

Through the eyes of Howard Schatz, MD

by David F. Chang, MD



I've always been impressed with how many ophthalmologists enjoy and pursue photography. Perhaps it's our understanding of optics, our unique appreciation of image quality, or our professional need to document and monitor ocular pathology. And in choosing ophthalmology as a career, I suspect that many of us concluded that the fundus is the most beautiful and photogenic part of human anatomy. But the personification of this harmonious amalgamation has to be retina specialist **Howard Schatz, MD**, who has remarkably reached the pinnacle of both professions through completely separate and sequential careers. I'm sure many of us have fantasized what it might have been like had we chosen an entirely different career path. But consider the energy, the talent, and the audacity it took for Howard to actually find out.

For UCSF ophthalmology residents like myself in the early 1980s, clinical faculty member Howard Schatz was revered for his charismatic and passionate teaching. Howard had the busiest retina referral practice in San Francisco, but lectured and published extensively while volunteering countless hours teaching residents. He authored several classic textbooks that were notable for their exquisite angiographic and color fundus photographs.

On a personal level, Howard was one of my most influential mentors. His advice and example both planted and encouraged the idea (heretical to me at the time) that you could still contribute to clinical research and teaching while in private practice. It was quite a shock, therefore, when this inspiring role model literally switched careers at the height of his prominence in ophthalmology. What began as a 1-year sabbatical in 1995 evolved into an equally brilliant and successful career in photography that is being celebrated in a newly released 2-volume retrospective collection of more than 1,000 of his best photographs, *Schatz Images: 25 Years*.

To accompany my interview of Howard this month, he graciously allowed me to select some of my favorite photos from this new retrospective book for publication in *EyeWorld*. Visit this website to see more: schatzimages25years-glitterati.com.

David F. Chang, MD,
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Self-portrait of renowned photographer (and ophthalmologist) Howard Schatz, MD

Dr. Chang: What sparked your initial interest in photography, and how were you able to pursue this hobby during your medical career? What inspired you to turn this hobby into a professional career?

Dr. Schatz: I think most physicians have stimulating interests outside of medicine. As a 23-year-old medical student, I was introduced to an ophthalmology resident at a party. I was planning to be a cardiologist, but was impressed by his passion for ophthalmology—how interesting he thought his field was and the fact that he would be providing both medical and surgical care for patients of all ages. As a result I decided to spend some of my senior year elective time doing an ophthalmology rotation and ended up loving it.

At that very same party, I met a physician in the military who had just returned from Korea and had brought back a new Nikon F camera. A number of us were admiring how wonderful this camera was and how it let the user manipulate and modify so many parameters—the ISO, ASA, and shutter speed and aperture. Although I'd always had an interest in photography, something just clicked when I saw that new camera, and I was hooked. I had a cousin in the military in Korea at the time, and I was able to purchase a Nikon F camera with a 50 mm lens through him. So it was a strange coincidence at a very formative time in my life, but out of that one party I ended up with both a career and a hobby.

For years I juggled parenthood and a very busy career involving teaching, research, and clinical care. But after my youngest daughter left for college in 1987, I decided to get more serious about learning photography. On the weekends I read everything I could about photography, collected photography books, and frequented museums and galleries. I converted our dining room into a studio and after 4 to 6 years, my photographs were being published in books and displayed in museums and galleries. I started getting requests to do editorial work for magazines and commercial work for advertising agencies. Although this was still just a weekend hobby and my retina referral practice was busier than ever, my wife finally suggested that we take a sabbatical and spend a year in New York to fully devote myself to photography. My associates allowed me to take the year off, and we moved into a studio in SoHo in 1995.

Pursuing photography full time was so exciting and interesting—I was shooting every day and taking

on whatever projects I wanted to. It was simultaneously fun, scary, and challenging, but incredibly rich with experience. After a year, I wasn't ready to stop and I arranged to extend my sabbatical for another year. Well, I just kept extending it for another year at a time until it became clear about 5 years later that I was never returning to my retina practice. Although it had never been the original intent, we now had a thriving photography business with commercial and magazine assignments, gallery sales, museum exhibitions, and a growing portfolio of published books.

Dr. Chang: How hard was it to retire from medicine at the pinnacle of your career as one of the preeminent medical retina specialists in the world?

