

Underwater love

Taking sumptuous high-end fashion photography to new depths, **Susanne Stemmer** is creating quite a splash in the lofty world of art. Grab your wetsuit and jump in...



Susanne Stemmer is a Paris-based underwater specialist whose clients

include Chanel, Vienna State Ballet Company and Belvedere Vodka.
susannestemmer.com



This elaborate ballroom scene was created for a Belvedere Vodka ad campaign.

T MAY BE FASHION, BUT IS IT ART? This is the question that provoked fierce debate a few years ago following Art Photo Expo's decision to dedicate an entire section to the likes of Ellen von Unwerth and Simon Procter's glossy images. The world's most prestigious art fair had tentatively dipped its toes before, but this was a fully realised showcase of what founder Francois Trabelsi controversially called the 'most accessible of the contemporary arts'. He even labelled the photographers in question 'the world's greatest living artists'. Purists were outraged, but more open-minded aficionados were won over by the lavish visual spectacle on offer.

This same audience would have a field day with Susanne Stemmer's work. More mercurial than Juergen Teller, more cerebral than Mario Testino, hers is a world that few dare to brave. Forget the familiarity of the studio – you're more likely to find Susanne underwater, camera in hand, creating jaw-droppingly awesome fashion photography that most would struggle to produce on dry

land. And with its vibrant colours, balletic poses and elegant grandeur, it's easily good enough to go toe-to-toe with the best of the genre, past or present. As for the 'Is it art?' debate, she recently signed a contract with a posh Parisian gallery, has exhibited in New York, and says she's finding the world of art 'very new and exciting'. The simple answer, it seems, is yes.

As newcomers to this rarely explored genre, we try to imagine what it must be like being fully submerged for a photoshoot. Busy studios can be daunting enough at the best of times, with so many lights, leads and modifiers to worry about, but underwater? "It's magic," is Susanne's breezy introduction. "It's such a fantastic feeling to float along with my model, not feeling any gravity. And it's so quiet. There are often 20 or more people on big advertising production sets, all standing

around chatting or building something, but under the surface it's just you and the model. It's a unique kind of energy, and of course it's always challenging, more so in the beginning when every shoot was still an unknown quantity. Would the model be able to move properly? Will the clothes flow where we wanted them to flow? Over the years we've got everything under control..."

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This last comment ends with a wry smile, suggesting that Susanne's journey has been a colourful one, but when asked if

underwater fashion photography is ever dangerous, the answer is more definitive. "It's no more dangerous than shooting models on land," she says, the wry smile still intact. "We've never had any mishaps and we leave nothing to chance, especially when it comes to underwater safety. There's always another diver in the water with me in case

the model suddenly gets tired or caught up." She then regales us with an astonishing tale of a Russian model that couldn't swim. Her agency either didn't know or didn't want to let on, but 'this really beautiful girl' had never set foot in a pool in her life, yet was due to pose in a 7m long dress with weights sewn in to keep her anchored. Heroically, after 2 hours of training, she was in the pool posing. "She was the bravest model I've ever seen, but now I always speak to the girls on the phone before I book them."

Susanne's own diving adventures began long before she picked up a camera, completing a PADI Open Water course while travelling in Australia when she was just 21. "I've always been fascinated by diving and being in and around water and I still indulge in some serious diving even now. Once a year in the Red Sea, without a camera... fantastic." Photography didn't start paying the bills until 1999, at which point work and play were kept well apart. "You've got to keep one little space in life where you don't work. Besides, I'd be a lousy fish photographer. Total lack of patience, I'm afraid." But then there was an evening, sat on a boat watching the sun go down. "I was working on a concept for a fashion shoot and I thought, 'let's jump in and find out if this works?'"

Jump in she did and that first underwater fashion shoot was one she'll never forget. The fashion editor was thrilled, but Susanne was panicking. "I was in Vienna at the time, and Austria isn't exactly surrounded by seas or crowded with experienced underwater photographers. Luckily, I found an old camera housing and two flashlights to rent, from a photographer whose only advice was to get as close to the subject as possible. So we jumped in the pool and started shooting. A few minutes later the flashes were dead, the model was cold and a huge thunderstorm was brewing overhead. But you have to be stubborn when trying something new, and in the end the rain stopped, the sun came out and we got a 16-page spread plus cover. And I knew I'd found a new love. I really learned a lot from that experience, and today we train the models, build our own underwater light modifiers, and nothing is left to chance." Not that chance is an option when big clients are flying in from Hong Kong, New York and Sydney.

Knowing how much planning goes into a large shoot on dry land, the added complication of water must prove testing. "There's a lot to think about," Susanne agrees, that wry smile making a brief reappearance. "People mostly; will they have the energy to swim like crazy and still look relaxed? Clients who've never been part of an underwater shoot often ask a lot of questions too. Meanwhile, we're filling two minibuses with lights, dive equipment and backgrounds, and adjusting fashion garments



Above A typically vibrant fashion image photographed for a Chanel editorial feature.



Above Susanne has also worked for reality TV show America's Next Top Model.

