

Making pictures versus taking them

by Amos Nachoum

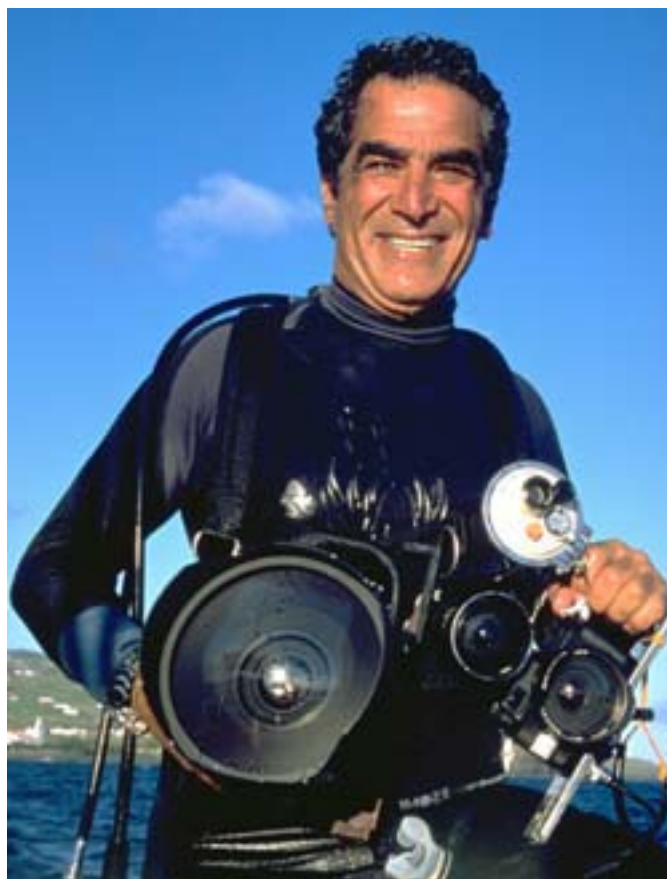
Several years after I had started taking pictures and after accumulating over 500,000 slides, I paused. It dawned on me that I had been doing too much of the same thing all these years and it was getting boring, just *taking* pictures. My frustration was reflected by the thousands of disharmoniously colored yellow (Kodak) and green (Fuji) film boxes that surrounded me, but it was also this frustration, disarray and chaos that eventually made me to think differently.

At the same time I was spending days, sometimes weeks, editing images after returning from a trip and it became so overwhelming that some projects were only edited a year later. It was from these drawn out delays and retroactive editing sessions that my most powerful lessons and transformations arose – Dare to ...imagine and see what is not in the picture. Dare to ... listen to my intuition and allow the ideal image that is in my mind's eye to form. Dare to... think and create a single image that can tell the whole story. And a final underlying and paramount lesson – To always do my best and push the envelope under any circumstances, as long as it is safe.

With this in mind, I recalled times that I returned home empty-handed, humbled by the forces (Mother Nature and people) I work with. Surprisingly, however, I was also becoming more content. The same forces were also challenging me to discover new angles and photo opportunities and as a result I was starting to create new images.

In hindsight I realize that my shoots were lacking in imagination and I was not excited to review my work any longer. It was no longer enough just to get one more technically good picture underwater, a colorful frame, or one more image of a rare species. I found myself using too many words (more than seven is too much) to describe each image and I held onto pictures because I was emotionally attached (the wrong reason) to the surrounding events. My images did not move me and I was not yet proud of them.

Circumstances intervened to help me realize



and accept that I am the only one responsible for the images I produce. It is not the camera and not the film. It is not the exotic location, the ocean depth, the perfect weather, the dive master, the wildlife or my buddy. It is always up to me and my willingness to embark upon the adventure internally. It was this realization that led me to the concept of and practice in the discipline of *making pictures* rather than just taking them.

