Composition and Negative Space

by Mark Webster

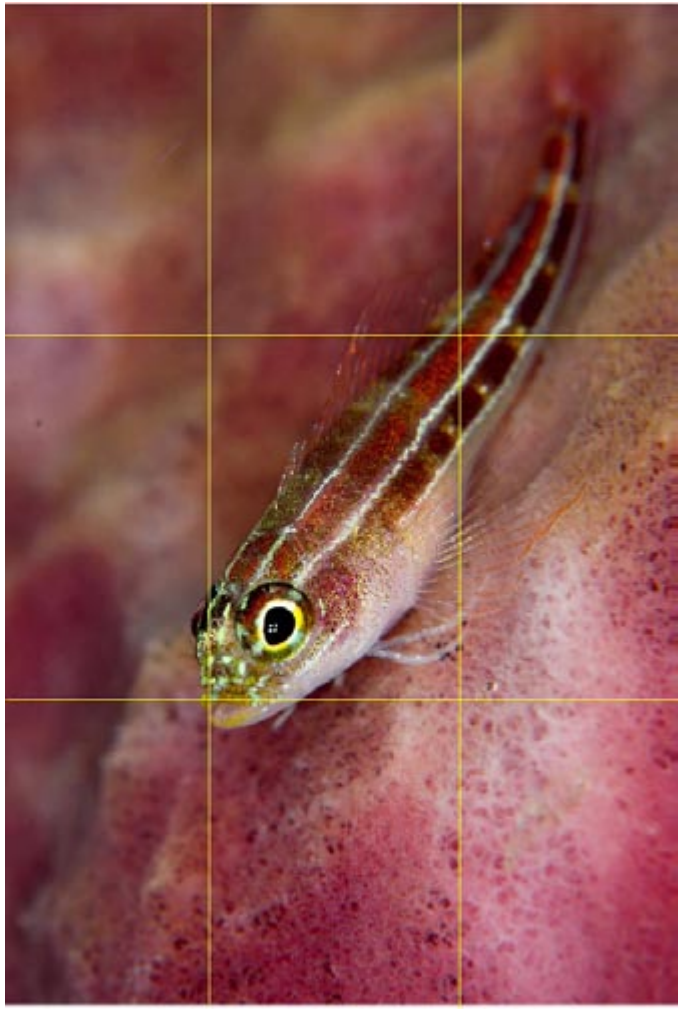
I am sure that we have all seen the results of a competition or perhaps an image in a prestigious publication and thought to yourself "I have a picture just like that". When you examine your own image you may find that it is every bit as good as that winner, but more often than not you will pick out small differences and nuances that add that little extra to the published image. That little extra will almost certainly be due to composition which when planned and applied correctly can make even a common subject stunning.

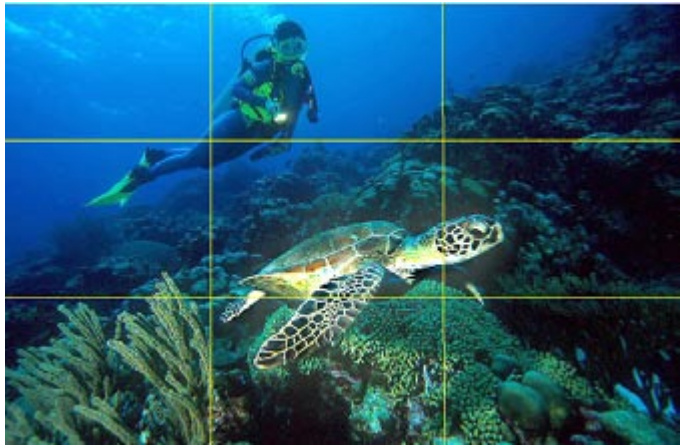
Looking at published images is often a good way to learn the art of composition. By mimicking the style of an appealing image you will probably be applying some of the basic rules of composition, albeit subconsciously in some cases. But if we understand a little of how these rules work it will help you deconstruct a successful image and perhaps see how they can work for your own image.

