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A sort of “half abstract,” as some with eagle eyes might see what this scene is about. Yet, it leaves room for many different interpretations and impressions.

Text and photos by Rico Besserdich

Abstract underwater photography—some may whisper, oh that’s “art”; others may shout, it’s “foolish and completely pointless!” while mourning the downfall of “real” photography. Some may stare at abstract images, unable to understand what they are seeing, because the perceived image does not match their expectations. And then, there are some who see their imaginations and senses boosted, eyes switching to “super-boost mode”—a fireworks of new synapses stimulating their brains, music starts playing and some might even hear luring voices whispering to them. But whether it is a lack of understanding (leading even to anger) or a refreshing fireworks of synapses, it all starts with one simple question: “What is it?”



Abstractions

Under the Waves

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the mysterious and challenging world of abstract photography. Yes, it works underwater, too.

Many very clever people have worked

hard to formulate a one-size-fits-all definition of abstract photography. Hence, several slightly different definitions do exist—none of them wrong, but also, none of them covers it all.

Without being too scientific, photographer and professor of psychology John Suler nailed it down to a few understandable words:

“An abstract photograph draws away from that which is realistic or literal. It draws away from natural appearances and recognizable subjects in the actual world. Some people even say it departs





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To isolate specific parts of an object always works well in abstract photography, underwater and above (right); The dynamic of water expressed in an abstract way (left)—strong contrasts work well.

from true meaning, existence, and reality itself. It stands apart from the concrete whole with its purpose instead depending on conceptual meaning and intrinsic form . . . Here's the acid test: If you look at a photo and there's a voice inside you that says 'What is it?' Well, there you go. It's an abstract photograph." [Source: *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche*, Prof. John Suler, True Center Publishing, 2013]

It is in the nature of photography itself that many photographers—underwater and above—love to stick to "rules." Some of those are defined by technical aspects such as camera and strobe settings and optics. Others are defined by dogmas, which have turned into "laws" just because enough people have repeatedly used them endlessly over the decades. There is nothing wrong with that, but let's entertain the thought that photography works on many different levels and dimensions, many of them yet to be discovered. There is never a 100 percent clear "right" or "wrong."



This, however, is no invitation to mess up your shots and claim them to be "abstract art" later on, waiting for MoMA (Museum of Modern Art, in New York City) to pay you a fortune for it. In a way, abstract photography (whether one likes it or not) requires mastery and a profound knowledge of photography.

But most of all, it requires something money can't buy: the ability of the photographer to dive down deep into the essence of a subject in order to photograph and turn it all into something new. Something that (if we are lucky) turns on the music and alters the "what is it" question into a steady stream of new impressions and thoughts. Available technology

such as cameras, lenses and image-editing software do, of course, come in handy, but they are still unable to compete with the eyes and mind of a creative and thoughtful photographer. This means: Don't mind your photo gear too much. It's just fine and will do the job.

Definitions

To help us understand abstract photography a bit better, let's see Wikipedia's definition of it, and let's add a few "translations."

"Abstract photography, sometimes called non-objective, experimental, conceptual or concrete photography, is a means of depicting a visual

image that does not have an immediate association with the object world and that has been created through the use of photographic equipment, processes or materials." (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_photography)

The bad news: Your collection of "eyes of fish" cannot be called abstract photography, as it is clear to viewers that those images display eyes of fish. It means that an immediate association with the subject exists, which can be interpreted as contrary to the definition of abstract photography.

But at least we are still allowed to use our cameras, and digital post-production is a nice tool in the



