

My journey

by Sandra Stalker

My first underwater camera was an epoque point and shoot film camera that I had picked up second hand in about 2003 with the dizzying heights of two settings: cloudy and sunny. It was probably more suited to tropical waters as colour images from my local Dorset dive sites were always a disappointment, brown on brown fuzz, so I resorted to shooting with black and white film as I could push the processing myself as I am an Art and Photography Technician at a college.

I then moved on to a digital compact a few years later and bought my first macro diopter which was a game changer for photographing nudibranchs as my previous camera couldn't get any closer than 1 metre. I am a bit of a nudibranch spotter nerd so I spent the next 15 years mostly taking ID shots so I could identify everything I saw on my dives. A good ID shot tends to be the absolute opposite of a creative shot with a flat on profile, front and top down with as much DOF as possible. I started to share my images as I loved showing people the amazing creatures we have on our coastline and built up a little following of armchair divers. It did end up with me taking the same picture of the same sponge under Swanage pier in the same flat way over and over for years and I was getting a bit bored at that point as I had recorded pretty much every species in Dorset.

In 2019 as a member of South coast divers on facebook I saw an ad for the Underwater Photographer of the Year competition and entered 3 images into British waters Compact, they weren't



Pinky. Sand goby at Sandsfoot. Canon G7xii in Ikelite housing. Backscatter miniflash x 2. F8.1/125 sec. ISO 250.

placed but that was the start of the change in my photography and the journey I am on now.

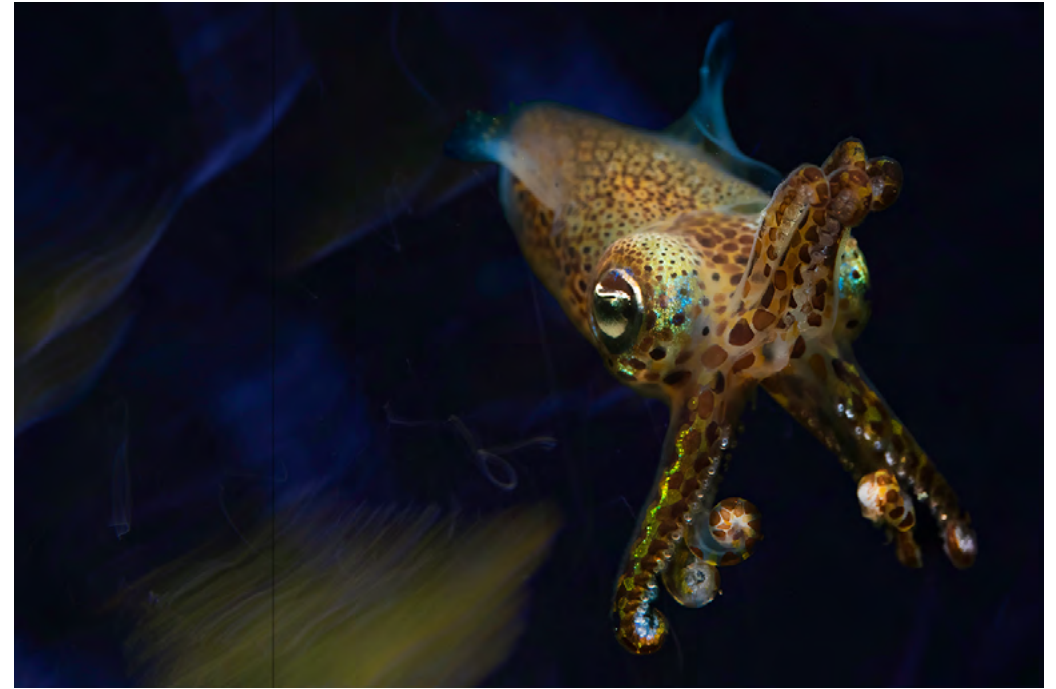
I was totally in awe of some of the amazing shots in the competition and how beautifully composed and artistic they were. Although I am trained in Art as an illustrator and Printmaker I never saw my underwater photography as anything other than a method of recording what I saw but after entering the competition it was like a switch had flicked and I got really excited; I wanted to produce

more artistic images that not only show off our fabulous UK creatures but also entice the viewer into that magical underwater world I am part of when diving. I aim to create images that go beyond the simple depiction of the creatures and draw you in as you view them, creating a narrative within the image or turning a common subject into something exotic.

