

Text and photos by Rico Besserdich

The path to a better image is always a path that comes with a deeper understanding about which elements of an image are in charge of awakening the attention of the viewer. The goal is to create images that please you and your audience alike. This does not always require the creation of a masterpiece of art, as the interpretation of “what is art” is quite a controversial topic anyway.



# Contrast, Line, Haptics

— *As elements of image composition*

LEFT: A colorful subject in front of a dark background is an all-time winner, based on a very simple (yet effective) concept of working with contrasts.  
ABOVE: Lines guide the viewer's eye, sometimes toward a subject, sometimes away.

Art aside, the creation of interesting and attractive underwater images is not that difficult once the basic principles of photography, in the classical sense, are understood. Regardless of which subject

is photographed, a strong key to effective imagery lays in the composition of an image. Image composition is not done by just knowing the Rule of Thirds (though knowing it certainly helps). There

are several more factors and elements of composition that are critical, and I would like to introduce a few of those now.  
The objective is to come to a clear





The most extreme contrast is the one between brightest white and darkest black.

Blue and orange/yellow color tones—a classic when working with color contrast in image composition



Red tones and blue tones combined (above) always produce an eye-catching color contrast; Orange fish and blue water background—it is simple and it always works (right)

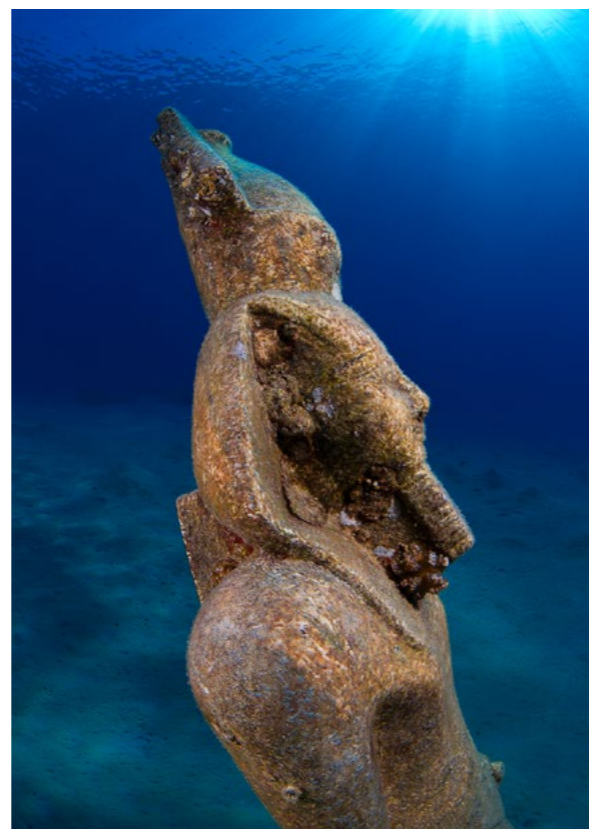
intention, as every good image begins with the photographer's intention.

### Contrast

An intention of working with contrast is an important element of image composition in underwater images. Contrast creates depth (or not!), guides the viewer's eyes to

the main subjects of an image (or not!) and is almost always the key feature of an image that attracts the viewer's attention (or not!). Because, in general, contrast is defined as: a strong "eye-catching" difference.

In photography, contrast is the difference between bright and dark areas of an image. The stronger the difference, the stronger the contrast. The human eye is able to perceive around 100 different levels of brightness. The strongest possible contrast is the difference between high noon sun and darkest night—mainly the difference between black and white.



Images with low contrast are mostly perceived as "flat". Images with high (or even very high) contrast display bright areas brighter and dark areas darker—in some cases, by paying the price with a loss of image quality. Super-contrast images do attract the eye upon first viewing. A second viewing then would reveal that actually lots of image details in bright and



dark areas are lost. That's not always a bad thing. There are many excellent underwater images that work with extreme contrasts. Everything simply depends on the photographer's intention, assuming an intention exists.

