

Model Behaviour

by Alexander Mustard and Kathryn Westaway

Imagine if your best friend went to their local branch of Toys “R” Us and bought a set of wax crayons and a colouring book! Stranger still when they got home they proceeded to fill in the pages, exactly as instructed. Always using the right colour, never crossing the lines. They claim they have produced a masterpiece, but are they really exercising their artistic creativity? It is safe to say that Vincent Van Gough has little to worry about.

Now imagine that your friend is into SCUBA. They have bought an underwater camera and a strobe. They have been on an uw-photo course. They want to photograph a diver. So they give their buddy a torch, find a bit of red coral and position their buddy in front of the sun. Just as they have been taught. They press the shutter. They have done everything right. Electronics motors wurr, computer chips do their magic: TTL quenches the strobe and the shutter snaps shut. The image is stunning. Dramatic. Polished. But is it artistic?

In this article we hope to convince you that the art of photographing people underwater is still largely unexploited and to encourage (and provoke) all of us to try to break new ground with our people pictures. “Wait a minute” we’re sure you’re saying, “People? Unexploited? I think not! What about the millions of pictures of divers?” Divers are indeed well photographed, but they remain an underused subject



Noah, Waterbaby. Black and white film will solve colour balance problems in the pool. Stopping down and using flash will remove the pool from your pool shots. Canon EOS 500, 28-70mm. (KW).

because we keep photographing them in the same way: never crossing the lines of our colouring books, always using the correct colours.

It seems that underwater photography has an unwritten rule that states we are only

allowed to take two types of diver images. The first is with the diver as a secondary subject, usually a silhouette: you know, quite small in the frame accompanied by the partners in creative crime, the torch and the sunburst. The second type is with

Mask reflections. Everyday diving equipment can be used in different ways in photos. Nikon F100, 17-35mm, 2 subtronic flashes aimed at crinoid not at diver, f8 on aperture priority. (AM)



the model as a complementary subject, lit from the front, mask facing the camera but eyes looking at the main subject, thus ensuring that their expression is illuminated (often through a large oval mask that would be the prized possession of the Historical Diving Society). These are undoubtedly strong, well liked images but much of the underwater world is well photographed these days, and such images are no longer bursting at the seams with artistic creativity.

The main limitation of photographing divers is that we are so well, photographing divers! Put more plainly there isn't much human left once we have added facemasks, regulators, wetsuits, hoods, jackets, cylinders and fins. Individuality, personality, identity are masked by diving equipment. Why should such characteristically human attributes be left out of underwater images? Being able to see the model's facial features means that we can get back to photographing individual people, not just the generic "diver".

So if divers lack personality, who else can we point our lenses at? Well, there

Skydiver. Taking a different viewpoint of a swimmer can create an abstract image that does not have to be underwater. Nikonos V, 15mm, f11 at 1/60th. (AM)



are lots of other people who get wet, what about snorkellers, surfers, sailors and swimmers? Down at the local pool there are high dives, races and a range of sports such as water polo, synchronised swimming, octopush (underwater hockey) and even canoeing.

It can be hard to get permission to enter the local pool with monstrous amounts of underwater camera gear, but it's all a matter of approach. Ask to photograph in a public session and be prepared to have the

leisure centre doors slammed in your face, but find a local club using the pool and they will often be queuing up for your lens. Homo sapiens is a pretty vain species when indulged in its hobbies; almost any group using the pool will usually be thrilled to get some shots of themselves. Just ask!

Swimming pools are great places to experiment and play with ideas, but the pool also throws up a new set of problems to overcome. Most pools have mixed lighting - sodium,

Synchronised. A more abstract view with a long exposure means that the colour balance of pool lighting adds pleasing warmth to this shot. Canon EOS 500, 28-70mm. (KW)

tungsten throw in some flash for good measure and the colour balance becomes a printers nightmare. Without unrealistic solutions, such as adding masses of studio lights, this jumble of colour temperatures is something we have to work with. Either we can go for black and white or be positive and use the warm colours for a creative effect. The white balance control of digital cameras is a real advantage in these situations.

Props are something else we can introduce in the pool. Props can look out of place with natural history subjects: a silk scarf would look a slightly strange with a shark, but can add appeal to a person pic. Fabrics and clothing take on a new character in the water. Water frees clothes from gravity transforming a boring white shirt into a diaphanous swirl around the model. Coloured material adds both vibrancy and texture to our pool shots. Seeing the effect of water on everyday items, such as clothing, is an subtle way of communicating the underwater world in our pictures.

The ocean shouldn't really be any different. However, when most of us get to a great dive site with a camera we want results. The fear of failure looms so large, that we lock our creativity away and will not break from our tried and tested techniques. It is quite common to hear photographers (including the authors) say that they are going on a "creative dive". Do we really need an excuse; surely every photographic dive should be creative? We should be constantly looking for new ways to photograph our fellow divers, investigating different interpretations of the



underwater experience. A simple example is that at the correct angle the plain of glass in a facemask will act as a mirror. As we look at and light subjects in different ways we will produce fresh images.

Two of the biggest draws to photography underwater should be the chance to create images that we could not get on land and the opportunity to capture the essence of the underwater world. And this doesn't mean just photographing fish! The way that water effects skin, hair, clothing, light etc are things that we should endeavour to record to communicate wateriness in our images. We can take advantage of the fact that our audience are



Getting in touch with the Ocean. Fingers point down from an air pocket in a wreck shown upside down. We are all familiar with the human body, and we should take advantage and photograph people in more abstract ways. Nikon F100, 17-35mm, 2 subtronic flashes f6.7 on aperture priority. (AM).

very familiar with the human body, concentrating on abstract compositions and form, and not the underwater equivalent of passport photos. When we are underwater both the photographer and model are free from gravity. What an advantage we have over land based photographers!

When you think about it, it is a crime that people are such an

underused photographic subject. People are pretty straightforward to find in the water and they are a lot easier to get to pose than fish are! Unless we are unfortunate enough to be on a contract photographing for a diving magazine, we really have no excuse for bottling up our creativity and sticking to formulaic people pictures. We hope that this article has

encouraged you to use the wrong colours from time to time and stray over the lines in your colouring books!

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