

Mastering Macro

By Brook Peterson

Macro photography is a favorite pastime of many underwater photographers. For some, it is the underwater macro world that captured their imagination in the first place. There are so many tiny aquatic critters that can be unbelievably beautiful, amazing, interesting, or just plain weird. Sometimes the strangeness defies reason, and we are compelled to show this through our photos to our friends, the land dwellers. I am a firm believer that “Good Things Come in Small Packages.” But how do you create an image with monster impact from a subject with such tiny proportions?

First Things First: Equipment

Without proper equipment we are at a disadvantage to show what we really see. This includes our ability to see the critters in the first place. I recommend a good mask with magnifying lenses. Much of the most beautiful detail may not be visible to us without the use of magnifying lenses. This leads to the use of magnifying lenses for the camera. A good macro lens is a must for any macro photographer. For

DSLR users, I recommend a 50/60mm or 100/105mm macro lens and their equivalent for mirrorless cameras. There are some compact cameras that have excellent macro capability, without the need for additional magnification, such as the OM TG-6.

In addition to the camera and housing, there are wet lenses that can enhance your ability to photograph the tiniest animals. I recommend Nauticam’s SMC or CMC diopter, but there are many brands of diopters that can be mounted to the camera’s housing. A diopter is basically a strong magnifying lens that allows you to photograph subjects much closer.

What makes a good photo great?

All good photos have three things in common; good or creative lighting, interesting composition, and they tell a story or show a behavior. These are the things you should be thinking of when making images. Be careful that you don’t fall into the trap of taking identification photos just to prove you saw something. It can be very exciting to see your first blue ring octopus and you may want to prove



Nikon D850 in a Nauticam housing with Retra Pro Strobes. 105mm micro Nikkor. 1/250th @ F18. ISO 320. Manual exposure.

it. So go ahead and take that ID shot, but then concentrate on making a beautiful image. Is there something you can do to isolate the subject from its background? Would it look better from a different angle? Is the subject “doing” something? i.e. hunting, mating, brooding, feeding, hiding?

Creative Lighting

The use of light is probably the most extensive and important aspect of art in any form but is especially



In addition to the camera and housing, there are some wet lenses that can enhance your ability to photograph the tiniest animals. I recommend Nauticam’s SMC or CMC diopter, but there are many brands of diopters that can be mounted to the camera’s housing. A diopter is basically a thick magnifying lens that allows you to photograph a subject at a greater than 1:1 ratio.



All good photos have three things in common; good or creative lighting, interesting composition, and they tell a story or show a behavior. These are the things you should be thinking of when making images.

Nikon D850 in a Nauticam housing with Retra Pro Strobes. 105mm micro Nikkor. 1/160th @ F18. ISO 100. Manual exposure.

important in macro photography. Light and the lack of light is often used in a photograph to isolate a subject from its environment.

For example, a subject that is lit will stand out from a background that is not lit. This can be accomplished by angling the strobes so that the edge of the strobe light falls on the subject, but not on the background.

Light spreads out from your strobes in the shape of a cone, so if your strobes are turned toward your camera housing, you can use just the outer edge of the light to brush the front of your subject, without lighting the area behind it. This can also be accomplished with one strobe. Place it above the subject and angle it back toward the camera.

Another great way to isolate a subject is with a snoot. A snoot reduces the angle of light so that the

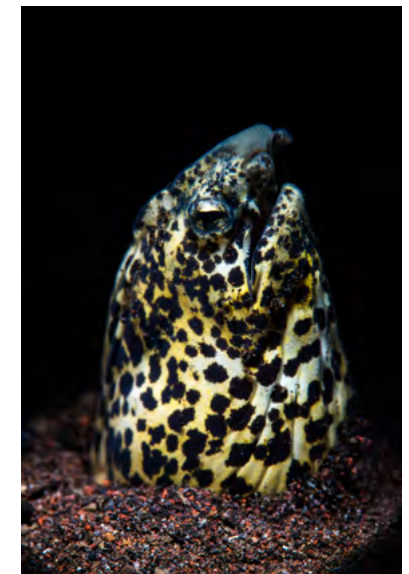
only thing illuminated is the subject itself. You can also use the fish's own shadow to help it "pop" out from its background. Use just one strobe from the side to cast a shadow that isolates its host.

Sometimes, just blurring the background by using a shallow depth of field is enough to isolate a subject. The point is, to think before you shoot so that your subject is the first thing someone sees when they look at your image.

