



Making a splash

Sports photographer **Adam Pretty** describes some of the challenges he faced while capturing his evocative photographs of the 2011 FINA World Championships in Shanghai, China. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

FOR MANY of us, sports photography is probably not the first thing that springs to mind when we think about great photographs. Often, our primary exposure to the genre is a cursory flick through the back pages of a newspaper or a flash of images on our television screens. However, once in a while a series of images come along that stops us in our tracks and makes us re-evaluate our opinion.

The 2012 World Press Photo awards were announced early last year and were accompanied by a major exhibition, website coverage and publication in numerous

magazines and newspapers. Tucked away among the images of natural disasters and political upheaval was a set of beautiful black & white photographs that couldn't help but grab your attention. Those images, taken by Australian photographer Adam Pretty on assignment for Getty Images, displayed the magnificent athletic prowess of the swimmers and divers taking part in the 2011 FINA World Championships in Shanghai, China. Pretty was awarded second prize in the Sports, Stories category at the World Press Photo awards, and where his images stood out was in their absolute artfulness.

Vadim Kaptur and Timofei Hordeichik of Belarus compete in the Men's 10m Platform Synchro preliminary round at the 2011 FINA World Championships at the Oriental Sports Centre

His application of light and composition is genuinely impressive, and the fact that many of these images were taken underwater is, if you'll forgive the pun, breathtaking.

'I had shot swimming events for many years, so it was a very natural environment for me to go into,' says Pretty. 'For many of these events I try to shoot underwater, so I took my Subal underwater camera housing with me and set about the editorial coverage. I often have certain requirements as to what I should shoot. For example, Getty may need me to photograph a particular competitor.'



➤ Different offices will go through Getty and request certain shots. As I am working for a news agency, I have to ensure that I am covering many angles. However, more often than not I won't be too restricted about what I can shoot.'

It wouldn't be unfair to suggest that the most impacting images in Pretty's Shanghai project are those taken underwater. It's an angle that often goes unseen in photographs of swimmers and divers, but in Pretty's images we see exactly what can be achieved with the right approach.

'Shooting underwater depends entirely on the location,' he says. 'The first thing I do is take a look at the venue and make sure the logistics of placing a camera underwater will work. However, this all depends on getting permission from the venue itself and this process can sometimes take up to a year. If I gain permission, I'll rent some scuba gear, go under the water and place the camera on the pool floor in the underwater camera house. The shots for the 2011 FINA World Championships were taken with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II, although now I generally use a Nikon D800E just because it has a larger file size. I'll frame the shot in a way that I imagine will capture the best action and then I'll pre-focus to ensure everything is pin-sharp. Once the camera is under the water, I need to set up a cable trigger so I can release the shutter whenever I can. Everything is remote.'

However, working in this way means that Adam can't actually see what image the camera is going to get once it is down there. He needs to rely purely on

Top: Michael Phelps of the United States, Takeshi Matsuda of Japan and Yin Chen of China compete in the Men's 200m Butterfly

Above: Tyler Clary of the United States competes in the Men's 200m Backstroke Final



instinct and pressing the shutter at exactly the right moment.

'There's a strong emphasis on being able to previsualise the shot when I'm working in this way,' says Pretty. 'I'm able to draw on experience. It's important because in these situations you often have a very limited number of chances to get the shot. You can't just hope for the best. Things will occasionally go wrong when you believe a swimmer is going to go one way and they end up somewhere else, although as it's diving and swimming you can generally anticipate where they'll be. Of course, there's a degree of luck involved, too.'

BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY

Pretty's images of swimmers and divers are generally converted to black & white during post-production. It's not often we see monochrome sports photography, but

in these already rather unusual images the black & white tones serve as a powerful and expressive medium. 'When I was looking through the images, which at that time were in colour, I realised that most of them would work a lot better in black & white,' he says. 'With some of the outdoor shots the light was quite flat and featured many silhouettes. In a sense, the shots were already monochrome. In some of the images I was shooting against a white cloudy sky where, of course, there's an absence of colour. The same applied with the underwater shots where the camera was angled up towards the sky. Also, you can see shapes and textures a lot better in monochrome. There were a couple of images that looked good in colour, but as a set they flowed much better in black & white.'