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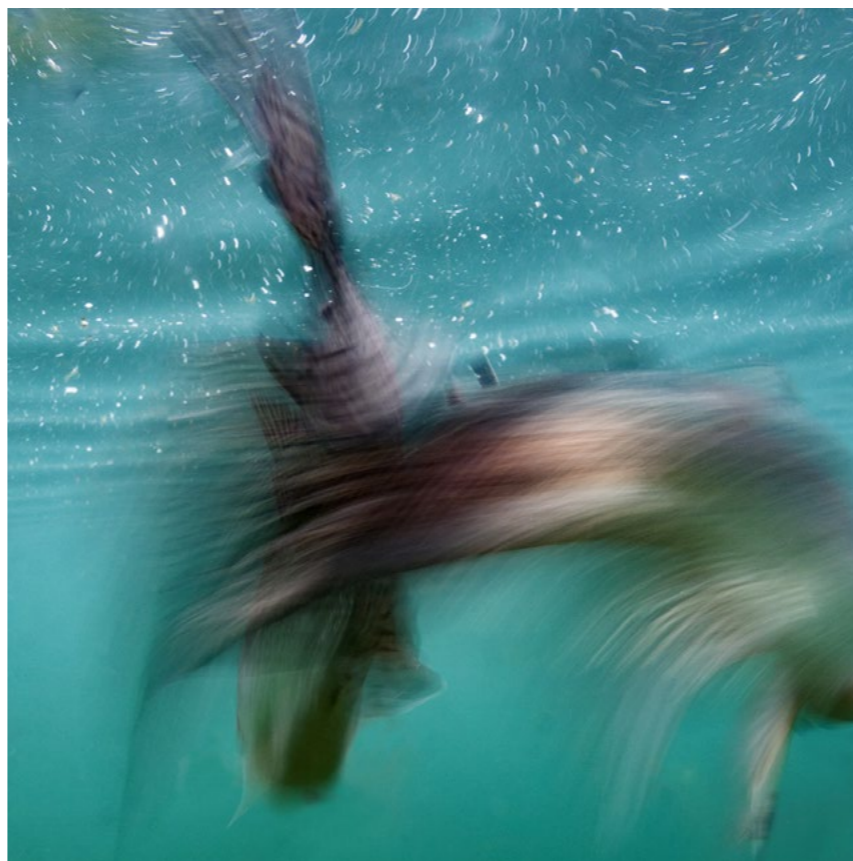
Another example of "isolation" (right); One does not always need a shark to express "speed" in an abstract photograph (lower right); Different angles and an intentional alteration of the depth of field can turn a common photographic subject into something new (below)

creation of abstract photography. In the days of analog photography, and later in printing, much could be done by changing or altering the materials (such as paper type).

Wikipedia goes on to state:

"An abstract photograph may isolate a fragment of a natural scene in order to remove its inherent context from the viewer, it may be purposely staged to create a seemingly unreal appearance from real objects, or it may involve the use of color, light, shadow, texture, shape and/or form to convey a feeling, sensation or impression."

The good news: We can isolate fragments of our photo subjects underwater, not to answer the question "what is it?" but to let our viewers come to their own impressions, develop feelings, or hear luring whispers or music. Isolation of specific fragments of a subject works well in abstract underwater photography, and in any case of doubt, "unreal" images make viewers take a closer look at our images. We do not want people to spend just two seconds looking at our images, hit the "Like" button, and then leave. We, of course, want them



to look longer, think a bit deeper, reflect... and turn the music on.

Lastly, Wikipedia states:

"The image may be produced using traditional photographic equipment like a

camera, darkroom or computer, or it may be created without using a camera by directly manipulating film, paper or other photographic media, including digital presentations."

Sounds almost like unlimited freedom, doesn't it? At least, as long as you are not about to enter underwater photography contests. While I prefer to create abstract images with a camera only or in-camera (call me a purist!) and post-production—in this case, it is better to say that "digital image manipulation" is considered a "legal" tool in creating abstract images.

Analog photographers can have lots of fun in the darkroom experimenting

with acids, proteins or even urine (oh yes, that's been done already!) on their films and papers. Those who now trust in digital image sensors might prefer image-editing software, as it is well known that digital camera sensors do not act well with proteins... or "worse things."

