

Jessica Taylor

by Jessica Taylor

Underwater photography for me came from the desire to work with animals. I have a natural love of water so it seemed obvious I should go in this direction. I also wanted to be unconventional and do something no one else had done before. So combining my passion for water with my skills as an artist was what I decided to do.

I acquired my first camera set up around two years ago while on my First Degree and enrolled on a course with Martin Edge. I am not technically minded and the mechanics of underwater photography seemed daunting. Adding to the pressure of taking a good picture, was the limited amount of chances I would get being a student on a budget, there was no going back and trying again. I had one chance only and that pressure caused me some sleepless nights. I would not recommend this field to any student living on a pittance!

The first pictures I took underwater were surprisingly successful. I think it was a mixture of the artistic eye I used in my land photography and diving the same spot over and over. Oh, and a lot of luck, that goes without saying. I managed to take those sealing shots you need for

your portfolio to prove to yourself and those around you that all the money you've spent wasn't completely wasted.

Since then I have been working on a limited budget in England and have even been taking photographs in the bath. It can be rewarding knowing you can still produce beautiful pictures at home. Although it was frustrating looking at other peoples work they'd been around the world to do. It is such a bonus being able to travel and witness new things, while taking pictures.

I am an Illustrator by trade and I am currently studying for an MA in Illustration at the University of Brighton. For the course I am making an Artists Book about the sealions who live on Los Islotes out of La Paz in Baja California, Mexico.

It is because of the course I have pushed my skills further and what I do has now become who I am. I could easily be making a children's book about a cat for the course, but I am very lucky to have brought my career to my hobby and created something unique.

As an illustrator it was a natural progression to draw underwater. But it takes a lot of skill and a lot of practice



and is not as easy as it may seem. I use special paper and graphite sticks and have made my own drawing board out of a plastic flower tray.

I have it off to a fine art now, I dive with my paper and a camera and can amount a large pile of work from just one dive if the conditions are right. Distant are the days of fear that I wouldn't get a shot, now that I draw, it gives me the same buzz you get



when you get a good picture and I know it was purely me that did it.

There is a certain amount of luck involved in taking photographs. With drawing I know I am using my own skills and there is nothing else involved, it is almost like I am using an extra sense. It helped my confidence to draw, knowing I had the security of already having some good sealion shots and it helped my photography as drawing is real lesson in looking. Photography always comes first though. I always finish my film before swapping over and using the drawing board. I think this is mainly because you have to take the opportunities to press the shutter when you can, and maybe I still have that fear of not getting a good shot!

There are so many times you see a cracking shot but your settings aren't right, or you've got the camera pointing the wrong way. With the sealions there where so many of them it was hard to know where to shoot. My tactic was to pick one, watch him and follow him with my camera. After a while, you get to know the behaviour of your subject and judge what they are going to do. As for the shots you miss, you just have to log them in your own album in your head, for the long months when you're not diving.

It has taken me a few trips to get my set up right. Even now it needs an extra clip here and a bit of weight there. What has made it possible is an understanding dive company and divemaster. It can be embarrassing trying to explain what on earth I am doing taking paper down and two cameras and what are these lumps of lead in your BCD pocket, I'm sure they think I'm mad, but the Cortez Club know me by now. They let me plan my own dive and I use them every time I work with the sealions.

Oh the sealions! Yes they make things



interesting too. They chew your fins, your snorkel, your arms, try to rip the paper off the board, cuddle up and fall asleep on your legs, undo your tank strap and one was even trying to eat the bubbles coming out of my regulator! This is all going on at the same time while I'm trying to draw them. But this is what makes it such a challenge.