Working in black & white inevitably means that the handling of light becomes a crucial

factor. Pretty's images are notable due to their almost studio-based feel. There seems to be a level of control in how the light interacts with Pretty's subjects. However, as he is working on location, he is reliant on the light he finds once he gets there.

'With any event I try to find the best possible time of day to shoot or an area that's well lit,' says Pretty. 'I then set myself up in that area to try to make the best of the lighting. With sports photography you really need to set yourself apart from everyone else. These are big events and there are thousands of photographers there. It's not just about getting the action – it's about capturing the composition, light and background in a way that will stand out from everyone else's work.'

Pretty says that a large part of the process comes down to the editing. While a vast majority of the shots

Above: Eric Shanteau of the United States competes in the second semi-final heat of the Men's 200m Breaststroke

Right: Tim Pyritz of Germany competes in the Youth Men's 10m platform diving preliminary on day 10 of the Youth Olympics at Toa Payoh Swimming Complex on 24 August 2010 in Singapore



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will not have succeeded, there is always a small number where all the elements have come together to produce something visually interesting.

It would be tempting to imagine that some level of digital manipulation has gone into Pretty's images, but due to the nature of his work he is severely restrained in what he is able to do in post-production.

'I don't like to crop a photograph, but the reality is that sometimes I have to,' says Pretty. 'That's particularly true as I'm shooting blind because the camera is underwater. You can't always shoot full-frame. It can be unpredictable. As far as post-production goes, I'm fairly restricted because as a press-agency photographer I have quite strict guidelines about what I can and can't do. I have to follow the rules and if I disobey them there's a strong chance that I'll lose my job. The shot has to be legit. It can't be overworked, so the aim is to get it in-camera. However, that's not to say I can't work on things such as the Levels to get the right contrast and good skin tones. So really all I can change is the Levels and convert it to black & white.'

SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY

In Pretty's opinion, sports photography can often be a genre that is 'over-photographed'.

Due to the profession reaching saturation point, it can be difficult to achieve something unique. 'At a lot of venues, it's almost like being in a cage and you're not free to move around,' he says. 'That's very restricting. Every year there are more and more photographers because new publications are cropping up all the time. That's a lot to do with web-based media and online magazines. It's so much more competitive now. I've been working in the industry for 15 years and the changes have been dramatic. There are too many people at these events, so it's so much more challenging. It's a double-edged sword because while it forces you to stay focused and look for the most unusual shot you can, when it becomes too hard it can take the fun out of it.'

While Pretty still shoots sports photography, he has recently moved into a new career as a photographer for advertising campaigns. 'As I'd been shooting sporting events for many years, I felt I was getting slightly jaded,' he says. 'So, in 2007, I made the decision to try my hand at something else. I needed a new challenge. I was beginning to get too comfortable and had begun to see sports imagery as just a job. That's not a healthy attitude, so I changed tack.'

Advertising provided Pretty with the

Pretty's image for BMW's Interone advertising campaign

challenge he needed, particularly as he had never worked in that environment before. 'With sports photography, you have very limited control over your environment,' he says. 'You're an observer. With advertising I'm totally in control, particularly with things such as lighting. When I went back into sports imagery, I felt refreshed and had a new perspective on things. It has helped to keep me passionate.'

Sports photography is tough, according to Pretty. However, he maintains that if you have enough drive and passion then there's nothing to stop any budding sports photographer from carving out a career. 'Like anything, if you want it enough it will happen,' he says. 'There will be occasions where it's like hitting your head against a brick wall. It is hard, but if you're passionate you'll succeed. I've seen it so many times where people didn't even really mean to become a sports photographer. They gave it a go and found that it became their life. Always remember photography is not about the equipment – it's about learning to see the picture.' **AP**

To see more of Adam Pretty's work, visit his website at www.adampretty.com. To see more images from the 2012 World Press Photo Awards and entry details about the 2013 contest, visit www.worldpressphoto.org