In underwater photography, contrast is often altered to boost the

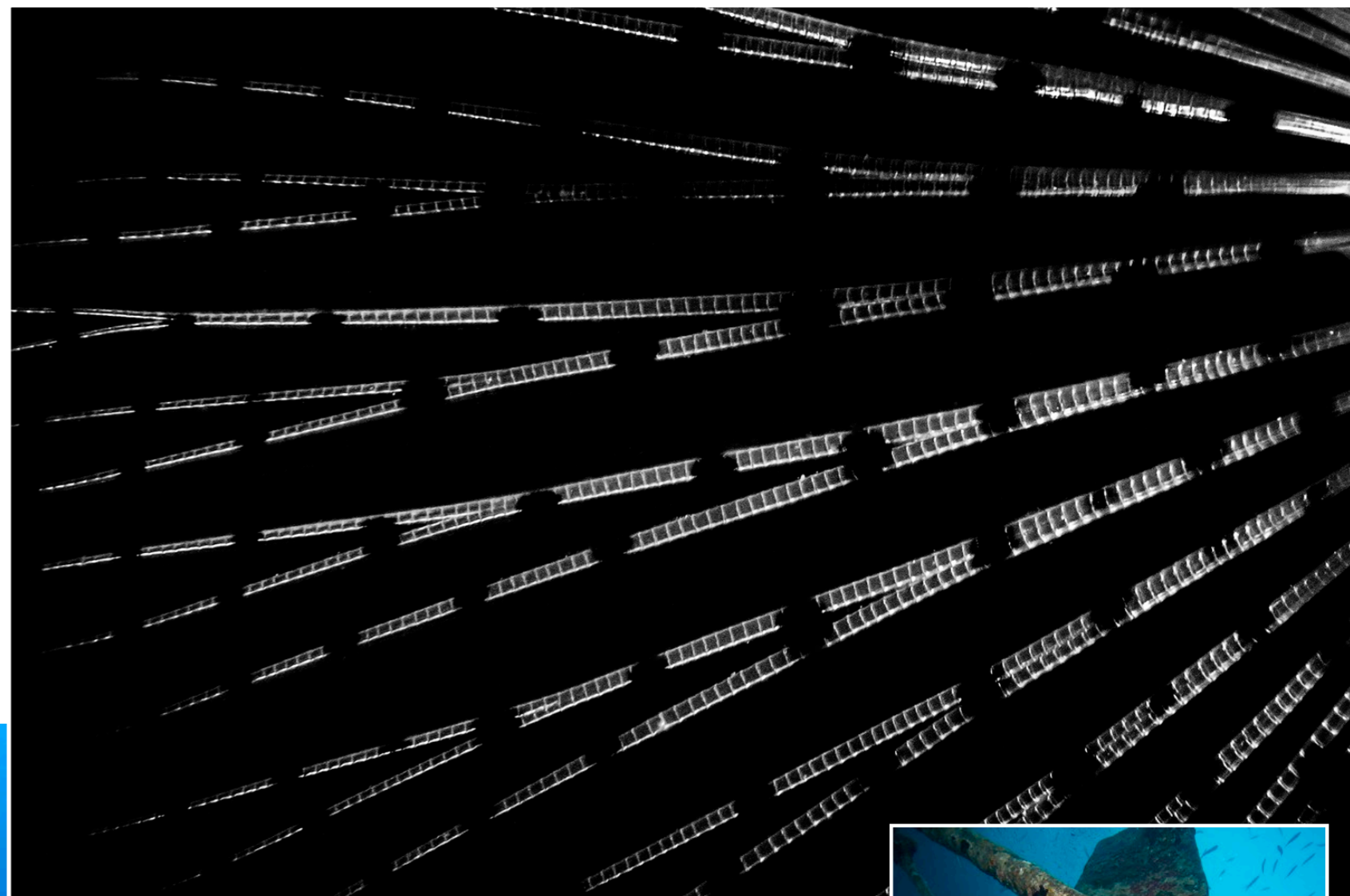
overall expression of the image. But contrast is a bit more than the difference between black and white. An image with a yellow or orange fish and blue water in the background is always an eye-catcher. This then refers to color contrast, especially the contrast between "cold" (blue) and "warm" (orange),







Lines and color contrast (left)—In some images we will find several composition principles combined. Lines do not always need to guide the eye to a subject of interest (below). Sometimes, they work well just being lines.



yellow). An image of a glowing squid in front of a black background refers to a “dark/light” contrast, and such images (with a black background) have remained popular over the years.

Strong contrasts always attract the viewer's eyes, but one thing should be kept in mind: Do not over-use it. Especially extreme contrast-boosted color images are perceived as “uncomfortable”. The image flickers, the viewer turns away.

But contrast in an image does not always refer to contrast in technical terms, as there are also “psychological contrasts”. Dead sharks with their fins cut off, animals stuck and dying in



A different kind of contrast is a contrast based on psychological effect. Here: anger about all that crap that lies on the sea floor

fishing nets, or waste and garbage in the water are examples of such “psychological contrast”. It has a strong effect on the viewer.

