargers contrast. I test processing times as if I was going to use a condenser enlarger in the darkroom. My testing shows for scanning a processing time of 6.5 minutes at 72 degrees Fahrenheit. For a diffusion enlarger in a darkroom I would add approximately 20% to my developing time or a developing time of about 8 minutes. The times on CatLabs site I found to be much too contrasty for scanning.

So, what concerns do I have? First and foremost, absolutely no technical information about the film from CatLabs; if serious photographers are to use this film then reciprocity curves and spectral sensitivity are absolutely needed. Next is the box, sorry to complain about the 4x5 film box but the box I received was damaged in shipping. Yep, the box is so thin that the lower left hand corner of the box was folded up on itself, the film was fine, just the thinnest film box I have found. I much prefer a 3-part film box, yes more expensive but absolutely no concerns about film damage or light penetration. To protect CatLabs film from light, the box did have the film inside of two black plastic bags. There aren't film separation sheets in the box as stated so I can only assume the film is hardened enough to prevent scuffing from the sheets above.

The good, I absolutely love the film - a quality film capable of capturing world-class images. Good tonal range that is easy to use with expansion and contraction controls as used with the Zone System. Short developing times make things quick in the darkroom with a 5-minute fix. Fine grain, even with Rodinal 1:50; I scanned my 4x5 film and printed a 20x24, the grain while noticeable was still quite fine, I had to be very close to the print to see the grain in a filtered bald sky. Lastly, no coating errors were found in the film that I have tested. The film is very, very, inexpensive as compared to Kodak and Ilford films.

I can recommend this film to any photographer, beginning or advanced. Keep this film in your toolkit for a little different look as compared to all of the other modern films. Rodinal is exceptional with 80X, I used 1:50 for 6.5 minutes at 72 degrees Fahrenheit, with hand agitation, this is for scanning. The highlight contrast and density must be controlled for quality black and white film scanning. Purchase a box, give it a try, I do believe you will love the combination of 80X and Rodinal.

I know I will be photographing with this film in the future.

Brent Wood