I am lucky to live on such an amazing UK coastline that faces many directions as the UK



A crab enjoying solstice sunset, in the Fleet, Dorset. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter miniflash strobes. Lens Sony 28-60 with Nauticam wwwl1b wet wide lens. F16.1/125.ISO 400..



Space Invader. Bobtail squid at Newtons Cove. Canon G7xii in Ikelite housing. Backscatter miniflash x 2. F11. ¼ sec.ISO 400.

weather is a fickle beast and usually when one side or other is blown out with visibility like an oxtail soup there will be somewhere to get in, the viz may not be great but there's always something to see. I am also really lucky that my husband is also an underwater photographer and we have dived together for 24 years and started on this journey together and grown in it at the same time, this really helps as we are always in the water either diving, snorkeling or playing with rockpool shots together. It also helps to have someone to bounce ideas off; we have a book we write our

ideas for planned shots in. It helps that we both take a different creative approach to photography.

Not all of my shots are pre planned some are more spontaneous, some are luck, right place and time or an unexpected happy accident within an image, often many are a complete disaster as I'm always trying something new but that's the best way to push myself forward with my photography. The great thing is that where we shore dive, sites are only about a 5 minute drive from our house so I can try again if I have got something nearly right.



Midnight Raver. Green shore crab on a night dive, raving away, captured using a long exposure with a purple filter on a Backscatter video light and a snooted miniflash strobe. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with Backscatter miniflash 2 Strobe and Backscatter videolight and coloured filter. Lens Sony 28-60 with Nauticam wwwl1b wet wide lens.F18.1/6.ISO 200.

My purple crab image that was awarded in UPY British waters Macro this year is an example of that. The first of the crab shots was spontaneous, there wasn't much about on a night dive and I loved the way the green shore crabs that are so common and often ignored for that very reason, danced around in front of me. My first shots hadn't quite worked but were nearly there so I was able to review the images

and my settings at home, think about what I could differently and what I was trying to achieve and try again on another night dive. I often go for species that are common and overlooked by other divers as I find it really exciting to try and get a shot of them in a more unusual way.

I upgraded from my compact to a mirrorless Sony A7RIV about three years ago. There were

two reasons as I really did love my Canon G7Xii compact. Firstly my housing was failing and I was at a crossroads of what to do and secondly I think I had reached a point where I wanted to push my creativity forward by being able to change lenses on a camera and try new things. Ryan my husband had also just upgraded to the Sony and it made sense for us both to get the same camera so we could



King of the pier. A black faced blenny displaying his splendidness under Swanage Pier. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter miniflash 2 Strobes. Lens Sony 28-60 with Nauticam wwwl1b wet wide lens. F16.1/60.ISO 400.



Bloom: This image was taken whilst snorkeling where I came across a beautiful vivid red strawberry anemone on a concrete wall. In order to show off the beautiful red I shot up towards the surface and lit the background with a green (red and green should be seen, in my opinion) and then snooted the red. It took a few attempts to line it up as I couldn't see the camera screen as had it upside down. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter miniflash strobes one with coloured filter one with snoot .Lens Sony 28-60 with Nauticam wwwl1b wet wide lens. F16.1/100.ISO 320.

share lenses. This was a game changer for me and has really allowed me to experiment much more.

I am particularly enjoying playing with a series of vintage lenses I have as they give much more of a fairy tale otherworldly narrative for me which fits with my view of the underwater

world. My favourite is the optic only of a Trioplan 50. I thought it was a complete lens at a bargain price on ebay but was missing the helicoid when it arrived so I had no way of attaching it to my camera, or focusing but that didn't matter as I have no way of focusing it in my housing anyway.



Pearl in the folds. Stalked jellyfish on Kelp at Porthkerris, shot using a single strobe at a low angle to create shadow. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with single Backscatter miniflash strobe . Lens Sony 28-60 with Nauticam www1b wet wide lens. F18,1/125,ISO 400.