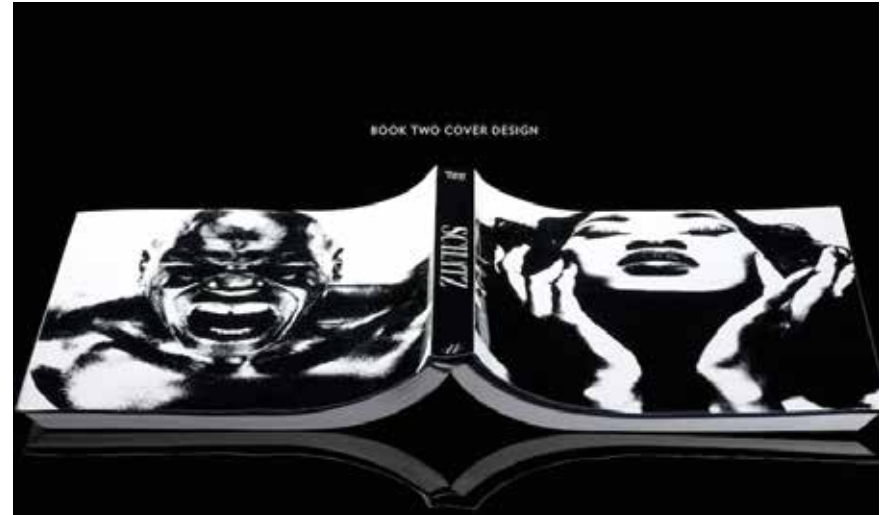
Dr. Schatz: It was not an abrupt decision, but rather a gradual, almost seamless transition from medicine to photography. Interestingly, I frequently get asked by physicians and other professionals, such as



Underwater Study #1, Katita Waldo, photographed in Fairfax, Calif., Feb. 1993.



The covers of *Schatz Images: 25 Years*



attorneys or CEOs, for advice about potentially switching careers to art or photography. I tell everyone, don't suddenly cut the umbilical cord and give up your day job because you don't know if you're going to love it, be any good at it, or be able to make a living at it. Try to do a little bit at a time and see how you do, which is basically what I did.

Dr. Chang: What about being an ophthalmologist do you miss the most?

Dr. Schatz: I liked my patients, my staff, and everything about being a physician. I had a busy consultative referral practice and loved the challenge of diagnosing and managing the most difficult cases. Fundus photography and angiography allowed us to share mystery cases among colleagues all over the world, and I loved these collaborations and constantly learning and teaching new things. I would have been fine if nothing had ever changed, but getting to have a second career has been a real gift. In a way I've been able to live 2 very different lives—one serious, focused life of science and medicine, and a second marked by creativity, imagination, fun, and the ability to try anything. It's been wonderful.

Dr. Chang: How has your medical training and experience helped you in the world of photography?

Dr. Schatz: I've derived phenomenal gifts from medicine. As physicians, we learn about analytic thinking, scientific proof and methodology, and how to make and record observations. I learned about assessing all sorts of possibilities and risk. But perhaps most importantly, by having so many frightened and anxious patients referred to me for their serious retina problems, I learned to behave in such a way that I could walk into a room, introduce myself, and within minutes give patients a sense of comfort and reassurance that they were in the right place. That really helps me as a portrait photographer. I know how to behave with my subjects who start off as complete strangers—how to present myself and to create an atmosphere that's emotionally comfortable. I don't have the photographic education that most of my colleagues have, but I feel that my medical education, which has enriched my life and given me so many important skills, gives me a tremendous advantage over many of my photography colleagues.

Dr. Chang: You are particularly well known for your innovative underwater photography. Tell us what is inspiring and most challenging about this unique genre.

Dr. Schatz: Underwater photography was the perfect challenge for me as a scientist, because I had to solve all sorts of problems of the physical

world in an analytical manner by changing one variable at a time. These were the challenges. Because water is cyan, skin ends up looking blue-green, which is ugly. Water sucks up yellow and red light, creating problems with illumination, but if you put lights near the water and they fall in, you can be electrocuted. So I had to solve the problems of lighting the subjects and achieving accurate color. When I started in 1992 all underwater photography was done through a viewfinder, so you're looking through one lens while shooting through another. It was very difficult to get the proper composition and focus. I had to figure out chemistry because chlorine would burn the models' eyes and it would make a terrible picture. I had dancers and models with no body fat, who quickly became so hypothermic they were shivering. I had to figure out what's the right temperature where they could work with me all day.