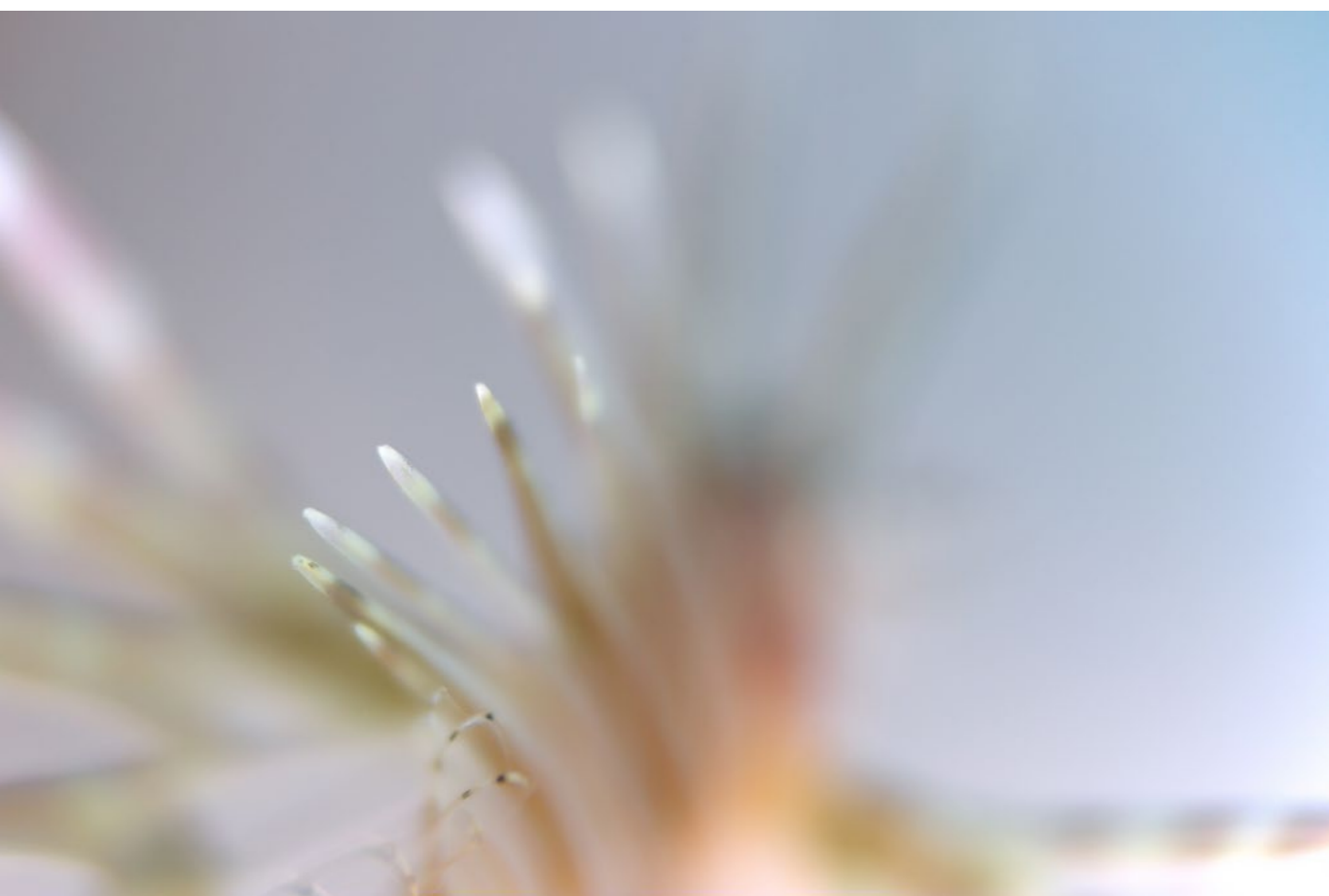
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The “spinning” technique is an interesting tool in creating abstract photographs of common subjects (right); Abstract, minimalistic... and blue (below)

Let's summarize

Abstract photography:

- Is non-objective, with no immediate association with the subject. The subject is secondary.
- Makes beholders think and reflect (“what is it?”), allowing them to develop their own impressions and feelings.
- Understands the real essence of a subject, digging deep, thinking deep.
- Plays with patterns, textures, color variations, tonal variations, curves, shapes and geometry, blurring, angles and

focus to create special abstract images.

- Is brave, playful and experimental. *Let the music play!*

By the way, abstract photography is not new at all. The first abstract photograph was created in the year 1842 by John William Draper. His works did not make it into the Museum of Modern Art but into the Smithsonian—that's also quite something.