I chose to create this piece as a photo essay, not only for the reason that writing in English is not my strongest suit, but predominantly because I wanted to illustrate to editors that I could create images that speak out louder than words. I chose to complete the assignment with only 12 images.

The hardest image to create at the time was the transition image, the one that leads the viewer (97% of the population, including the photo editors, are non divers) from the above-water to the underwater environment. For this reason I elected to do a Half Over Half Under image....

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Saba – Half over & Half under

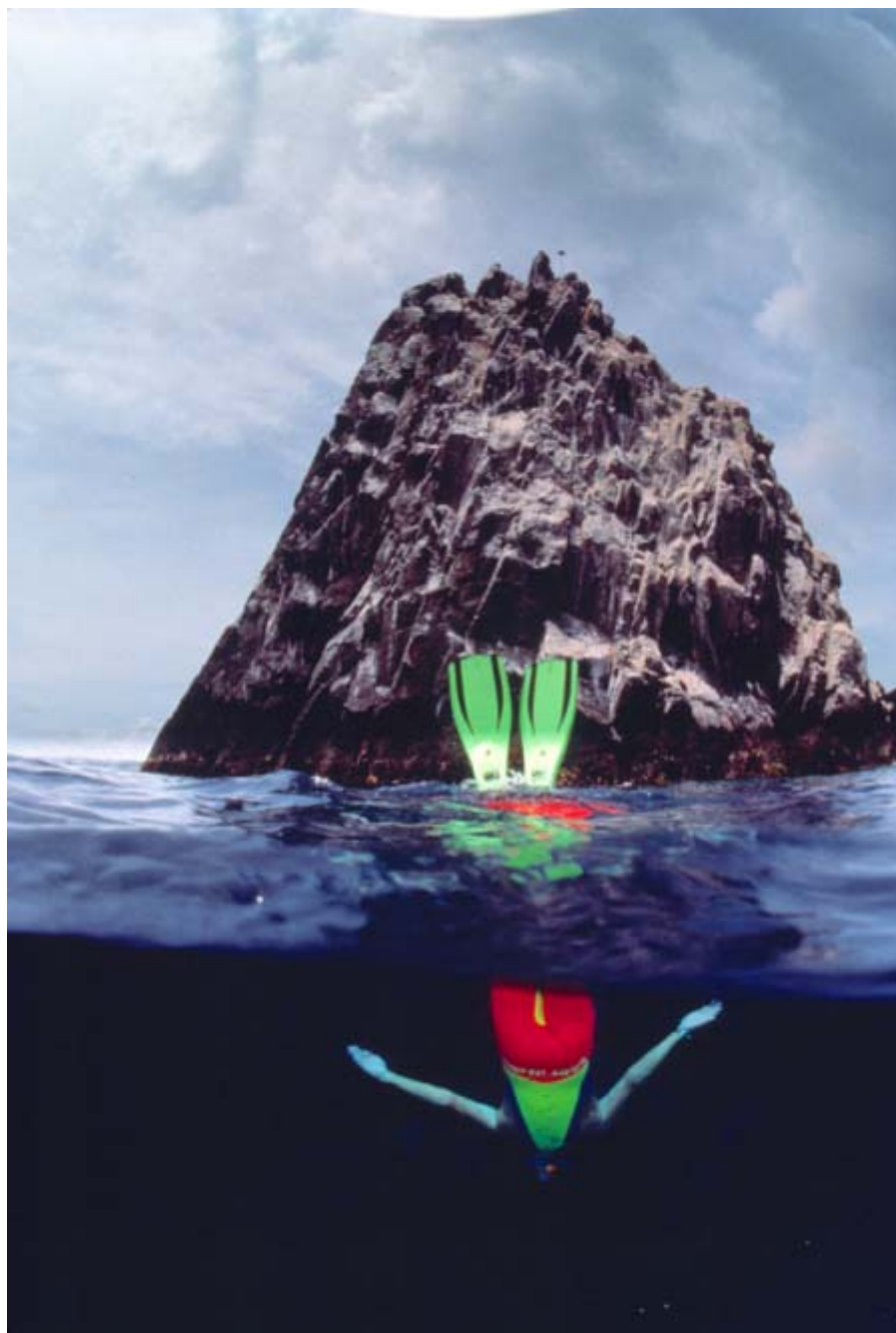
Nikon F-3. 16mm lens. Fuji 100. Two Sea&Sea YS 200 strobes. 1/60, f-11

To create this intriguing transition from air to water, I chose to feature a person in the center of the Half Over Half Under image.