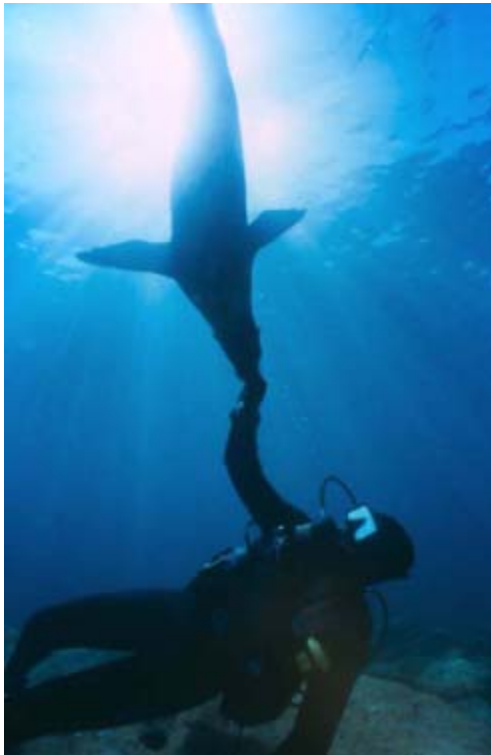
It is very hard drawing a subject that moves so fast. Try drawing a formula one car! That's how it feels when you have to worry about who is biting your fin and everything else, as well as your diving and your buddy.

But the work is the reward. I spent the total of 6 weeks in La Paz and have everything I need to make the book I am making. Now that I am home it



is a case of designing and moving the work off from the slides and underwater paper and onto the pages of the book. It is another stage to compile the work and create something from it. But it is also how I get to work with the sealions all year round.

The future for my work is as a freelancer and I also see myself working abroad. My plans are to continue with the direction I have taken but to place myself in the environment where this is possible. Right now I think this might take me into the dive

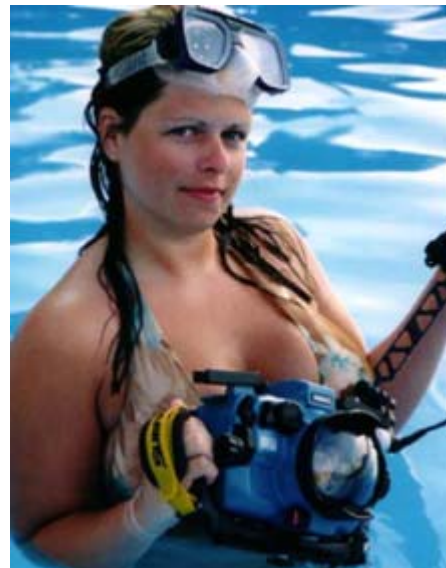


opportunities in every species.

I currently have two cameras. My favoured one is the Nikonos V and 15mm lens. I have had the best results with this and find the hands on approach suits me. I also have a Nikon F90 in a Subal housing. I have three lenses for this but I have only used the 20mm lens. I only ever shoot wide angle.

My flashgun is a SB105 but I am looking to upgrade this to a Subtronic soon. I have always used an arm by Ultralight and this is one of my favourite bits of kit although it doesn't come close to the Nikonos 15mm lens, which is my most precious possession!

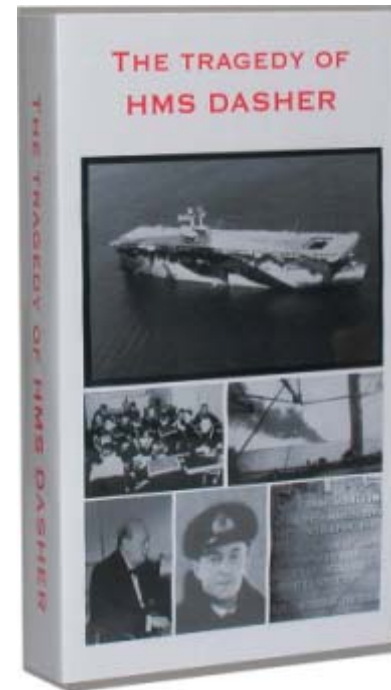
Jessica Taylor
jeswah@mac.com



industry if only so I can be in the right environment, the watery one.

I would like to work alongside Marine Biologists as I have had some experience of this with the sealions. The partnership between art and science is something that is neglected but I think it is a valuable resource in communicating issues to the general public. I will continue to make Artists Books and my next subjects are likely to be different species, ideally large animals like the Shark or the Manta Ray. But I could even find something to say about the Jellyfish, Shrimp or Moray Eel. I think there are

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