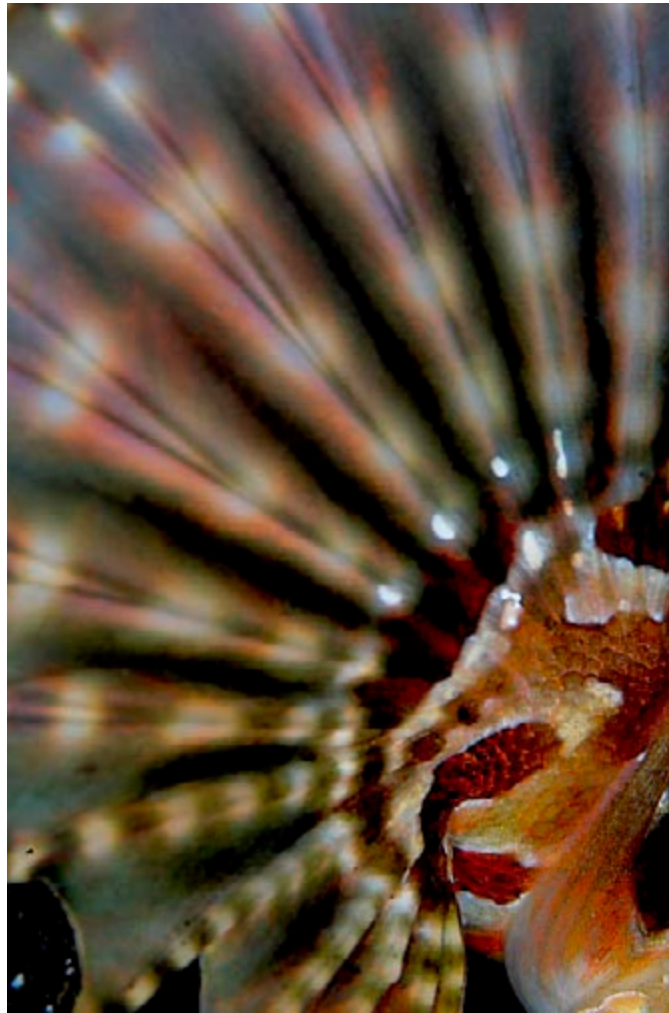


Abstract Attractions

by Mark Webster

When we begin underwater photography the initial challenge is to simply record as many of the species we see in what is often a stunning underwater world. This alone can keep you busy for a long time, particularly when you start to explore the variety of species in the macro world. During this pursuit you may also begin to realize that there are thousands of unique and striking details in both small and large subjects which, when isolated and composed in the viewfinder, can produce some unique and often abstract images. Abstract painters are frequently inspired by nature, but of course they don't often see the amazing diversity that is available to underwater photographers. So the purpose of this short article is to encourage you to think beyond the standard illustrative image and explore the potential attractions of the abstract image.

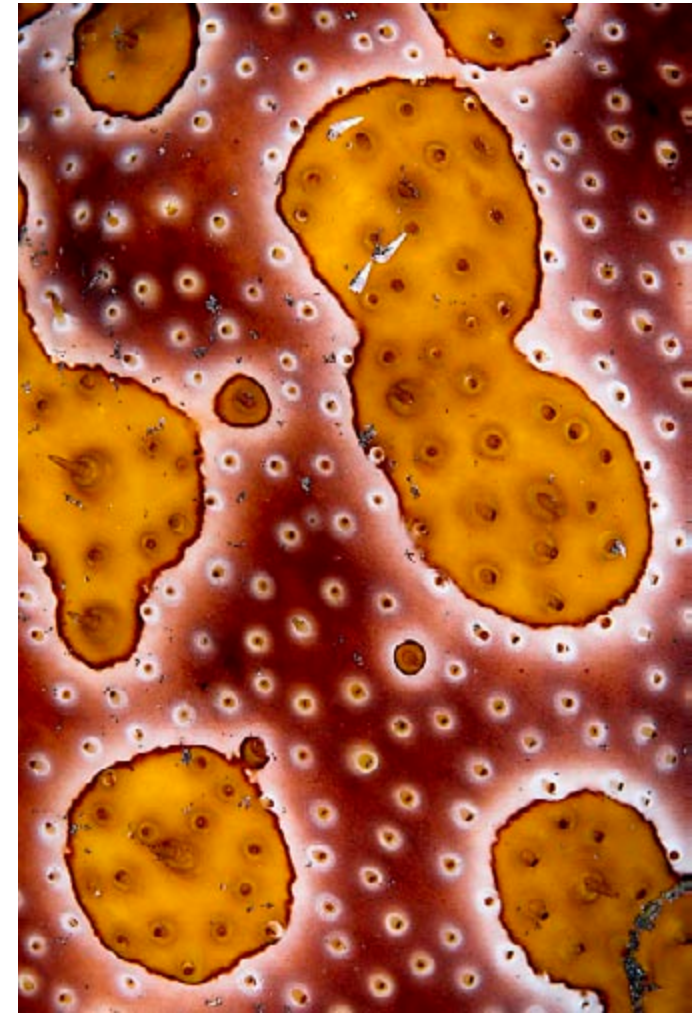
Abstracts and patterns are, for me at least, predominantly in the higher magnifications of the macro range and I will often see an opportunity whilst I am working a subject with a more 'standard' image in mind. For example, if you are shooting shrimps or clown fish in an anemone the detail in the anemone itself is normally quite striking and shape of the arms allows strong compositions. Static or sessile subjects are naturally the easiest to work with and allow you time to vary you composition and lighting to produce the most pleasing images.