Although rules are made to be broken and not every powerful picture will follow them slavishly, it does help to have a grasp of the basic concepts and then to train ourselves to think about them when in the water and dealing with all the other variables.

The most basic tool is the rule of thirds, which has been used by all the great classical photographers and in fact can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greeks and Renaissance painters. Essentially it divides the image into nine equal sections by drawing three imaginary horizontal and three vertical lines through the frame. This enables the photographer to position key elements of the image within, or at the intersection of these areas to create a flow and a central focal point in the composition. These are often referred to as the Power Points within the image. For example, the most important feature of a fish will be its face and the eye and mouth which in a portrait image may be composed in the centre or towards the lower third of the frame to lead the viewer's eye over the subject (see example). By using the rule of thirds you can achieve a better sense of balance in an image before you release the shutter.

You might position your subjects to pass through two or more of the "rule of third zones" to create a balance and lead the viewer's attention across the image. The example of the turtle and diver illustrates this. Many cameras offer the option of a grid overlay in the viewfinder which can help



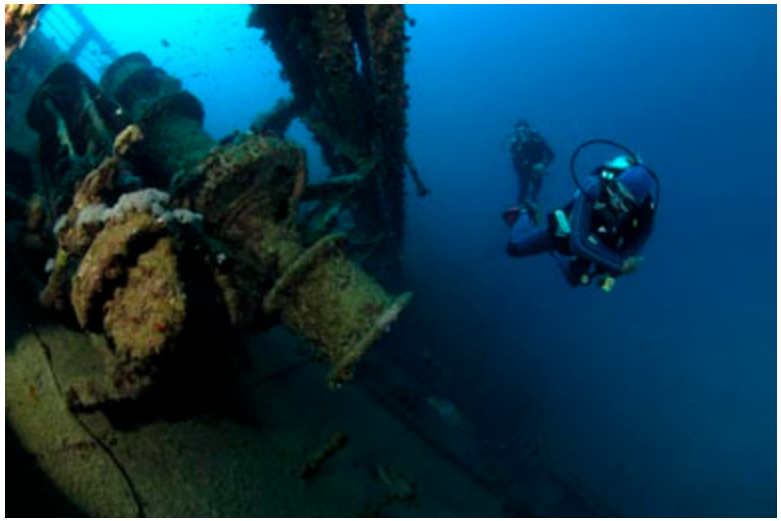


(Left) Rule of Thirds 1 – Triple fin blenny – this portrait format shot demonstrates a classic rule of thirds composition. The fish passes through three of the zones and the eye and mouth are close to one of the 'power points'. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f18 1/125

(Above) Rule of Thirds 2 – Turtle and diver – In this image we have a primary and secondary subject placed in two zone areas to maintain a balance in the image. Both subjects are close to a 'power point' or intersection of a zone. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, Sea & Sea YS120 and YS50 strobes, Elitechrome 100, f11 1/60

Diagonal - Crinoid shrimp – These two examples demonstrate diagonal composition in both a portrait and landscape format. Both are relatively bold and obvious diagonals but you can use this technique quite subtly dependant on the subject. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f18 1/30

Diagonal and Negative Space – Ornate ghost pipefish. This is perhaps a simple image on initial appraisal, however it does combine a diagonal composition, a negative space that describes the subject's habitat and a natural light background to boost subject separation. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f16 1/25



Perspective – In this example the slope and angle of the deck disappear and the overhead pipe rack run into the background of the image creating a sense of depth which is reinforced by the divers swimming up and following the line of the deck.
Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Subtronic Minis, ISO200 f8 1/30

you optimise the positioning of the major elements in your image. So the rule of thirds can help you plan a structure for an image before you release the shutter. Use it as a starting point or guide but don't be a slave to it!

