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MAGAZINE

Simply Wet

The Underwater
Photography of
Howard Schatz



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FABULOUS
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Still Life

A PHOTOGRAPHER AND HIS WIFE FOCUS ON MINIMALISM

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY WENDY CARLSON





SPARSE AND SIMPLE Schatz's ethereal work "Underwater Study 2250" is displayed. The gently undulating landscape proves the perfect setting for this mid-century gem. Howard and Beverly share a passion for simplicity. Stone steps provide a peaceful walkway amid flowering trees and plants. Originally a kit house built in the 1960s, the structure now includes a late 1980s addition by architect James Spencer.

To

say photographer Howard Schatz and his wife and business partner, Beverly Ornstein, are minimalists is an understatement. They don't like a lot of stuff, period. "Stuff demands attention, and I don't want the demands. I just like a clean slate," says Beverly, whose close-cropped hairstyle and black attire complements the crisp simplicity of their mid-century modern home in Sherman.

"Howard and I are very similar that way," she says of their uncluttered lifestyle. "I remember when we lived in California, Howard was working on a project called 'Wet Kids,' where a group of kids would jump in the pool, and when they got out of the pool dripping wet, Howard would make the portraits. One kid, after arriving at the house, looked all around and asked me, 'Where's all your stuff?'"

So, in 2001, when the couple were house hunting for a weekend place, they insisted that it be modern, bright, and open—and not more than 90 minutes' drive from their New York City loft.

Beverly, a fan of American architect Richard Meier who is renown for his prominent use of white, first saw the 5,000-square-foot Sherman house in winter. "Everything was covered in snow. It was blindingly white inside, and that's what got me. I loved the white," says Beverly. Inside, though, it was "tchotchke heaven," she says.

LET THE SUNSHINE IN Ethereality is further explored in "Underwater Study 3198." An all-white bedroom overlooks tennis courts and a woody backdrop. Except for a few items, such as a collection of Asian vessels, the couple prefers spare décor. White interiors and lots of glass fulfill Beverly's desire for sun-filled spaces. Below "Underwater Study 001," Beverly reads.



"The previous owners had very eclectic taste, so every nook, cranny, every corner, every wall, every part of the floor was filled with stuff," says Howard.

The garden was also profuse, filled with an overabundance of plants and trees arranged in a hodgepodge. But the two minimalists could envision what the house could be. Lots of glass gave the bright interiors a sense of connection to the woods outside. Architectural details including curving, floor-to-ceiling bookcases and a spiral staircase gave shape and dimension to the abundance of white space. And a long, light-filled corridor connected a new 1980s addition designed by David Specter with the original 1960s kit house.

After re-landscaping the lawn into an undulating, park-like setting, the house seemed to have it all, except for one thing. The couple needed a pool—and not just any pool but one retrofitted as an underwater studio with camera lights, temperature controls, and special filtration to lower turbidity. Howard, whose work regularly appears in *Vanity Fair*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *ESPN Magazine*, is also an acclaimed underwater photographer who has created imagery for prominent clients such as Sony, MGM Grand, Ralph Lauren RLX, Mercedes-Benz, Nike, and AT&T.

His images of dancers, actors, athletes, acrobats, and models striking seemingly effortless poses have an otherworldly, ethereal, and dreamlike quality. What is striking is how natural his subjects look underwater, in part because both Schatz and his subjects are submerged in water for a short time, often less than a minute, before coming up for air. Frequently, he captures the image he wants within the 30 seconds. But he also learned how to balance the pool water's pH so it won't irritate the models' eyes, and to adjust lights to achieve warm skin color rather than garish blue tones. As a result, his subjects look at ease, serene, and utterly beautiful. One appropriate exception is ghostly advertising imagery he did for A&E's "Bag of Bones," a miniseries that aired in 2011 based on Stephen King's novel.



PHOTO FINISH A formal dining room overlooks the pool area. A curved, windowed hallway connects the new addition to the original house. The photograph "Underwater Study 1681" was part of an MGM Grand ad spot. Beverly and Howard, married 26 years, are business partners too. Howard's photographs add a splash of color to the all-white, spacious kitchen.



Long before he plunged into the water with a camera, Schatz, now 72, was a successful ophthalmologist and retina specialist in San Francisco with a professorship at the UCSF Medical Center. When his other colleagues were off playing golf on weekends, Schatz would spend his free time in a studio. As his fine-art photography earned success in the late 1980s, he started getting commercial and editorial work, more than he could handle.

By 1995, he decided to take a one-year sabbatical from his medical career, and the couple moved from California to a 5,000-square-foot SoHo studio apartment, where Schatz launched his second career. "That one-year sabbatical is now in its 17th year," jokes Beverly.

As his business partner, Beverly oversees the production of Howard's books, including his upcoming 20th, *Caught in the Act: Actors Acting*. Set for publication this fall, *Caught in the Act* is a collection of images of actors that stem, in part, from a monthly feature Schatz did for *Vanity Fair*. For those assignments, he asked actors to improvise a series of roles and dramatic situations. The book comprises portraits and photographs of the actors acting, as well as in-depth interviews, which were crucial to the photography.

"I've learned that people have to be open and be free in front of the camera, so the interview is very important," Schatz says. "I let them be the center of attention because if the subjects feel that you are interested, they will trust you in front of the camera."

His award-winning book, *At the Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing*, published last year, is a six-year study of the sport, including interviews with champion boxers as well as managers, trainers, and promoters. That experience made Schatz a natural for a *Sports Illustrated* assignment earlier this year, photographing scenes of the upcoming comedy/boxing film, *Grudge Match*, starring Robert De Niro, Sylvester Stallone, and Kim Basinger, scheduled for release this fall.





BEACHED

Hardwood floors and white walls and furnishings help create a simple, airy feel throughout the home. Howard's photographs (below, "Underwater Study 2822") are the focal point of most rooms.



Yet another project is a series of portraits of models and their mothers recently published in the *New York Times Magazine*. "It's a study of relationships; it's a study of heredity; and certainly, it's a study of aging," he says.

To top it off, he is working on his next book, a 25-year retrospective to be published in 2014. "We have lots of projects," says Howard—which is why his and Beverly's home in the country is such a necessary respite. "When we drive through the house gates after coming up from the city, we both go, 'Whew.' It's six acres of peace and quiet, and we can be productive and do what we want."

For Beverly, that translates into time to read; and for Howard, it's back-to-back tennis matches on the outdoor courts. "Our friends are always inviting us to travel with them," he says.

"On African safaris," Beverly chimes in.

"But we're really not interested in exploring," says Howard. "We've done that. Right now, work is like a treasure hunt, and I'm always searching for the next great photo that surprises and delights me." ■

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