Looking at all the factors that can make a photograph an abstract one, we can now agree that there is a lot of potential for shooting abstract un-



derwater images.

A photo dive with the aim of bringing some interesting abstract shots back home requires a different way of seeing things during that dive. It also requires one to forget (for the moment) some “rules” of classical underwater photography.

I need to add that when it comes to abstract photography, there simply is no “middle” ground: Some people love it and some people hate it. It is a question of personal taste and preferences, but the attempt to open our eyes and senses to abstract imagery sharpens the photographic eye and stimulates our creativity. Suddenly, very common or even “boring” subjects offer

new photographic potential. We only need two things: the eyes to see it, and the will to express something different.

Time for a warm-up!

The good news first: Almost any camera can do it. Compact cameras, DSLRs, mirrorless cameras—they all are generally suitable for abstract photography. The same is true for lenses. Prime lenses (with fixed focal length), zoom lenses, wide-angle, fisheye or macro lenses—they all work.

In abstract photography, there is no need to be too scientific or even picky about technology. But it still helps to know how to use the technology available to you. The journey to abstract photography is a journey into your inner self, your imagination, creativity, and most of all,

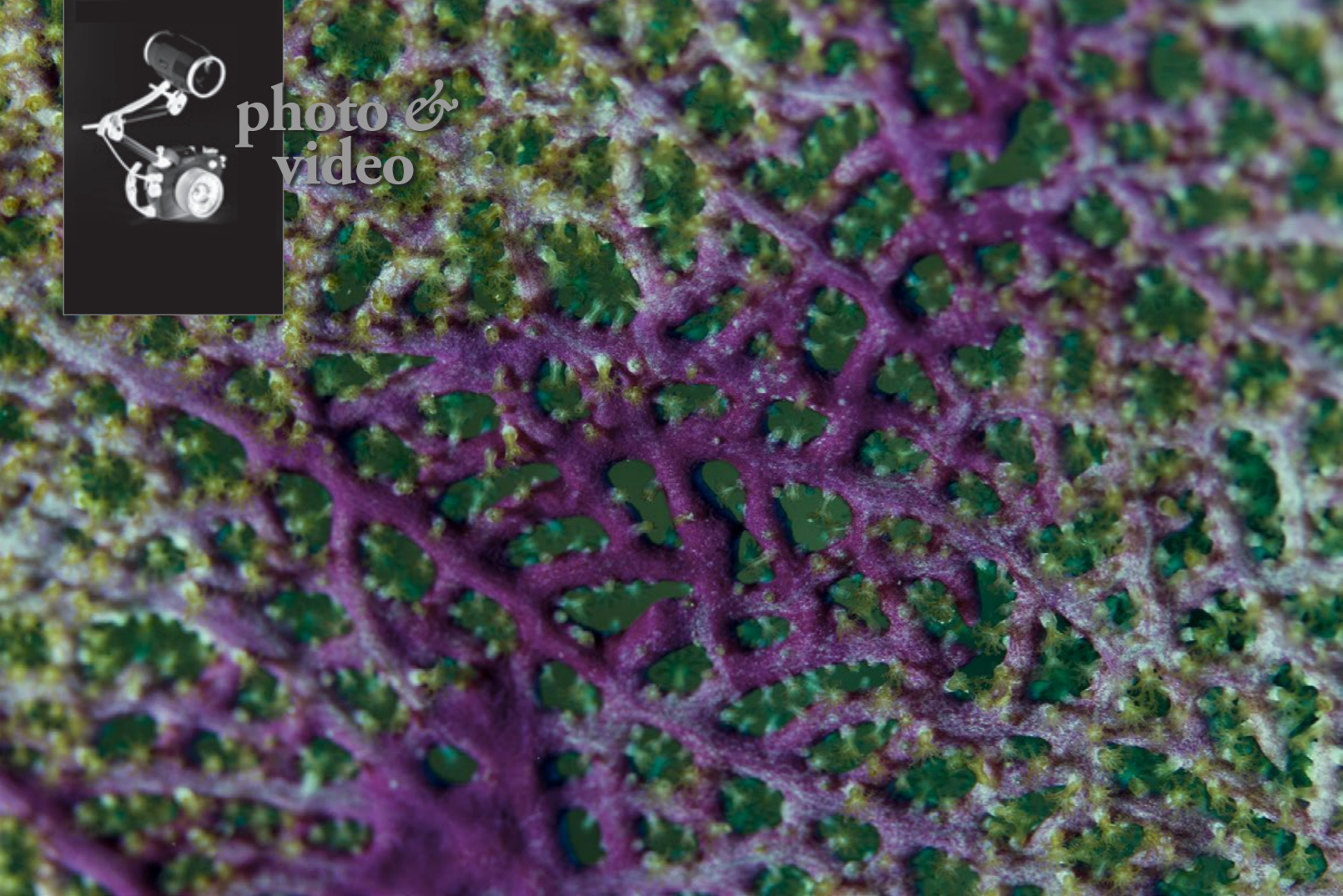
your ability to think deeper, uncovering the heart and soul—the very essence—of the subject in your photograph.