In order to tie up the image and make it unique to Saba I had to find and include a landmark, “Diamond Rock”, to capture the island. Only once I had all these elements together was I ready to deal with the technical photographic challenges and for that set up I was considering the use of a super wide-angle lens - the 16mm (176 degrees coverage).

Using this lens behind a dome viewing through two different elements, half over the water and half underwater, introduces several limitations. The most critical one is the minimum two stops different exposure between the topside verses the U/W . For all other lenses I could use screw-in split filters (in my case it is a Neutral Density filter for the over-the-water part, which reduces the amount of light reaching the film. The lower half of the filter is a plus two dioptre for U/W section to match the focusing between the two elements of air and water); however, no filter system exists for the super wide angle fisheye lens and there is no way to mount any kind of filter in front of the 16mm (Nikon) lens.

To overcome this I purchased a sheet of Neutral Density gelatin filter that lacks any optical attributes.



I cut out a three-inch square piece and placed it (with clear tape to the lens hood) over the upper half of the lens, the half that would focus on above-water portion of the diver. My intention was to stop down the light from above by two stops, creating even exposure between the U/W and above water. I then mounted the dome over the lens, so that only half of it was covered with sheet filter and I would not need an optical diapoter for the other half. One of the advantages of using the fisheye lens is the

superb depth of field created while using high f-stop, between f - 11 to 22. This eliminates the need to use optical correction and provides focus from inches in front of the dome to infinity.

The experiment worked and I am pleased to share with you that this story was accepted and published several times, and the image used for several magazine covers and poster promotions of Saba. This is the power of the created image versus that taken merely because the opportunity arose.

Spirit of Miami Double exposure

Top side - Nikon F3 & 18mm lens. 30" exposure f-22.
Underwater - Nikonos III & 15mm lens. 1/60, f-8. Fuji 100 ASA

A short time after Rodale's Scuba Diving magazine featured the Saba split image on its cover, Steve O'Neal called me from Florida. "I'm planning to sink a Boeing 727 plane off the coast of Key Biscayne as part of the Greater Miami Artificial Reef Program", he said.

The questions I kept hearing in my head were, "How can I illustrate the point that this is a plane underwater, not just another wreck?" and "How can I dramatize the concept to attract the viewer?"

I decided to take a picture of the runway at night and then double expose the film with the plane underwater, between the runway lights.

But, I had never done double exposures before and I did not know how to do it.

The execution was complicated and involved many people, special permits and favors. I remained persuasive, determined and believed enough in myself and, more importantly, in the results, that the people around me were motivated to help me. The result was just out of this world as you can see. This was my first pure journalistic work that was published in Sport Diver magazine and in the National Geographic.

I loaded the first roll in my Nikon F3, exposed the first frame and opened the back. Holding the camera shutter speed



on B, the shutter opened and remained open as long as I held it on B. With a pen I followed the frame exposed by the open shutter. I did the same for the next four frames.

I kept the film in the camera and took the night shot first. Each image was duplicated as closely as possible into an underwater slate. This way I knew when I had a horizontal image versus a vertical image. I registered the runway lights positioning throughout each frame and shot the rest of the roll with a few different lenses.

On the next morning, I loaded the same roll of film that

was shot at the airport into the Nikonos III with a 15mm lens. I loaded and unloaded the film a few times until I was able to see the marks I made originally through the opening of the F3. I shot the whole roll underwater exposing it as normal. Equipped with the slate, I positioned the plane underwater between the runway lights to the best of my ability and was then able to direct the divers into the frame that I had seen with my mind's eye. In the end I got about half a dozen good images for publication!