“Everything takes twice as long underwater”

Susanne had to beg and borrow kit for her first shoots, but now uses a Canon 5D MkIII and a selection of L-series primes. “I had to buy my own gear to get ahead,” she says. “I asked a lot of people for advice, but ended up even more confused. Eventually I found a guide book by Howard Schatz, who at the time was one of only a few professionals working underwater. I thought, why not ask the best? So I emailed him and got a reply a few hours later. Canon, Seacam... nice guy. Then I found out that Seacam, who make underwater housings, are based near Vienna, so I called the owner, drove to his factory and bought one of his housings. I loved the design – the viewfinder was perfect, as was the handling.”

Underwater softboxes and beauty dishes are few and far between, so when it comes to lighting, Susanne has to innovate. “We just started to build our own using old Broncolor light shapers and they worked perfectly. We fix the stands with diving weights. I also use Broncolor lights to flash from above the surface, and lots of reflectors. Everything takes twice as long underwater as in the studio – move lights, swim back, take a test shot, swim to the monitor, move the light again... – but the effort is worth it.”

– a little bit of cutting and sewing here and there – to make sure they keep their shape.”

With so many creative types involved in such elaborate shoots, from stylists and make-up artists to models and, in Susanne's case, dive instructors, it's logical to assume that everyone involved has to be a competent diver too. By all accounts it helps, but the reality is more physically demanding than you might imagine. “Models are trained to strike the poses I want them to. If they're divers themselves, fine; if not, also fine. I'm a fish and can swim for hours. Plus, I have a mask and regulator. And I'm stubborn. But for the models it can be really tough. Being underwater for hours, up and down, with their eyes open... it can be gruelling and they have my total respect.”

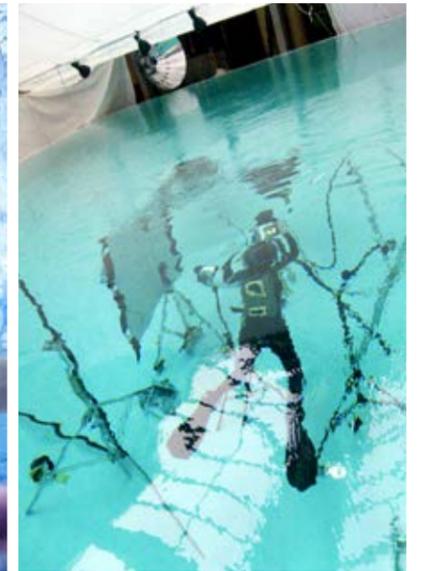
Gruelling is the word. Susanne and her team spend up to 17 hours a day on set, mostly in the water, and shoots can last for four or five days. “Which is tough enough, but then you sometimes have to squeeze out of your wetsuit and go have dinner with the client.”

Of course, Susanne is responsible for more than just taking pictures on set – she's also the creative talent behind the elaborate stages that form the backdrop for many of her most memorable images. “I design most of the sets myself,” she says, pointing to the

“I never shoot in chlorine or the sea, as I want total control”

fantastical image on page 48. “Then we get into the workshop to see if it works the way I'd imagined. I'm lucky to work with a superb team who are always ready to try something new, no matter how long it takes or how much effort it is. Some backgrounds, such as that used for the Belvedere Vodka campaign, are a mix of cutting-edge 3D and photographed water reflections.”

Beyond the obviously superlative nature of Susanne's work, the eagle-eyed among you will have noticed one other striking feature – the water surrounding her models is crystal clear. Knowing how chlorine-infested regular swimming pools can be, and how unforgiving on the senses that can be, we ask if she uses specialist clear water tanks for her shoots. “Public pools can be a bit... well, yuk,” she laughs. “Over the years we've tried every pool in and around Paris and Vienna, and now have a network of tanks we can rent according to what we're shooting. I never shoot in chlorine or the sea, as I want to have total control over lighting and the movements of hair and clothes.” Just like every other artist, then,



Susanne's top underwater fashion tips

1 Learn to dive

It's essential to know what you're doing when under the water, as you need to be able to fully concentrate on shooting, especially if you plan to shoot in the sea. Advanced buoyancy aids are readily available, and if you're serious about diving, the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) offers numerous courses and caters for all ability levels. Go to padi.com for more info. There's nothing worse than finding yourself out of your depth, just because you've been fiddling around with your camera and not concentrating on the water.

2 Never give up

This is true for all types of photography, but even more so when you're working underwater. There are so many challenges to overcome, so many things that can go wrong, and you've got to be so persistent and so stubborn, but a successful end

result makes all the blood, sweat and tears worth it. Never listen to those who say something can't be done – if you want it badly enough, you'll always find a way.

3 Experiment with kit

Find your own style and 'design' your own language. By this I mean try out different lighting techniques, exposures and ways of moving until you find a way of working that's right for you. It's so much easier to do with digital – when I learned the basics I had to spend hours in the darkroom, which was a nightmare!

4 Take inspiration

What truly inspires me is literature – I love the old classics like Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Stendhal, Remarque... Reading, travelling, seeing non-photographic exhibitions; for me, this is the only way to invent a unique style. There's no magical recipe – it's inside you waiting to get out. 