

Underwaterworld

by Pete and Aleta Saloutos

My love of water goes way back: swimming lessons as a kid, surfing as a teenager, swim team in high school. Thirty-five years ago I got certified for diving but never really got behind it. At that time, the equipment was primitive by today's standards. Ten years later, well into my life as a photographer, my interest in diving was rekindled when I began to experiment with a Nikonos underwater camera and lights. For the next several years, I had great fun with colorful shots of swimmers using multiple lights and gels.

In 1984, my world of underwater photography came to an unexpected and abrupt end when I began to suffer massive headaches after even a minimal swimming experience. If I couldn't swim, it was clear that diving was out of the question. For the next seventeen years I tried to figure out what was wrong: I visited neurologists, acupuncturists, chiropractors, massage therapists: you name it, I tried it, but to no avail. I had CAT scans and MRI's. Still nothing. So I eliminated water from my workout horizon, using its remembered rhythm only as a way to relax myself to sleep. I did keep running though, which was my other long-time fitness/fun habit.

It wasn't until I pulled first my left hamstring, then my right a week later, that I made a reluctant decision to give up running as well. Faced with the impossible situation of no cardiovascular exercise alternative, I tried slowly reintroducing swimming into my life. To my incredible joy and surprise, there were no more headaches. It seems my running was



the trigger for my headaches all that long time.

Why do I include this saga of loving, losing, then yearning for and reclaiming the water? Perhaps because it's important to remember that nothing is lost when our lives take us in a different direction than we plan. During those many years when I thought I could not swim, I spent all of my photo time learning and pushing the limits of corporate and advertising photography. My work for clients became more and more complex, requiring upwards

of ten power packs and twenty lights for a single shoot. I mixed strobes with tungsten and ambient sources; I pushed the envelope whenever and wherever I could. When I finally re-entered the pool as part of the Master's Swim Program in my hometown, my brain took all those experiences, laid them out like so much track and my photographic wheels began to turn.

Fast forward to my new life in the pool and the photographs presented here. All of these images

originate at indoor and outdoor pools in the Seattle area. My land experience in photography allows me to take the techniques I've mastered on location and in the studio and apply them underwater. In several of these shots, there are four of us in full scuba gear, each person with an Ikelite strobe and sync. I use a Nikonos 5, usually with a 35 mm 2.5 Nikkor lens. I like the perspective and depth of field that the 35 mm lens gives.

Once Nikon releases its new D2X and Ikelite makes an appropriate housing for it, I'll switch over to a digital format, but for now it's film, mostly Kodak E100VS, which supplies excellent color and sharpness. Having had extensive opportunities to use strobes on land has given me an intuitive sense of what will bring my exposures close to target underwater. For this reason, my exposure technique is based on trial and error. I'd rather underexpose than overexpose; since I'm using E100VS, I can push it effectively with little contrast build up or color shifts. I snip test while processing, so this type of modification is always available at the lab to help me nail my exposures.

If you wonder what happens above the water during a shoot, I've usually orchestrated two Norman 2000 water power packs and four to six heads, with and without soft boxes. These lights are dialed way down, with each head commonly set at about 50 watts of power. By contrast, when in the water, I'm using between 100 to 200 watts per head. Each of the underwater assistants is holding either a 200 or 400 watt Ikelite strobe and flash sync. The land strobes need less power because they are providing backlight.

Despite first impressions, I don't always try to make my underwater shots as difficult as possible. The subject itself may imply a less complex



approach: my pregnant nudes, for example, are usually shot with daylight as my primary or exclusive light source. I do warm up the shots with a gold reflector or add six points of red/yellow in Photoshop, when appropriate.

Typically, I have two assistants out of the pool working lights and changing film. All of my subjects are not only experienced in the water, they are first rate in their fields: swimmers, divers. The synchronized swimmers are especially amazing because they can stay underwater for such long periods of time and make it look so easy, smiling continuously doing the whole shoot!

How does a typical underwater shoot translate into what the photographer does below the surface? The pregnancy shots are a good example. I find

that having the sun at roughly a 45° angle works best for this type of shooting. I actually hold my breath during each individual underwater sequence. Typically, that means I stay down for about 45 seconds without air in my lungs while wearing an eight-pound weight belt. No air may seem excessive or crazy, but it's not. I do it for two reasons: 1) I don't have to deal with bubbles, and 2) to stay down with a full breath of air would require a sixteen-pound weight belt, too heavy to move with. My assistants hand hold fabric to create the appropriate surface area, texture and intended movement for the shot. Once I'm in the water, I stay there. I ascend and descend, but do not get out. My deck assistant(s) change my film and always lube the camera back after each roll is removed.



My exposures cluster around 1/30 sec. at between f5.6 and f8. I like a little curtain drag on the film, as it gives the shot more movement and color. I use gels over all my strobes: double straw seems to work best for me to warm up the otherwise cool underwater skin tones. When I'm shooting with strobes (the underwater dive shot is a good case in point), I use a Nikon 105 on my camera as my synching strobe. It provides no

direct light on the subject; rather, it is usually aimed at one of my underwater assistant's strobes to set it and its companions off.

Shooting divers is very tricky. Above water, the dive coach relays signals to me with a clipboard held underwater telling me when to expect the next diver. In order to keep the flow going, three or four divers work in succession. They get into a rhythm, just as they would during practice or a

swim meet. The most challenging part of capturing a diver on film is to get all of the underwater crew in optimal position. I determine where the best place is to put my strobe handlers and when to hit the shutter. Those of us underwater mirror the rhythm of the divers as we synchronize our movements and responsibilities. Again, my exposure is often set at 1/30 sec. from f5.6 to f8, where I can see the movement I prefer.



My two synchronized swimmers must practice their moves repeatedly before we shoot. They then empty their lungs, go down to the 12' pool bottom and slowly begin to ascend while making their moves. I have assistants with me, each one managing a light. We ascend right along with the swimmers. This type of shoot has many potential problems, as you might imagine. For the image you see here, I spent an hour with the



swimmers and shot three rolls of film: 90% of the frames were bad. In my opinion, getting edgy results requires lots of failure; playing it safe yields only static results.

For me, these underwater shots represent a whole new world to explore. Prepping my equipment and packing it into my car from my studio equipment to get it to the pool requires an entire day of grunt work. Then there is getting it out of the car and into the facility. After two hours of shooting in the pool. I'm exhausted but exhilarated. There is no better time to appreciate my wonderful assistants than when they break down then carry all that gear back into the

car while I creep around, waterlogged and weak. None of my underwater shots would be possible without their exceptional help, as well as the expertise and support of the great folks at www.exoticaquaticsscuba.com and www.Southern-Nikonos.com.

I'm having lots of fun in pools, but recently I've started thinking it's time to branch out. My next group of underwater models will be the jellyfish of Puget Sound: no model releases, no pay, but then they don't take directions well either....

Pete and Aleta Saloutos
www.petesaloutos.com



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