Great White Shark breaching.

Nikon F5. 80- 200mm lens. 1/500, f-2.8. Fuji Provia 100ASA

Images and video footage of this phenomenon shot off Seal Island, in False Bay, South Africa have been the cause of much amazement and, like many of my colleagues and fellow adventurers, I wanted a share of the event through my camera.

Researching the available images on breaching, I found some extraordinary sequences that left me pretty intimidated. I wondered if I could do as well, let alone capture something different. In order to make an educated decision, I decided to go on a fact-finding trip and chartered a boat for two days to the Ring of Death, as the area is known, together with another photographer.

We had limited success and I learned how difficult it is to get good images of a breach. Two days spent concentrating for three-hour stretches, heavy camera gripped to my face on an unsteady boat, inhaling lung-fulls of engine fumes and sea spray taught me that this is a low yield (I saw only one breach), risky event that involves extreme discomfort, often pain, to photograph. The experience both frustrated and challenged me at the same time.

It was the frustration, however, that also revealed a solid opportunity to me. Because breaching was so infrequent and physically challenging to photograph, it had only been undertaken horizontally to date. No one had been willing to take the risk of shooting vertically, a more awkward position with a 50% higher chance of missing the breach due to the narrower frame.

The vertical shot would provide the most artistic frame of the breaching behavior, as it would compliment the direction of the movement. Extraordinary behavior would have to be matched by extraordinary imagination and effort, no matter what the circumstances.

I returned last year for four days, but by the second became so discouraged by the limited number of breaches and physical discomfort, that I gave up and returned to horizontal shooting to ensure that I at least left with something. The vision in mind's eye would not leave me, however, and I became recharged early in the third day after witnessing three breaches and with the knowledge that I had a few good images in the can.

With determined focus on my vision in my mind's eye, I placed myself in the familiar position



and glued my eyes behind the viewfinder. The skipper began towing the bait, a rubber silhouette of a seal, and I focused on the blue water about 20 feet behind the boat. An hour into the session I began hallucinating, drifting in and out of sleep despite the surrounding noise and motion, and the agony in my fingers.

When the shark breached, I was so primed that I was not aware of the event until after it was over. I reacted totally on instinct, squeezing that camera trigger at the first movement, perhaps even before the shark breached the surface. The reaction was so rapid that I caught several images in the first split second of the ascending breach, the most crucial for showcasing the extent of the shark's power and athletic ability. The total breach is arguably some of most expensive time in wildlife photography lasting no longer than three seconds. During that short burst I managed to expose over 18 frames, as fast as the camera could allow.

The hours on end behind the camera rehearsing this moment had paid off. I knew right then and there that I had it! – a vertical image of the shark frozen before the peak of the breach. For this apex predator, any other format would not have been as powerful, dramatic or rare.



There are two events in the wild that I view as the most dramatic and around which my life's mission and vision are focused ... Capturing wildlife, and in particular Big Animals, on film during their peak behavior i.e. predation, migration, nursing and mating, and during peaceful interactions with humans. The latter aimed at "Dispelling the Myth" about the dangers of marine animals.

It was on a cold November day in Norway. National Geographic had sent a video team to capture my annual encounters diving with Orcas and to capture on film the Orcas "Carouselling" feeding phenomena.

Orca & dead calf – Norway

Nikon RS, 18mm lens. 1/60, f 5,6. Fuji 400ASA

We were on our first week

into the shoot and still had not achieved what we came for. We had seen the Orcas and the feeding, but had been too slow to capture the desired images. In early November it is already winter here and we had only six hours of daylight to work with and the rest of the time to dream, sleep and prepare for the next day.

And dreaming I did. Again and again in the dark of night I rehearsed sliding from the zodiac, wearing a dry suit, 28 pounds of weight, pony tank attached to my back.

