

Composites

A different way to capture movement

by Alexander Mustard

Movement is an evocative and challenging subject for photographers. Our medium is the still image, yet the world we record is constantly on the move and as a result we have developed a wide range of techniques to capture and communicate movement.

Sometimes we express movement in our images by freezing a clearly fast moving subject, capturing the moment in razor sharp stillness. Composition is also important here, for example giving a subject space into which to move in the frame lends balanced dynamism to the image. On other occasions we communicate movement by allowing the subject to blur across our frame (something I wrote about doing with sharks in UWP 30).

In this short article I want to talk about

This composite is composed of three frames. I actually shot 10 frames of the diver rolling into the water (within seconds) and selected the most appropriate ones for the final images.

Below left is one of the middle images in the composite catching the diver at the point of impact with the water. Below right is the final frame in the sequence. As a standalone image it is not good – with water splashed by the diver covering the port. However I used this frame in the composite because the section of frame I needed is good. Nikon D2X + 10.5mm FE. Subal Housing. F6.3 @ 1/400th.





This composite image is the combination of four frames taken of a girl diving from a yacht. I actually panned the camera slightly during this sequence which has led to a slightly panoramic image. Nikon D2X + 10.5mm FE. Subal Housing. F9 @ 1/160th.

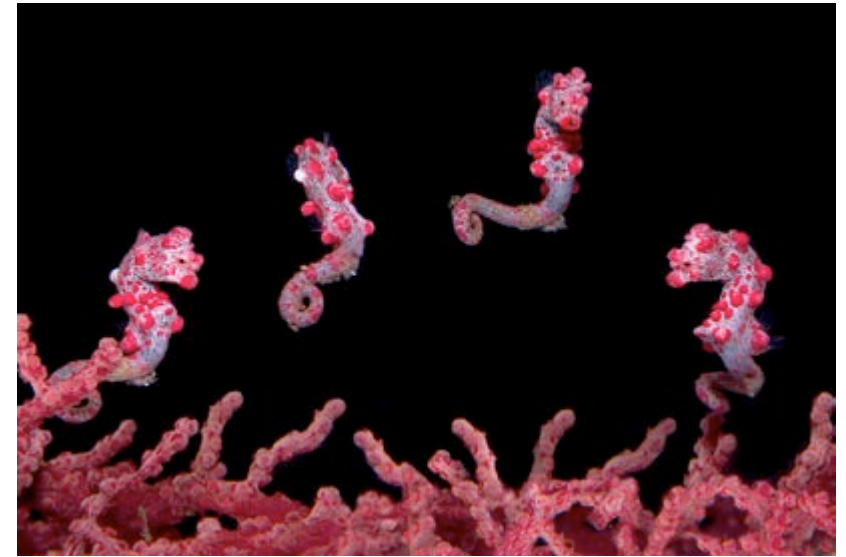
my experiences with another method for communicating movement – digital compositing.

Digital compositing is a troublesome area for pure photography because by including elements from several images we are not creating an image that is an accurate record of a moment in time. For this reason I always limit my digital composites to images containing elements shot at the same time, with the same lens, to provide a strong link with the reality. Furthermore, I think that these images are obviously manipulated and the viewer understands this. I don't believe that anyone looks at composite images like these and thinks that I have photographed identical and synchronised

sextuplets jumping off a boat!

The aim when capturing movement with digital compositing is to show the subject travelling across the frame. The technique is fairly similar to creating panoramic images, but instead of moving the camera between a series of shots, we keep the camera still and combine the frames together – showing the main subject several times in different positions, moving across the frame.

The final image starts even before we get in the water. It is very much a technique that we have to decide on before shooting rather than being something that is built in the computer after a trip from the images we happen to have taken.



This is my only successful composite image of a natural history subject. This image combines four frames showing a pygmy seahorse swimming from one point on a seafan to another. I didn't use a focus light for this shot because I find it tends to make pygmy seahorses turn away. Nikon D100 + 105mm & +4 dioptr. Subal Housing. F38 @ 1/180th.

The first step is to think carefully about the composition of the final frame before we start shooting. Ideally we want the subject starting on one side and travelling to the other. Wide-angle lenses are most suited to this technique because they provide lots of space for this subject movement.