Sunset gazer. Nudibranch in Portland harbour gazing into the sunset. Using glitter board as backdrop behind the weed and a vintage lens to achieve the bokeh. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter miniflash 2 Strobes. Lens part Trioplan 50 optic only (home bodged together). F2.9.1/200.ISO 100.



I bought an M42 microscope adapter tube which I then gaffa taped the lens into and it works fantastically. The tube acting as an extension tube and by pure luck giving me the optimum focus distance for the tiny size of nudibranchs we get along our coastline. I love using that lens over and above any of my other much more expensive lenses.

I do play a lot with coloured lighting as colour is something I

really love, I started off with Lee Filter gels taped to my old Sea and Sea strobe and my initial UPY success of 'Pinky' back in 2021 was taken using this method with my compact camera. I've since upgraded to the Backscatter Miniflash with filters as these are more easily interchangeable underwater. I also use the coloured filters on the Backscatter video light for long exposures such as the crab shot and can switch them easily

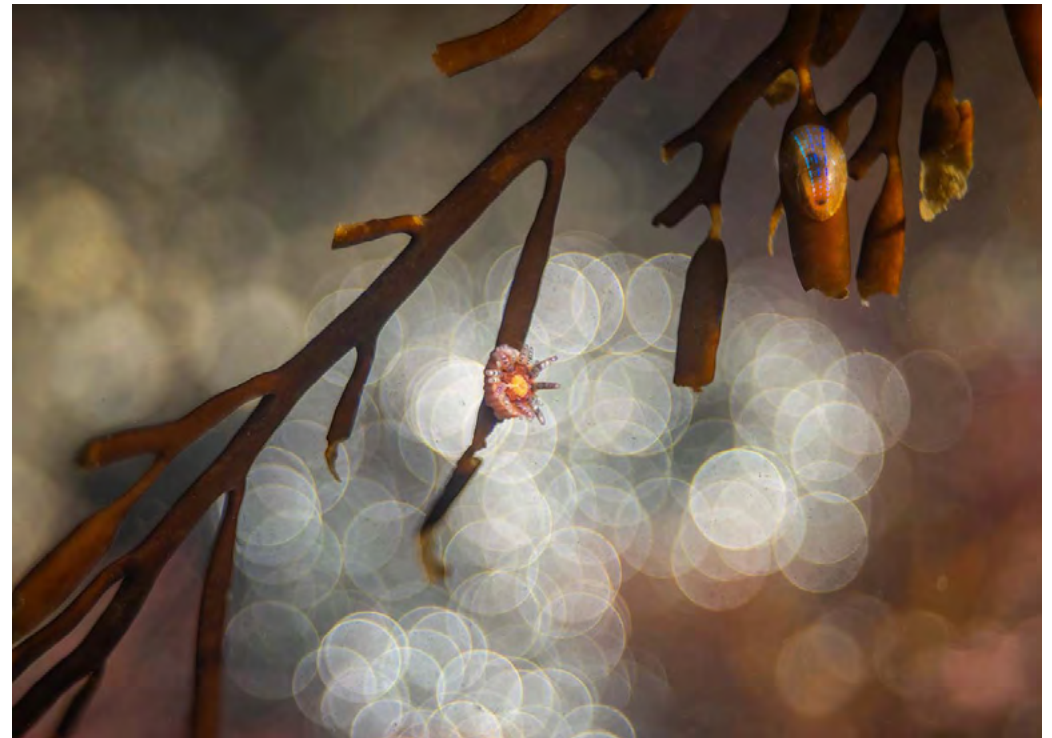


The conversation. A nudibranch and a snail having a chat at Kimmeridge Bay. Shot with a coloured filter on one strobe and a snoot on the other. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with single Backscatter miniflash strobe . Lens Sony 90mm. F10.1/160.ISO 125.

between strobe and video light even in the depths of UK winter diving in 6°C water with fat gloves on. I do still use things like the Lee Filters taped onto cheap torches that I might place in the weed for a bit of coloured backlighting. I play with lots of different artificial backgrounds using anything I can alongside more natural backgrounds where I might see a creature against a colour or texture that I feel would be a great backdrop,

these tend to be spontaneous shots where I come across something I maybe wasn't expecting.