Orcas are unpredictable and fast and the only way to catch up with them is to anticipate their action and movement and be there before they are. More easily said than done.

I had no idea why I was rehearsing so carefully in my mind, but I had learned to pay attention to my intuition. I found myself recounting the action of

sliding in and descending at once while turning to my right. I had a gut notion to expect an action to come from my right side. For five days I practiced these motions in my mind an endless number of times.

On day eleven of our shoot, late in the afternoon with the sun brightly shining, we spotted a pod of eight Orcas while riding the zodiac. I slid into the water and descended. I did what I had rehearsed in my mind so many times without thinking, just doing what I trusted, and the pod came over my right shoulder, directly into my frame!

I raised my camera up to my mask, looking through the viewfinder and shooting at the same time. I shot off several frames and only then did I dare to look over the viewfinder. I got the chance to see it - four Orcas that came from my right shoulder to the left side, only 10 feet away and one of them



carried something in its mouth, but I was unclear what it was.

By the time I registered the action with my eyes it was too late, as the Orcas had already passed my straight-on view and there was no sense in chasing them. I realized what we were witnessing. It was a dead calf that one of the Orcas, likely a female, was carrying, the others escorting her in her process of agony before she would let go of the stillborn young one.

The shot was used as the centerpiece of the National Geographic Explorer program. As the narrator on the program said, "...it is an image never photographed before..."

Orca feeding, tail slapping Norway

Nikon RS. 18mm 1/30 , f-4 .
Fuji – 400ASA

Numerous misconceptions

still exist and run deep about marine wildlife and notably about Orcas as a danger to humans in the water. I traveled to Norway in '92 for the first time to photograph Orcas underwater. At that stage I knew nothing about the "Carouselling" behavioral phenomenon of the Orcas in this region.

We were not alone. A Spanish researcher, equipped with a remote camera, was there as well, on assignment from the BBC to capture the "Carouselling" event. When he saw me ready with camera in hand and clearly planning to go underwater, he yelled his concern to my skipper in Norwegian. Later I learned he advised that I was risking my life and would be injured by the Orcas.

As soon as I heard the exchange, I left the dinghy and went underwater. After all, I did not understand Norwegian. For

40 incredible minutes I was surrounded by at least twelve Orcas and witnessed first hand the amazing, loud and well-orchestrated feeding behavior called Carouselling.

This was the first Carouselling action ever photographed in the water, although the behavior had been seen and reported previously by local researchers. The total behavioral process and order was not yet understood at the time. In particular, researchers questioned what caused the loud sounds underwater, described as "door slamming". There was no indication as to how they came about. The pictures I captured below and my view from underwater showed that Orcas slap the school of fish with their powerful tail, causing a shock wave underwater (heard as loud slam) that knocks out between 30 to 50 fish at a time that are then fed on one by one!

The adventure of making pictures is a long, frustrating, rewarding, lonely and testing journey. Many times in order to reach the photo opportunity I have found myself on the edge of discomfort and having to go further than commonsense might dictate. Look adversity in the eye, find a way around it and laugh. It has demanded not only being balanced, passionate and patient, but also the need to recognize that in the process of making these images I depend on very important people - my guests, skippers, dive guides, pilots and local experts. To each I am very thankful for joining me on this adventure of a life time making pictures that endure.

Making pictures is a coordinated process. It takes knowing my camera, the film, my subject, my own limitations and, most importantly, it requires

treating with respect the environment, the wildlife and the people I depend on to bring me to the action.

