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Howard Schatz on underwater portraits with EOS DSLRs

© Howard Schatz

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A pioneer of the digital underwater portrait, Howard Schatz has refined his technique over many years of experience and now, recently paired with a Canon EOS 5D Mark III, he's raising the bar even further, as CPN Editor David Corfield discovers...



© Howard Schatz [Enlarge image](#)

Underwater Study #1. Schatz's first ever digital underwater image, which he still rates as one of his best. Taken on a Canon EOS-1Ds with an EF24-70mm f/2.8L USM lens at 40mm; the exposure was 1/60sec at f/11, ISO 200.

There aren't many photographers like Howard Schatz. He's at an age now where lesser men would hang up their cameras and contemplate a quiet retrospective in a gallery somewhere, but not Mr. Schatz, not a bit of it. The very thought, in fact, is enough to send this genius of the underwater image into a creative maelstrom as he finds ever more exciting ways to push himself – and his photography – to new heights. Or should that be depths?

Schatz ignores my ridiculous pun and looks me square in the eye through his webcam. It's 8am in California and he's just come in from jogging. "Let's get right down to business: I'm driven by quality," he explains. "And I only ever work with the highest quality cameras to get the results I demand. I'm a tough worker – I shoot pretty much every day – and the equipment I use gets one heck of a pounding... it's one of the reasons I switched to Canon eight years ago, because I knew they were producing the very best tools for the job. I've never had any reason to change."



© Howard Schatz [Enlarge image](#)

Underwater Study #3223. Taken on a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with an EF16-35mm f/2.8L USM lens at 17mm; the exposure was 1/60sec at f/11, ISO 200.

Howard Schatz has been shooting for the last 20 years, having given up on a career as a retinal surgeon after the lure of another type of lens got the better of him. It's his underwater work, involving dancers and – later – celebrities, that caught the world's attention and Schatz points out that it's basketball in particular which he has to thank for it.

"In 1990 my wife and I bought a piece of land in Marin County, California, just north of San Francisco, and we designed a house together. I am very athletic and I wanted an indoor swimming pool that had a basketball hoop on the wall at just the right height for me to shoot baskets while I was in the pool."

“It was while I was shooting baskets that I got thinking about taking photographs underwater,” Schatz reveals. “One day I got splashed in the eyes by the ball landing right in front of me, so I put on a pair of goggles. It was at that moment that I realised how interesting the world under the water looked...”



© Howard Schatz [Enlarge image](#)

Underwater Study #3222. Taken on a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with an EF16-35mm f/2.8L USM lens at 17mm; the exposure was 1/60sec at f/11, ISO 200.

Howard Schatz knew straightaway that he was onto something, and rushed out to buy an underwater housing for his camera. On the way back he invited some friends to join him in the pool so that he could try out the housing and see if he could get some interesting images.

“I realised this underwater world was magic,” he admits. “I could see that under the water there was this beautifully weightless environment. So, for the next six months, I began to explore ways of making images underwater. Nobody could help me with the technique either, because all the other underwater photographers I knew went deep underwater with scuba gear and lights – whereas all I wanted to do was shoot human beings.”

“I had to learn about composition, resolution, colour correction, lighting, water chemistry, water temperature and a host of other things before I was ready to do this properly,” he recalls. “I made careful notes and over the course of six months I discovered how to make a great image that I had complete control over.”

Schatz started working with a prima ballerina from the San Francisco Ballet, British-born Katita Waldo, who was very happy to have Howard Schatz photograph her in a weightless environment. “The adversary of dance is gravity,” Schatz warns. “And underwater, where there is none, you can make glorious pictures. From those early sessions with Katita I realised I was onto something. In fact some of those pictures from that first shoot are among the best I have ever made.”

A purpose-built photographic pool

Howard Schatz’s stunning images of ballerinas underwater had soon caught the eye of fashion magazines and in mid-1995 he published a book called ‘Water Dance’, which led to a number of shoots that elevated him even higher in art circles. “By 2002 we decided to buy a property in upstate Connecticut and I had another pool made,” he explains. “But this time a proper, photographic pool because by now I had become an expert.”

Biography: Howard Schatz



© Howard Schatz

Howard Schatz was born in Chicago, USA. He trained as a retina specialist at Johns Hopkins University and while living and practicing as a retina specialist in San Francisco, started working as a fine art photographer, turning professional in 1994. The photographs of Howard Schatz are exhibited in museums and photography galleries internationally and are included in many private collections. He has received international acclaim for his work, which has been published in 18 monographs. His most recently published, 'With child', is the result of a 20-year long exploration of the landscape of the human body in the last two weeks of pregnancy. Most recently, Sports Illustrated magazine published Schatz's study of boxing and boxers from his book 'At the Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing'.

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