Composing your subject along an imaginary diagonal line is also a very powerful compositional tool. The diagonal is used time and time again in all types of photography, sometimes in a striking and obvious manner, whilst others are more subtle but none the less powerful. In doing this you will inevitably construct your image within the rule of thirds zones but obviously you need to consider where the focal point of the image should be positioned.

We also need to consider the format of the image, should it be a landscape or portrait? The great thing about digital imaging is that we can play with the composition, particularly if we have a static or co-operative subject. This will give you the opportunity to play with the position of the main subject in the image area and assess the difference between say a horizontal and diagonal composition and landscape or portrait format. It is often said that a portrait or vertical image will have more impact but, whilst this may be the best format for a single fish, it is not something we should accept blindly. Twist the camera through 90° or more, watch through the viewfinder and take some sample shots to determine the best format – the obvious one is not always the best one.

Perspective, particularly in wide angle photography is another important compositional tool. We can make effective use of the forced perspective created by a fish eye lens in close focus wide angle by getting

Perspective - You can use the forced perspective qualities of a fish eye lens as a compositional tool to make a small or medium sized foreground object look much larger and a background subject appear to be farther away. A diver in the picture can also be used to mimic a diagonal in the main subject to strengthen the composition as shown here. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, Sea & Sea YS120 and YS50 strobes, Elitechrome 100, f11 1/60

Perspective – This image uses the line of the deck head and walkway to draw the viewer's eye into the depth of the image. The diver swimming towards the camera emphasises this line. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, Subatec S100 and YS50 strobes, Ektachrome 100, f8 1/60

Wide Angle Negative Space Silhouettes can be very powerful images and are simple to take. In this image the graphic straight lines of the hull and outrigger are mimicked by the position of the diver. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 10.5 FE, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO100 f18 1/125.

very close to a foreground subject to make it appear larger than it really is. Add a diver, sunburst, boat or all three and you have a powerful image. You can also get your model to mimic any diagonal line in the image to add a further sense of balance as shown in the example barrel sponge and diver image. Here the sponge is no more than 2ft (60cm) high, but looks far larger, and the diver perhaps 15 feet (5m) or so behind the sponge but looks further away due to the perspective distortion.

We can also use perspective to draw the viewer's eye into an image and add a sense of depth. This works well with wreck photography where, for example, the line of the deck or a walkway can be positioned in the image to emphasis the perspective. Having a diver follow this line, perhaps towards the camera, is also very effective as shown in the two examples.

Positive Use of Negative Space

Negative space is essentially anything in the frame that is not the main subject or point of interest. The objective is to try and separate or distinguish your primary subject from the back ground and for this we need our negative space to be contrasting or complimentary. Another alternative is to choose a background that completes the story or balance of an image.

In wide angle our task is a little easier as we can use the backdrop

Wide Angle Negative Space Adding a dive boat on the surface is one of the simple and effective ways of filling the negative space in a wide angle image. Remember to move the camera around to position the boat correctly and perhaps add a hint of sunburst. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 16mm FE, Subatec S100 strobe, Ektachrome ASA100 f16 1/125.

Macro Negative Space Sometimes it is a good idea to look for the negative space first and then wait for a suitable subject to enter it. In this case the domino fish gave in to his curiosity and had to peek at the camera. Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f18 1/125.

of the reef or open blue water as complimentary negative space and these will be a part of the image that generally do not fight with the main subject. Wide angle images often offer the opportunity to get below the main subject and adopt a view towards the surface. By adding a sunburst, a boat on the surface or a diver we can create a balance in the image and fill the negative space.

Successfully positioning a diver in the frame can be difficult unless you have a dedicated model. Photographers in theory should make good models as we understand the need to be positioned correctly in the image. However, we are often the most impatient of models as the urge to return to your own photography is ever present! If you are planning to pose for each other make sure you discuss your needs and a range of polite signals first! The other alternative when diving with a group is to look for good foreground compositions and then wait for a diver to pass through or direct one of the group into the frame. Even the dullest of foregrounds can be made more interesting with the addition of a diver so try and imagine the possibilities even if the reef does not look inspiring to begin with.