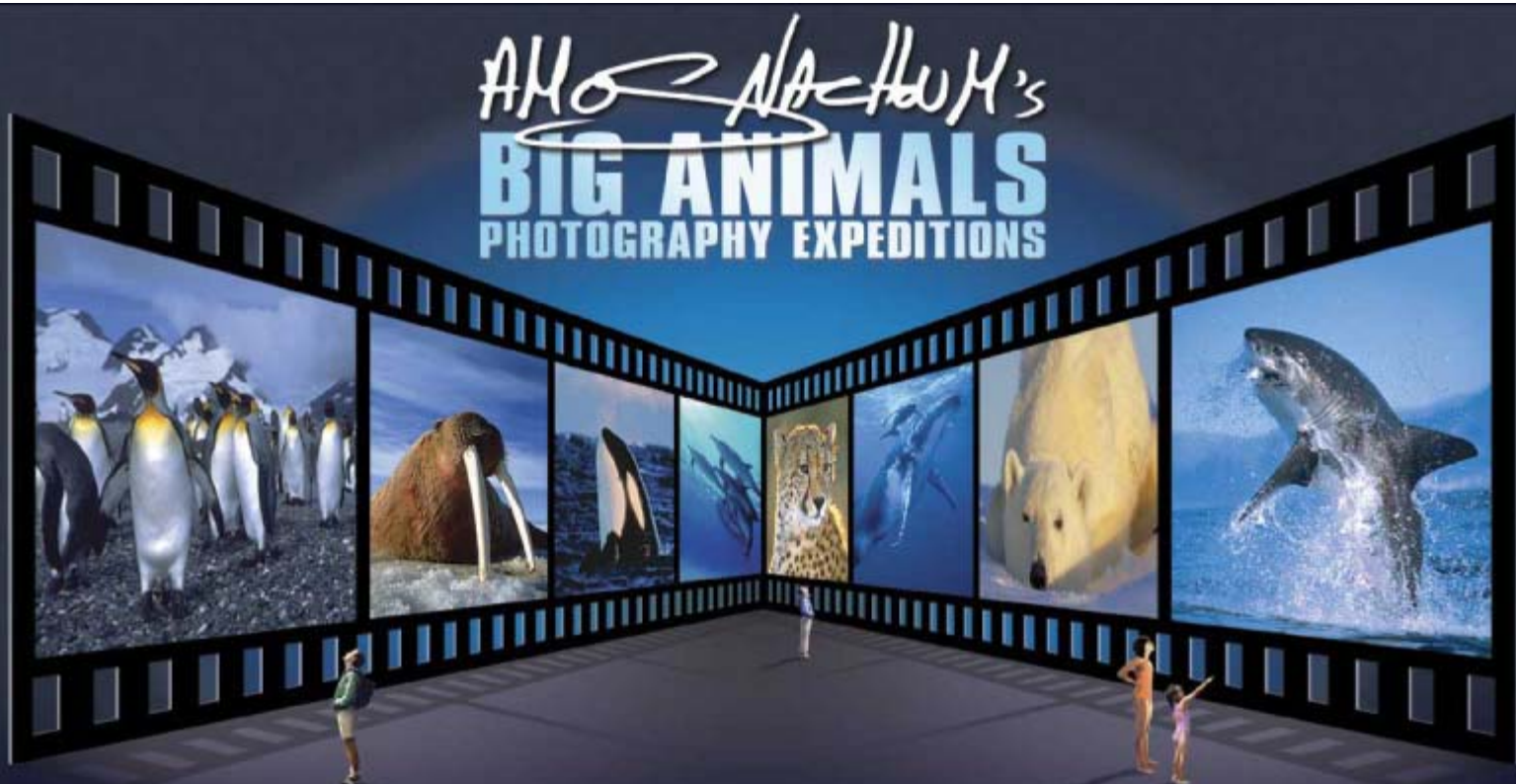
Only when I learned to live the adventure and to accept its responsibilities, did I start creating the results I have shared with you. As you begin your own adventure process you will discover that for all of us there are different challenges. Each one successfully met will be evident in the new images you create.

Go out there, join the adventure and create your own pictures. Shoot from your heart, live your dream, embrace the challenges that are in the emotional, economic and physical adventures – it will make my day to see your inspiring new images.

Amos Nachoum



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