So, instead of talking about camera models, settings, lenses and stuff, let's activate some new synapses. Before we shoot, we think. Let's try a mentally abstract approach to a popular underwater photography subject—the shark.

Now, when thinking about sharks, what comes to mind? Perhaps elegance, beauty, speed, evolution, grey color, big teeth, rough skin? Anything else? Just take your time and think about what makes a shark, a shark. Write down a few short words or characteristics. There is no need for a complete list. What is important is your very own thoughts and impressions.



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While scuba divers might have a clue as to what this subject is, everyone else might ask the “what is it?” question (left); Tree of Life—is it a plant, a tunnel system of diligent ants, or a very close look at a coral? Who cares? In an abstract photograph, viewers can see whatever they like (below).

Abstractions

photography. But don't go shooting nudibranchs for a magazine article and deliver images in which no one can spot a nudibranch. That wouldn't do you any good.

However, if you feel like you now have more than enough nudibranch pictures in your archive, but your preferred dive spots have nothing else to offer (except nudis), you perhaps might like to give abstract photography a try. It works perfectly with common subjects, and after all, it is always a good idea to be brave and try something new.

What works well in abstract underwater photography?

Patterns

Any kind of decorative motifs such as color patterns of fishes, corals, sun-ray reflections on the sandy seabed or even different blue tones in open water.

Textures

Anything that gives one the feeling that one is “touching it.” This could be the rough metal on wrecks, stones and rocks, skin details on a shark, the surface of a jellyfish or fish scales.

Color variations

Anything that comes with at least two colors could work. The “abstraction” here comes from the interplay of colors. All blue and red hues work fabulously. Green and yellow hues can work as well, as long as they are bright and not dark.

Tonal variations

Variations of color tones (different tones of one and the same color) and also black and white elements have great “abstract potential.” Tones of blue (or green) water, or the interplay of light and

However, please exclude thoughts like:

- expensive
- needs a wide-angle lens
- no holidays left
- scuba regulator needs to get serviced first
- needs a better camera

These thoughts are not helpful at all during this little creative brainstorming.

Pick one of the characteristics you have listed. Incidentally, I have picked “speed.” Now comes the question: How does one express speed (of a shark) in an abstract photograph? I have to confess, my pick was actually not that incidental.

Most likely, your spiritual and creative mind has now connected itself with your “analytical” and technical mind. Is your mind whispering phrases like “slow shut-

ter speed,” “slow sync flash,” or “pan”? That's all right, you have incidentally just solved the task of finding a suitable photography technique. Easy thing, that was—leaving us more time for shooting.

Now, what is left to do is to go diving, find a shark and shoot images. Not everything can be planned or even staged in abstract photography. Sometimes (oftentimes, actually) things just happen, and sometimes, there is no shark to be found. But that does not matter so much. What matters is how you are now observing the world around you with different eyes.

Even in waters where there is not much to see and nothing swims, floats or crawls around, you still have the element of the water itself. Seen with the eyes of an abstract photographer, water is very photogenic and the possibilities are endless.

Seen from a more psychological perspective, abstract photography often works with something I now like to call “provocation.” And this is why: Whenever a human looks at an image, the brain automatically compares the perceived with formerly stored perceptions and knowledge.