Negative space in macro may be a little more challenging as reef features are often around or close behind our main subject which can produce busy or competing backgrounds. In these circumstances we can use the inherent shallow depth of field of the macro lens to our advantage to soften and blur the background. Basic macro guidance, particularly in underwater photography, is to use a small aperture to maximise the depth of field and therefore ease the task of focussing. But opening up the aperture a couple of stops say from f22 to f11 has a significant effect on DOF and if you are braver still then open the aperture to f8 or f5.6 and the reduction is dramatic. Accurate focussing is more important and you will need to control the power of your lighting to ensure a correct exposure, but the result will be pleasing soft blurred backgrounds.

We can of course look for subjects in positions which allow us to exclude the background by shooting against open water and then choose to have a black background or a balanced light background. Balanced light backgrounds may need longer shutter speeds or perhaps an increase in ISO or a combination of both. Each subject will be different dependant on prevailing conditions and you will need to take a few shots to get the desired effect.

Subject separation is another consideration and is particularly important when working with camouflaged species. For example, we as photographers all know what a frog fish is and will be likely to be able to spot one in a reef image. But showing this to perhaps a non diver and they probably will see a lump of sponge. Adopting a low angle and placing a subject like this against open water now reveals a very strange looking fish. The viewer still may not know that this is a frog fish but you have succeeded in revealing the weird beast.

Another alternative is to look for interesting or striking negative space and then wait for an inquisitive

(Above) Separation 1 . We as photographers will know this is a frog fish but to the uninitiated this would be hard to spot due to the excellent camouflage. This sort of subject needs separation from the background to make it more recognisable. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/60.
(Right) This is the same frog fish as in image 1 but at the end of the dive. The froggy had moved to perch in a tube sponge to improve his hunting but also offering me a lower angle to capture him against an open water background which reveals the face of a very odd looking fish. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/60.

(Left) Poor Bokeh – Nudibranch. In this image of a nudibranch we can see that the highlights in the background are reflecting back into the lens in the shape of the aperture – thus poor bokeh! Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f16 1/80.
(Right) Good Bokeh – Nudibranch. In this image the background is softly focussed and smooth with no distracting highlights - thus good bokeh! Nikon D100, Light & Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f18 1/125.

subject to move into it. A good example of this is the brightly coloured skirt of a giant anemone which can range between scarlet and deep purple. Anemones may have clown fish, domino fish, shrimps or porcelain crabs as symbiotic residents and a bit of patient waiting and scanning through the viewfinder will pay off.

No discussion on macro photography is complete without the mysterious and now popular term Bokeh, which does play a part in negative space. This term is derived from the Japanese word for 'fuzzy' or out of focus and is used to describe the way a lens reproduces a softly focussed background. So lenses are referred to as having good or bad bokeh and the key to this is apparently in the design of the aperture diaphragm – round ones tend to produce the most pleasing results.

Poor bokeh normally becomes an issue when reflections or highlights in the background (caused by backscatter for example) typically show the shape of the aperture, but sometimes you may have to look hard for this. Good bokeh produces smooth even backgrounds with no obvious shapes. However I think that we could become overly concerned by this as most current macro lenses are well designed in this respect, although plainly some are better than others. In the real world getting the shot and composing well are probably more important.

Abstract – Giant clam siphon and mantle – Abstract images lend themselves well to the principles of composition. In this example we have the rule of thirds and a gentle diagonal with perspective flowing to the back of the image. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f16 1/80.

Although composition is crucial to a successful photograph it is all too easy to become a slave to it if you try too hard. Keep it in the back of your mind and break the rules occasionally. With experience you will learn to dissect the image you are viewing through the viewfinder and examine its compositional elements. By changing your position and twisting or moving the camera or just changing the format from horizontal to vertical, you can vary the composition until it is arranged in a pleasing or striking manner before you release the shutter. Don't forget these are guidelines only and breaking the rules can also create stunning images. You will never know until you try!

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