Lion fish fin - Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 100ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 125th

Anemones

There are numerous anemone species in both temperate and tropical waters which lend themselves well to abstract photography. Often the skirt alone will be strikingly patterned or textured or you can explore the border between the skirt



Sea cucumber pattern – Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 200ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 60th

and the tentacles which normally have contrasting colours. Isolating the tentacles on their own is also effective and you can compose using strong diagonals. Tentacles are often on the move in the swell or current, so it pays to be patient and time

your shot and then take plenty to secure the best arrangement and focus. Tentacles, particularly those with ‘bulbous’ ends can glow and reflect light dependant on your lighting angle, so don’t forget to vary the lighting to see how they react or perhaps to cast strong shadows and create deep contrasts.

Fish fins and scales

Although many fish try our patience when we try to capture an image, there are species that will remain still when you get close. These tend to be the camouflaged hunters who are mostly convinced that you cannot possibly see them no matter how close you get. Scorpion fish, crocodile fish, frog fish etc. all fall into this category and the fins, scales and patterns make great images and compositions. There are other slow moving species such as lion fish, rays and some moray eels that can be a little more challenging but also provide excellent opportunities. You can also dive at night to find species that are normally skittish during the day which will be static sleeping in the reef after dark. However, many fish species adopt a much drabber colour or pattern at night, so it is best to dive soon after dusk just as they are beginning to settle in for a snooze and beginning the change.

Eyes and patterns

The eye of a fish or cephalopod can make a powerful element of a composition and often the pattern that radiates from the eye is equally striking. Some fish species will tolerate a close approach for this, but we are mostly again limited to the sessile camouflaged species. Occasionally you will encounter a co-operative giant puffer fish for example, particularly at cleaning stations and a slow patient approach can produce an opportunity.



Parrot fish eye – Nikon F90X, Subal housing, Fuji Velvia 50ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 125th

In temperate waters during winter, when water temperatures fall, fish often become sluggish and are easier to approach when resting – wrasse in the UK are a good example of this. Cuttle fish and octopus are always good subjects as they are



Hard coral detail - Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 100ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 125th

naturally inquisitive and will permit a very close approach if you are patient. Otherwise it is back into the water at night when species like parrot fish provide many opportunities



Spiny starfish detail – Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 200ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 60th



Mushroom coral detail - Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 100ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 125th



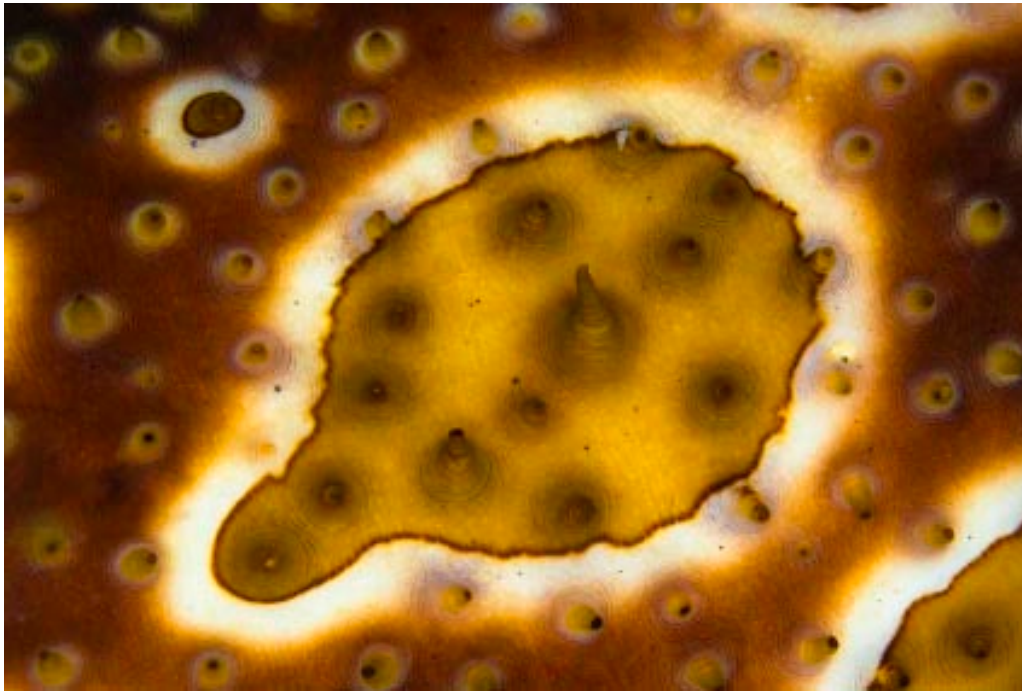
Strawberry anemone detail – Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 200ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 60th