If there is a match in the database (the brain), everything is fine. But if there is no match, the brain feels “provoked” (and hopefully stimulated), the finger moves away from the “Like” button, and brain cells on holiday are called back to attend an immediate emergency think tank. The human begins to think and reflect about the perceived. “What is it?” is just the first step. Now, try not to think about a pink shark.

Abstract photography is in a class of its own, and is certainly not meant to replace any other general themes or categories of





shadow on wrecks, are both good subjects with which to start.

Curves, shape and geometry

In simple words, it's about how things, or subjects, are formed or shaped. Subjects can include corals, fish fins, special underwater landscapes, wrecks (in total or only parts of them) and silhouettes of all kinds... as long as they are interesting-looking. Beware: If one can easily identify the subject, it ain't an abstract photograph.

Blur

Unsharpness—but created with intention! Motion blur, bokeh effect, panning, spinning or zooming—there are lots of ways to create an abstract shot based on, or working with, blur. This works with almost anything you can find underwater!

Angles

Unique, or even uncommon, angles or points of view can result in interesting abstract photographs. One hundred percent permission to break "classical" rules granted! From below, from behind or even diagonally... any way you like it.

Focus and depth of field

To set the focus at unusual points on a subject can create interesting abstract shots. Decrease the depth of field intentionally and suddenly see the very same subject in a more "abstract way."

Is abstract photography considered contemporary art, fine art or not art at all? It doesn't really matter. What matters is opening our eyes to new visions and ideas of photography, and always staying open to something new. What

is important is (as always) that you enjoy taking images underwater and that you like your photographs—even the abstract ones.