I usually use this technique with human subjects because I can direct their movement (relatively easily) and therefore achieve the desired composition. We can make things even easier by choosing a situation where the subject has little choice but to move over a predetermined path. For example, it was very easy for me to predict the path of the diver rolling off the side of the dive boat.



This was one of the first composites I tried, and combines five frames of one of the crew doing a somersault from the back of a liveaboard. I took several more frames during this sequence, but I tried not to use too many so that there were only small overlaps between the different positions of the model. Nikon D2X + 10.5mm FE. Subal Housing. F4.5 @ 1/640th.

Generally, I have tended to use this technique in conjunction with split-level images. I find that this helps because human movement in air is influenced by gravity so the model's path through the frame looks realistic. When I have tried shooting composites underwater they tend to look faked, because the movement of the diver appears unnatural because they are neutrally buoyant. I don't see this as a hard and fast rule and I will keep trying to produce a pleasing underwater composite of a diver!

I strongly recommend using manual exposure (both for the camera and your strobes) when shooting for composites because this insures that the exposure of the subject and background remains the same throughout. If we shoot RAW it is also important to use the same settings in the RAW Converter for all the images, and to also make any exposure or colour corrections after we have built the composite in Photoshop.

I would also encourage you to shoot lots of frames of the action, so that you can choose the ones that have the subject in the correct position to produce an ideal composition in the

finished frame. For example, I took 10 images (in two seconds) of the setup for the composite image of the diver backward-rolling off the boat, choosing only the best three for the finished image.

When shooting like this it is important to select a fast shutter speed – this not only to freezes the action but also enables a high frame rate. One other potential problem is strobe recycle time, which varies between models and brand of strobes. Generally for fast moving subjects, such as people jumping or diving into the water, I shoot in available light only. But where this is not possible it is important to think about strobe recycle time when planning your frame rate.

The next step is to download the images and choose which ones to use for the final composite. Often the most suitable images are not the best individual ones, but instead frames that contain the subject in exactly the right pose and position. Ideally we want start and end point images and then one or two intermediate positions. Invariably I select either the start point or the end point image

as the main image background and cut the subject from the other frames and drop them in. It is nice when the subject does not overlap with the previous position, although this is not always possible.

There are lots of ways to cut out images in Photoshop, and the method you choose will depend on the subject and the background it is on. You can either mask and cut the subject out exactly or cut it out with part of the background included – and feather the edge of the selection so it blends with the existing background. Once the new elements are imported as new layers you can arrange the elements into a pleasing and natural looking composition.

Of course there are always images that break these rules. Probably my favourite composite image goes against nearly all the advice I have listed above. The “Dancing Pygmy” photo was taken with a macro lens, features an unpredictable natural subject and was illuminated by flash. It had been my intention to shoot a composite before this dive, but I never dreamed of such a fortunate composition. I had actually planned to shoot several different pygmy seahorses and then to join them together to create a pygmy infested seafan, but when this individual jumped up, looked at the camera and resettled on the fan I knew

I had a better image.

Sometimes as underwater photographers our vision is grander than what we can practically achieve with our camera. Sometimes we are constrained by the limitations of the physics of light in the ocean. At other times it is the restrictions of how long or deep we can dive, or the financial constraints of how long we can afford to spend in the field in the pursuit of images. While on other occasions the images we wish to create are just impossible. Digital compositing allows us to break free from some of these constraints and to show movement in a different way, it is not a technique to be over used, but it can certainly add some unusual images to a portfolio.

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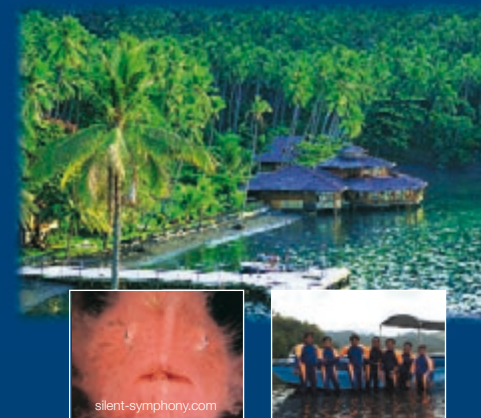
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