Corals and polyps

Corals are an obvious choice, particularly when their polyps are extended. The structure of the stony element of reef building corals also lend themselves to bold compositions – remember to

keep rotating the camera to find the most pleasing composition. One of my favourite subjects are the sea fans or gorgonians which have a intricate and often colourful branching structure with delicate contrasting polyps which you can compose

against open water. This can give you a choice of backgrounds ranging from jet black through deep blue to pale blue by just adjusting the shutter speed and angle of view towards the surface.



Sea cucumber pattern - Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 100ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 125th



Colonial cup coral polyps - Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 100ASA, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f16 @ 125th

Invertebrates

The invertebrate world is also full of opportunity and includes star fish, crinoids, urchins, sea cucumbers, nudibranchs, sea pens etc. Some of these subjects have powerful natural patterns or their physical structure make very graphic compositions when viewed in extreme close up. Feather stars (crinoids) and plume worms in particular have an amazing fragile structure with numerous diagonals and swirls which mixed with their bright contrasting colours can make stunning images.

We often approach a nudibranch intent on recording the whole of the colourful beast, but some of the larger species provide abstract opportunities as well. Try using the flower like gills or cerata as a centre point in your composition or the brightly coloured stripes and patterns on the body of the species.

Starfish and urchins also boast intricate patterns and textures in bold colours and additionally may carry symbiotic shells or shrimps that can add to the composition. In some locations dive guides will turn over

these species to look for critters or to show you the patterns – be sure to turn them over again and leave them in the same location and habitat. Urchin spines or perhaps the spines of a crown of thorns starfish are also worth exploring in extreme close up and composing with strong diagonals.

Lenses

Shooting with an DSLR the best choice will be one of the longer macro lenses, e.g. 105mm or 200mm micro Nikkor, 150mm or 180mm macro from Sigma etc. These lenses give

you a little more working distance which is an advantage when trying to isolate detail, particularly if you are working with a fish for example. You may find that you also need additional magnification and for this you can choose from wet lenses, close up diopters or a teleconverter. Working at high magnification often results in the lens hunting – either use manual focusing or lock the lens by switching your CSM switch to manual (Nikon) once you have the desired magnification, then rock focus.

If you are using a compact

camera then zoom ratio and magnification will vary between manufacturer but there are a variety of macro wet lenses available for compact camera housings as well. Of course, the great advantage with digital is that you can crop into the detail as well during post processing.

Lighting

I shoot most of my macro with an Inon Quad flash (ring flash) and personally like the lighting effect that it produces, particularly in subjects like anemones which seem to glow a little under flat lighting. You can achieve the same effect by aligning two small strobes alongside your port pointing directly at the subject. Many abstract subjects are fairly 'flat' and so this approach works well, but if you are using your flash guns positioned in a more standard pattern then watch out for harsh shadows as you are normally quite close to the subject. Some subjects respond well to deep shadows from side lighting, so don't forget to experiment with flash position as you explore the best composition.

Composition

Good composition is a very personal assessment and there should be no hard and fast rules in abstract photography. The patterns and shapes in the macro world give you

the opportunity to compose as you please by either following the basic rules or by breaking them with your own interpretation. Many subjects respond well to the classic diagonal positioning in both the portrait and landscape format but try and explore all the potential variations as often the most unlikely arrangement will work best. Experiment as much as possible as we are no longer restrained by 36 frames!

Abstract macro photography can be practiced equally well in both tropical and temperate waters and it often helps to dive with this particular purpose in mind. As always, the best images are produced when you are totally focused on a technique or style of photography but it is easy to be come distracted by other events around you. When you are next set up for macro close you mind to whale sharks and mantas and explore the seemingly endless and sometimes puzzling variety that the reefs have to offer.

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