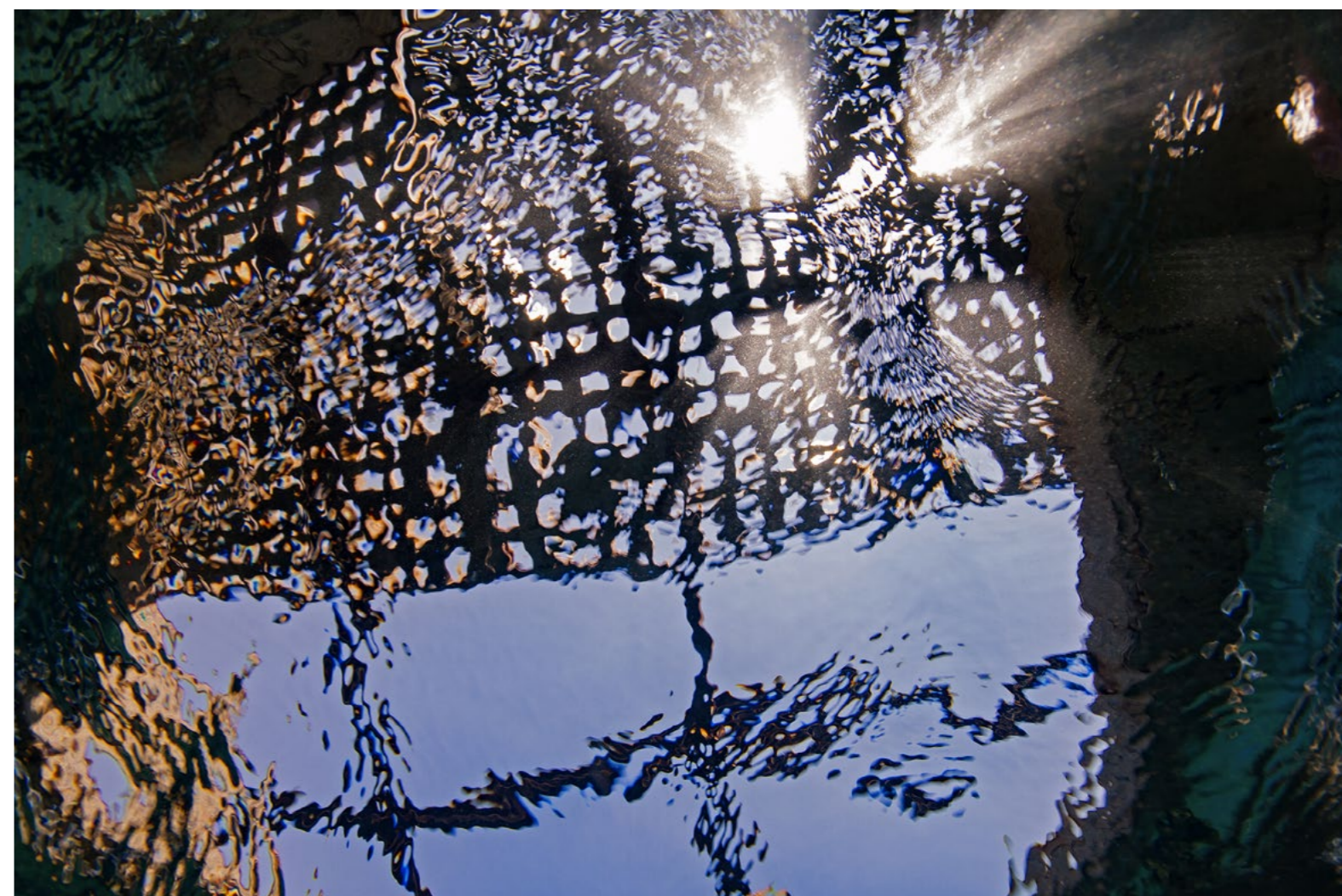
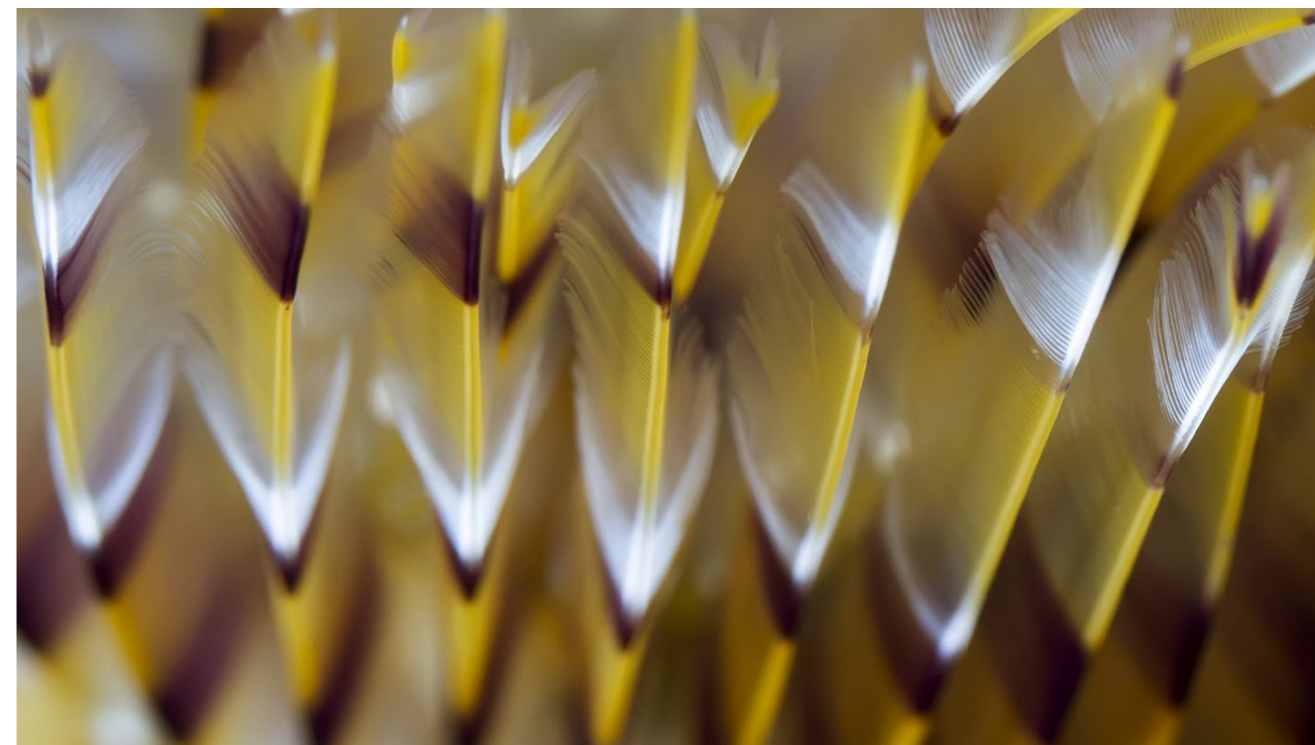
One last tip: A "serious" abstract photographer never reveals what the original subject of the abstract image is. Help your viewers use their brains, allow them the freedom of impression and keep your own freedom of expression.