I think of the more macro scenes as mini stage sets where I can control everything to show off the creatures to the best and also create an image that I hope the viewer might get lost in or allow ambiguity in how they interpret it. I often use a snoot on one of my strobes in order to just pick out the subject against the colour. I used this



The belle of the ball. A tiny gem anemone and a blue rayed limpet on weed at Kimmeridge Bay, shot using a vintage lens and a pan scourer background to bring attention to the beauty of the tiny gem. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter miniflash 2 Strobes. Lens part Trioplan 50 optic only (home bodged together). F2.9.1/200.ISO 100.

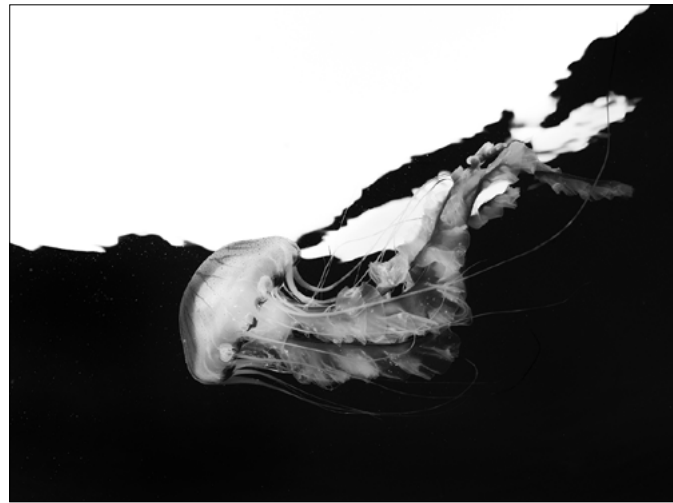
method with a coloured blue strobe backlight for my stalked jellyfish which had success in both UPY and CUPOTY last year. This was a shot that I had in my head and went in for my dive with my vintage lens on with this shot in mind. It was frustrating as the very abundant stalked jellyfish that had been everywhere the previous week were eluding me and I finally found one 60 mins into the dive, by which time the swell had picked up and

managing to focus with a fixed focus lens set to a very shallow DOF and line up a snoot beam on the subject felt almost impossible; in fact I came out from the dive thinking I hadn't managed to get the shot I wanted.

I also like to break the rules of photography, nudibranchs shouldn't be shot from behind so I shoot them from behind to add to the narrative, what is it looking at? Gazing into the distance, the viewer becomes part



Gliding through the honey pot. Seahare gliding along a piece of kelp backlit by the sun at Chesil Cove. Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter miniflash strobes .Lens Sony 28-60 with nauticam wwwl1b wet wide lens. F20.1/160.ISO 200.



*Between worlds: Compass jellyfish at Chesil Cove, Dorset
Sony A7RIV in Nauticam housing with two Backscatter Miniflash strobes . Lens Sony 28-60 with Nauticam WWWL1b wet wide lens. F18, 1/125, ISO 200*

of its world. My strobes are almost never lined up perfectly giving a flatter perfect exposure, I love to use shadow and directional light to add drama, I light from underneath to add horror movie style shadow to creatures like pipefish as they remind me of dinosaurs. I know how to play by the rules but breaking them can be lots more fun.

As I said at the start entering competitions totally changed my mindset and approach to my photography about 5 years ago and they really are what drives me forward and I am where I am now as a result. They are an exciting roller coaster of ups and downs that drive my creativity forward. Also being married to another underwater photographer we do have a healthy competitiveness between ourselves which is really good at motivating us and developing our photography; we both see the same subject in different ways and can learn from each other. I have to say that a huge amount of new ideas I try (some of them quite bonkers and experimental) often end up in epic fails at the start and I then build on what has worked and what hasn't to drive myself forwards, that's what keeps it all fresh, exciting and fun for me.

Most importantly though I do what I do for me and because I love it, all art and photography is incredibly subjective, what one person loves another will hate so I feel its really important to have masses of fun with what I do and primarily do it for me. It's been an amazing 4 years and I feel really excited for what the future will bring.

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Instagram