Interesting Composition

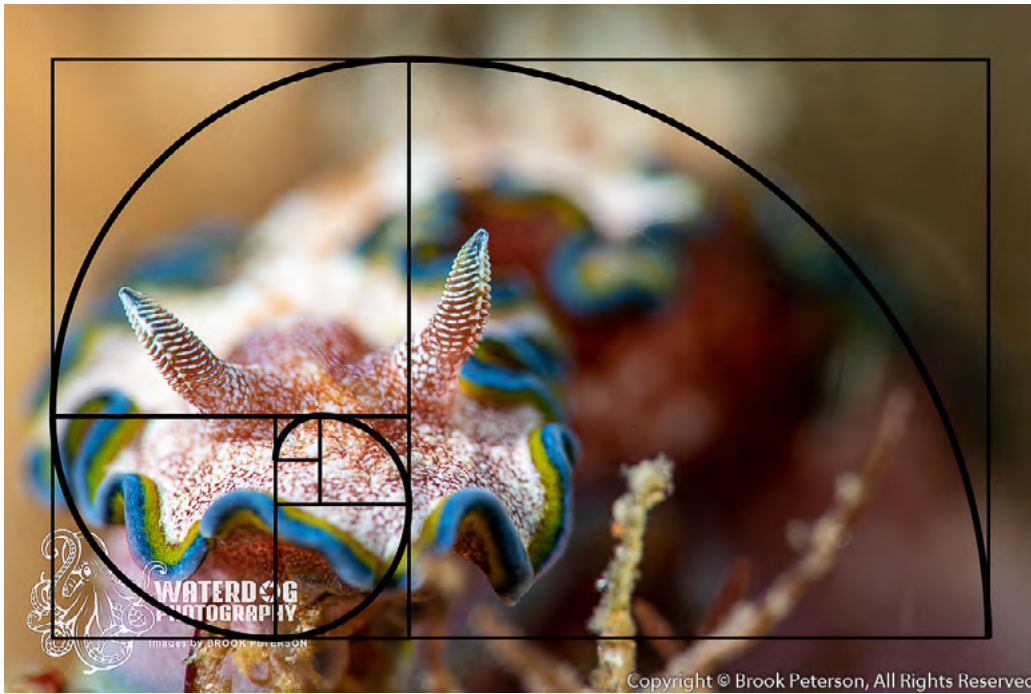
What is it that makes an interesting composition? Is it following composition rules, such as the rule of thirds, the golden spiral, diagonal composition, "s" curve and others? Is it framing the subject? What about leading lines? Using negative

Take a look at how the snake eel pops out from its environment when lit using a snoot (below) as opposed to two strobes (right).



space? How about camera position relative to the subject? The answer to all of these questions is yes.

That being said, it is important to note that the "rules" we use to govern our idea of good composition came after the fact. In other words, the world's greatest artists created what was in



their mind's eye first, and then several hundred years later, theorists devised "rules" to explain why the composition feels so good to modern viewers. You should listen to your instincts when composing an image but keep the theory of composition in the back of your mind to help you along.

Tell a Story

My father was a professional landscape photographer. When I began taking underwater images, he told me that the images I make should first be created in my mind, then with the camera.

At first, I was baffled because I thought there would be no way to predict how a sea animal might behave. It turns out, sea life is very predictable. The little critters can be found in their own distinctive habitats. Some of them yawn, all of them are trying to eat and reproduce and some of them are trying to disappear from sight.

The point is, I can predict a behavior, imagine the result I want, and then go diving with my very limited bottom time and get the result I want. Each of the following images were pre-imagined. Each took the majority of my bottom time to execute, but each produced the desired result. Learn about your



Nikon D850 in a Nauticam housing with Retra Pro Strobes. 105mm micro Nikkor. 1/250th @ F18. ISO 100. Manual exposure.

subjects, decide on a course of action, then go get a photograph that tells a story.

Macro photography can be one of the more challenging and also one of the most rewarding types of underwater photography. Lighting, composition and action are some basic techniques that you can develop to improve your images. Remember that art is something that provokes an emotional response in the beholder and you want your images to bring out that response in your viewers.

Keep this in mind, and your

photographs will become beautiful works of art that tell the stories of the tiniest life in the sea.

Brook Peterson

www.waterdogphotography.com