Now, let the music play and never forget: "There is no must in art because art is free." — Wassily Kandinsky ■

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Doing crazy things in image-editing might result in an abstract image. But I personally find it painful to ruin my image like this. Please don't ask me to do it a second time (left); Again, isolation of specific parts (or colors) of an object come in handy for shooting things the abstract way (below).

Abstractions



And if there is nothing swimming or crawling around to photograph, we always have the water itself to shoot.





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Vuze XR

Available in black or white, the unique dual-camera design of the Vuze

XR Camera seamlessly combines two advanced capture systems into one pocketable device. Portable and simple to use, the camera gives everyone the power and convenience to record and live stream, or share, from their mobile phone or computer. The Vuze XR Camera is aimed at both consumers and prosumers, and enables users to easily create and share experiences in both 5.7K 360° (2D) or VR180 (3D) formats. The camera includes a mobile app for iOS and Android, and desktop editing software for Mac and Windows. The software supports basic and advanced editing and stitching functions for VR180 and 360° content, including live streaming in both VR180 and 360°, as well as sharing directly to social media channels. Tripod and underwater cases are for 360° and VR180 are accessories. **Vuze.camera**

From macro to wide

Nauticam's new MWL-1 is a game-changing wet-mount lens. Ultra wide-angle and macro perspectives are now available on the same dive—even with full frame DSLR systems. The Nauticam MWL-1 is a wet-mounted ultra-wide lens designed to be used with a 60mm full-frame equivalent macro lens that results in an ultra-wide 150° field of view. The MWL-1 can focus from the lens' front element to infinity. The MWL-1 excels at smaller apertures, and full-frame shooters will get optimal results at F16 or higher. The lens is depth rated to 100m and weighs 1.20kg in air and 0.58kg in water.

Nauticam.com



Camera or dive light?

We have often bemoaned the dearth of innovation, but the Tovatec Mera appears to be one of those bright ideas (pardon the pun) about which one cannot help thinking why hasn't this been thought of before. The Mera combines a 1000 lumen primary dive light with a high definition camera capable of recording 1080p video. Whatever the light is pointed at gets recorded by the camera when it is switched on. Burn time with both the light on and the camera recording is 1.5hrs. It can be operated with one hand using three buttons. One turns light on/off, another takes still photos, and the third stops and starts the video. The light glows blue to let you know it is ready to record, and glows red when it is recording video. Depth rated to 60m. The product is available 1 November 2018. **Tovatec.com**



Spherical video

The Garmin VIRB 360 is a rugged waterproof camera capable of capturing fully spherical video in up to 5.7K/30fps resolution with 360-degree audio, and it includes built-in GPS. With one-click 4K spherical stabilization for smooth and steady footage, it eliminates, or greatly reduces, the lengthy editing process—no matter how rough the adventure. With in-camera stitching, videos are immediately viewable and sharable with the free, easy-to-use VIRB Mobile app or VIRB Edit desktop software. You can even instantly live stream to YouTube or Facebook. VIRB is compatible with many other Garmin devices, mounts and more. **Garmin.com**



Weird or what?

The Laowa 24mm f/14 2x Macro Probe, is perhaps the weirdest-looking lens we have ever laid our eyes on. Is it an underwater lens? Well, sort of, but not quite. The front of the lens, which has a diameter of just 0.79in (2cm) and a built-in LED, can be inserted into water and/or into extremely narrow spaces. While traditional macro lenses isolate tiny subjects with extremely shallow depths-of-field, the Laowa 24mm captures an 84.1° wide-angle, bug's-eye view that includes background details. It also allows to focuses as close as 2cm and in 2:1 ratio.

Venuslens.net

