



THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EYE

column & photographs
by Tony Wu

Walk into any camera store or browse online for the latest in photographic gear these days, and you'll no doubt be overwhelmed by choices. How many megapixels of resolution do you want? What ISO range does the camera have? What are the lens choices? What companies make housings for which cameras? Can you shoot HD video, too?

I have no doubt that within the next few years, we'll see even more features—shooting HDR images in-camera, perhaps; or having high-speed video capture capability; or being able to capture multiple images with a wide depth-of-field range—along with a whole slew of functions I can't even begin to imagine.

And yet, none of this matters much.

Don't get me wrong. I'm usually the first in line to play with new toys and gee-whiz techniques, and I'm by no means belittling the incredible advances in technology we've seen, but I happen to be a big believer in sticking to fundamentals.

I realize that my last statement comes across like a tired old platitude, but bear with me. I'll endeavor to show you that there's substance to what I'm saying. With the following three pairs of photographs—six images in total—I'll try to underscore my belief that vision, both literal and figurative, is the most important and advanced tool at your disposal.



Juvenile midnight snapper (*Macolor niger*)

SEE (DON'T JUST LOOK): First up, take a look at these two images of a juvenile midnight snapper (*Macolor niger*), both from a trip I took to New Ireland in Papua New Guinea.

There's nothing wrong per se with the first photograph, but as soon as I took it, I thought: "Hmmm, the exposure is right, but the background is distracting, and there's minimal impact."

After watching the fish for a while, I noticed that it periodically swam up in the water column to snatch bits of food from the current. With clear water and a bright sky above, the situation was ideal to try to capture an image that you don't see often—juvenile snapper against a blue background.

So with the same camera and same lights as I used for the first picture, I managed to get a much nicer image (the second one), simply by seeing the photograph that was begging to be taken.





Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*)

INTERPRET (DON'T JUST PRESS THE SHUTTER):

I realize that most people reading this haven't had the opportunity to frolic among frisky sea lions, but I can't think of a better subject than these adorable pinnipeds to illustrate my next point. Sea lions have character. They're intelligent, inquisitive, interactive—and they express their feelings quite clearly.

The first photograph shows an Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) swimming by, sort of looking toward me, but not really communicating any particular mood or action. Once again, it's not a bad photograph, but it's not something to make you look twice, either.

The second image, on the other hand, immediately grabs your attention.

The difference between the two pictures isn't due to better equipment or newer gear. It's not even the composition, lighting, or exposure—although these are obviously important considerations. The primary difference is in interpretation.

The sea lions in this particular location, Carnac Island in Western Australia, engage in their daily activities whether people are around or not. Watching them, understanding their daily routine, and then engaging the sea lions during their “play time,” when they were most receptive to interaction, created the ideal circumstances for the second image.

All I had to do was observe and interpret this sea lion's mood, and it practically created the photo opportunity for me.





CREATE (DON'T IMITATE): My final point is a simple one—that photography can be art, if you make it so. And like all art, originality is critical. The key to originality is seeing what other people don't.

To illustrate this point, I've selected two photos from a recent trip to the Lembeh Strait. Taking photographs in Lembeh is truly a challenge, because so many divers visit this destination every day of the year, a large proportion of them carrying cameras.

It's not difficult, for instance, to take a photograph of an Ambon scorpionfish (*Pteroidichthys amboinensis*) in Lembeh, since these fish are relatively common in the area. It is, however, more of a challenge to create an image of an Ambon scorpionfish that's different enough to make even the most experienced divers and underwater photographers stop and take a look.

The two images here are of the same fish in the same place and the same conditions, taken only a few minutes apart.

One is a snapshot; the other is art. ■

For more of Tony's work, visit: <http://www.tony-wu.com>



Ambon scorpionfish (*Pteroidichthys amboinensis*)

VISION VS. TECHNOLOGY:

The point I'm trying to get across is that technology, while certainly helpful, isn't the key to creating unique and artistic images—vision is.

I took all of the images here with normal DSLRs and strobes for the images that needed artificial light. I didn't use any fancy equipment, and more importantly, I didn't use any special settings on the camera. In other words, there were no secret weapons or high-tech helpers.

All I needed was control over aperture, shutter, ISO (and focus, of course)—the same variables I've always used since lugging around my first beat-up old Nikon F2A with rolls of Kodachrome—along with the desire and patience to see the image.