While still in California I started by shooting in my swimming pool on the weekends. I bought an underwater camera and took copious notes while experimenting between the shallow and deep ends of the pool. After 6 months I finally figured out how to make a focused, well-composed, perfectly colored, and properly lit picture where the model was comfortable in terms of chemistry and temperature. One of my early books was called *Seeing Red: The Rapture of Redheads*, and the

cover model was Katita Waldo, a prima ballerina with the San Francisco Ballet who became a good friend. I called her up, and said, 'Katita, I've spent 6 months trying to make pictures underwater. I think I can do it, but I need a beautiful subject, and it occurs to me that the adversary of a dancer is gravity. What if you could perform in an environment that has no gravity? You could do a leap and hold that pose for a minute, until you have to come up for air.' She loved the idea and the very first picture we made ended up winning an award. For photography, underwater is really a magic place. I continued to get better with experience and now, of my 20 total photography books, 5 of them were shot underwater.

Dr. Chang: In ophthalmology, you had such a passion for clinical research. Has photography continued to provide similar opportunities?

Dr. Schatz: My studio has been my research lab where I can try anything and where I've basically taught myself by experimenting. I would see an interesting magazine image over the weekend and by Monday, I would try to figure out in my studio how it was done. I learned so many techniques this way. Unlike with medicine, the best thing was that there was nothing to lose! The worst thing that could happen was a poor photograph, but through experimentation, the

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picture would often be great. I am constantly learning, and it makes what I do fascinating and exciting. I continually tear out images from magazines or take iPhone shots of photos that interest me and that I then try to duplicate in my studio and learn from. I can't get enough.

Dr. Chang: Tell us about your newest 2-volume book.

Dr. Schatz: We've published 20 books in all, and one of our publishers, Glitterati Press, proposed doing a special retrospective collection. I was ambivalent about devoting myself to past rather than new projects,

but after several months I finally relented. My wife Beverly, who runs our studio, and I hired a world-renowned photo editor to help us go through 4 million images representing 25 years of work. To be selected, every photo in the retrospective had to receive an A+ grade from each of the 3 of us. Over the course of the

next 8 months we ended up selecting 1,083 images that fill a boxed 2-volume set with 830 total pages.

Dr. Chang: What are you working on now?

Dr. Schatz: I have almost 300 kids that I've been regularly photographing since birth. Imagine—age 1 week, 1, 2, 3 years, and now they're all 20. When they were all in the second grade, I had them sit down and answer several biographical questions that we sealed in a time capsule, not to be reopened until they reached adulthood. It's going to be a daunting, major project to look at their life stories compared to what they said at age 7, along with their growth captured through these chronologic portraits. Of course there are some other projects that interest me, and we'll see if they come to fruition.

Dr. Chang: Who have been your favorite portrait subjects?

Dr. Schatz: I really bond with my subjects and I've always said that I fall in love with everybody. From the start, I tell my subjects that we're going to work together to make something special that the world hasn't ever seen and that will delight everyone. When we really care about the shoot this way and we both give it our all, it creates a very special bond. I've been blessed to have this connection with many famous and amazing people who have become very good friends in the process.

Dr. Chang: Your photography books have celebrated athletes, models, actors, boxers, newborns, and even redheads. When will you produce a book featuring cataract surgeons?

Dr. Schatz: A lot of my friends have asked, 'What about doing portraits of ophthalmologists?' To make a good portrait, there has to be something about the picture—the lighting, the atmosphere, the environment—that's so different and interesting that you can't take your eyes off of it. The person either has to be fascinating looking, phenomenally beautiful, famous, or incredibly idiosyncratic—a rare creature. And frankly David, as much as I'd like to, I just cannot fit a cataract surgeon into any of those criteria. **EW**

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Zaire and Ariyan, born July 12, 1998. Little boys do not generally like standing next to girls. But in the case of twins, the boys are very comfortable near their twins.



Amir Khan, junior welterweight, photographed in New York, Oct. 2011. Dr. Schatz threw clumps of sand and asked Khan to hit them so hard that some would hit the camera. He did.

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Dana Hanson, photographed for a *Natural Health* magazine editorial in New York, June 1997. Dr. Schatz's idea was to illustrate "balance."



Underwater Study 1657. Sara Sessions. *Swan Lake*, photographed for Epson America in Fairfax, Calif., April 1997.



Laurence Fishburne, photographed in Los Angeles, Jan. 2010. "You're the father of little kids, telling them that you have the magical power to see them all the time, wherever they are."



Alan Arkin, photographed for *Sports Illustrated* on the set of the Warner Brothers film *Grudge Match*, New Orleans, Feb. 2013.



David Faulk, photographed at the Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco, Sept. 2003.



Ichiro Suzuki, photographed for *Sports Illustrated* at spring training in Arizona, March 2002. *Sports Illustrated* asked Dr. Schatz to “study” the swing of the great hitter Ichiro.



Liquid Light Study #1034, Dana Stackpole, photographed in New York, Feb. 2005.

Source (all): Howard Schatz, MD