Whatever kind of contrast is used, if done with intention, will result in a stronger image.

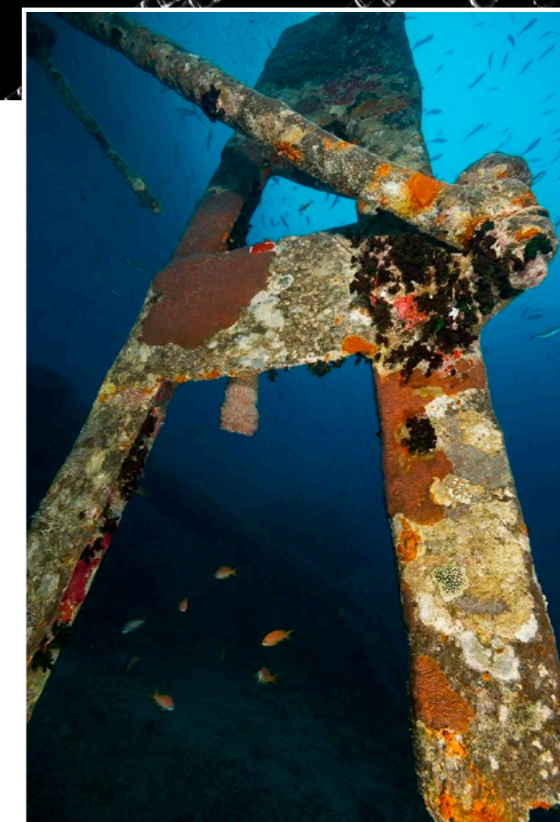
### Lines

If they do not occur as a separate element, lines form at the edges of objects through color contrast or are notionally derived by connecting image elements. Most of

the time, we distinguish between actual lines and imaginary lines.

Lines guide the eye of the viewer and can contribute a lot to the clarity and harmony of an image. People are used to recognizing a “system”, or a clear structure, when viewing images; this is true in underwater images as well.

By using lines as an element of composition, we, as photographers, can take viewers by the hand, so-to-speak, guide their eyes and show them where







# photo & video

Once the eye spots a line, it will follow it automatically to find out where it leads (above); Lines and contrast—in this example of extreme contrast, the beam of light works as guiding line to the main subject (below); Lines do not always have to be straight—curves work well too (lower right)



to “walk the line”. While actual lines convey clarity, imaginary lines stimulate the eye and create a feeling of harmony.

For example, in an underwater photograph of:

- A diver at a safety rope—the rope creates an actual

line. The rope guides the eye and gives an impression of “depth”.

- The back of a whale (or dolphin) evokes an imaginary line.

- The water border in split shots (over/unders) creates

an actual line.

- Sun rays create actual lines.
- A swimmer swimming in an Olympic pool creates a combination of actual and imaginary lines.

Of course, lines of any kind do not always have to be straight. They can be rounded or even interrupted. Just think of underwater images of whip corals (they have

a rounded line) or sunlight patterns on a sandy seafloor (they have interrupted lines). Once the eye spots a line, it always wants to follow it and see where it goes. Knowing this provides the intention-driven photographer a strong tool in creating “eye-catching” images.

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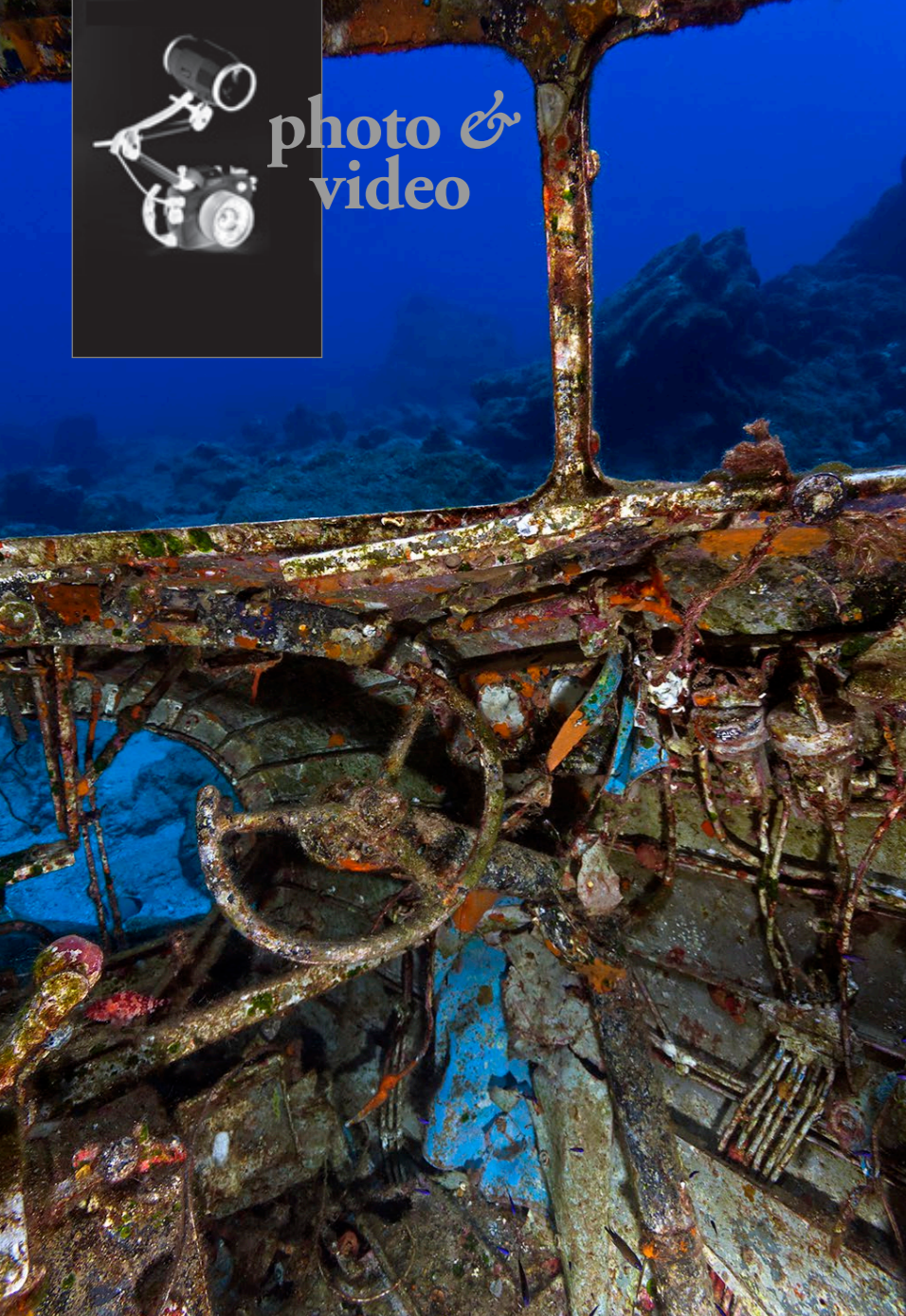
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What might it feel like to touch this subject (below)? Some subjects awaken a sort of "haptic curiosity"; It (right) looks so soft and fluffy! May I touch it? No, you may not; You obviously don't want to touch this (bottom left). However, some images can evoke a haptic feeling—it is all about imagination; It's tricky to resist playing with this plane wreck's steering wheel, isn't it? (left)

sion on a human being: people understand a thing by touching it:

*Haptic perception (Greek: haptōs "palpable", haptikōs "suitable for touch") literally denominates "to grasp something". Perception, in this case, is achieved through active exploration of surfaces and objects by a moving subject as opposed to passive contact of a static subject during tactile perception. Haptic perception relies on the forces experienced during touch. (WIKIPEDIA)*



But there is also a "virtual haptic perception", and such virtual input can be triggered by looking at a photograph. Still, we want to touch it, yet we can't (or are not allowed to). But our brains suggest a virtual haptic perception of an object or thing, and we start to imagine "how it would feel like" to actually touch it.

In some cases, an underwater image can work with haptics as well. Just think of soft sand on the sea floor, or why the jellyfish is named jellyfish, or smooth and rough metal structures (such as wrecks), or just algae, which can not only look beautiful (but don't have to!), they



can inspire one to wonder what it feels like to touch it. ■

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Is it still movable? A small "haptical provocation"—despite the image itself is not super-fancy or interesting, the viewer can't help but think about that small wheel. May I touch it? No!

### Haptics

We know not to touch anything underwater, right? But if we could, what would it feel like? Soft? Slimy? Rough? Is it pleasing and nice, or stinging and hurtful? Most of us will never know, but we try to imagine it anyway. This refers to a kind of psychological effect, going back to very early childhood when we discovered, as babies, the world around us, simply by touching everything we could (or at least everything our parents allowed us to). Physical contact with a thing creates a strong impres-



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