

# UP FROM THE DEPTHS

## THE VIEW FROM BELOW



**H** By Michael Cacy  
 ere's a technique that may add some life to your underwater subjects. Sunlight plays some incredible tricks when viewed from beneath the surface.

Whenever possible, I prefer to paint from reference I have procured on my own. That is, I like to paint from photos that I have taken myself. While I live on a sunny island surrounded by coral reefs and colorful fish, I am not a scuba diver, nor do I own an expensive underwater camera. So, for fish photos, I stopped by the local public aquarium with my simple digital camera and photographed my subjects through the glass windows. The field trip yielded some juicy fish shots... enough for several paintings.

I then purchased an inexpensive, disposable 27 exposure underwater camera. (The camera I used is a 35mm one that tourists buy around here, but I have also seen inexpensive, disposable digital cameras as well.) Into the water I went (with a big brick in my pocket for extra weight). I submerged below the surface, aimed the camera up toward the sun and clicked away. No flash! The camera I bought had no flash anyway, so that part was a no-brainer. The resulting photos gave me the kind of visual information I wanted for the water in my painting. Although I braved the sea to get my photos, a swimming pool on a sunny, cloudless day would work fine, too.

### STEP 1

While this article deals with sunlight and water, I knew you'd also be a little curious about my fish, so I have included a couple of photos. The fin along the bottom and the eye were painted first, and (as shown here) are protected by frisket film. The two small masks were the only frisket film used to paint the fish. The other edges and details were accomplished using acetate loose masks and freehanding.

### STEP 2

Here is the completed fish, and I am now ready to tackle the water. The basic shapes and sunlit contours of the light are lightly drawn in pencil at the top of the composition.



**THIS DRAWING (A DETAIL OF THE ENTIRE AREA) DEPICTS THE RANDOM KINDS OF SHAPES AND CONTOURS WE'RE AFTER. LARGER AND SMALLER SHAPES...**

### STEP 3

This drawing (a detail of the entire area) depicts the random kinds of shapes and contours we're after. Larger and smaller shapes... fluid curves and jagged points. Pay particular notice to the "sawtooth" edges. These are important because they suggest the eddies along surface ripples. (Think of the parallel, windswept sand ridges on the dunes of the Sahara.)

### STEP 4

With a detail brush, apply acrylic in a thick and thin manner along these edges. This uneven line need not be continuous. That is, not every edge needs this



Painted outline. This detailing will, in a subtle way, punctuate the contour of the shaded water against the lit areas.

### STEP 4a

With the lit area of the water concealed under a mask (I used frisket film for this project, but have used acetate on previous paintings) I airbrushed a dark tone of blue that traveled (more or less) along the edges of these shapes. As with the process described in the previous photo, this serves to punctuate the contour against the lit areas.

### STEP 5

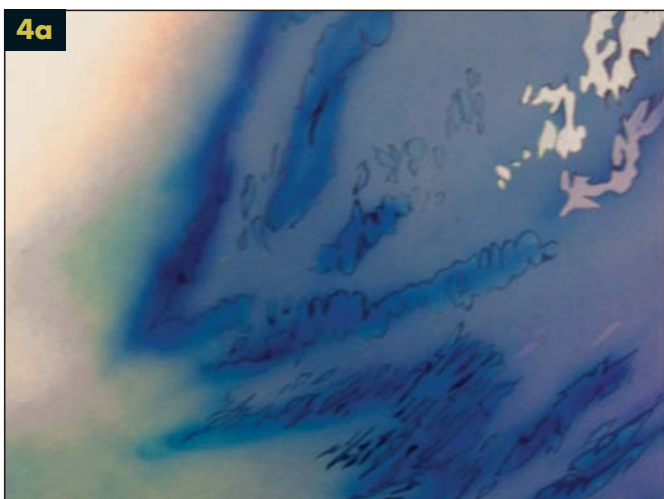
Here, the darkest area of the water has been painted and the frisket mask removed. The fish remains under a mask

of a tracing paper slip sheet with frisket film grabbing the surface along the edge of the fish.

### STEP 6

An acetate loose mask was quickly cut using a Stencil Burner (on glass...not over the artwork) and positioned over the art. Blues, much lighter than in the previous step, have been airbrushed over the exposed area to create a secondary shape. Then, the loose mask was removed, and even more blue was added to the lit areas.

Notice that the sun shapes (fragmented by the surface of the water)



are actually frisket masks. These were used to “mark” the position and nature of these shapes and to maintain pure white in those areas.

### STEP 7

Now that we’re almost finished, here’s the fun part. This is the step where the water comes alive. In this photo, I’m using an electric eraser with a hard nib to grind paint off the smooth, hard surface of the illustration board. This irregular white highlight line sparks up the light along my ripples. As in Step 4, not every contour should be highlighted. You be the judge, but create an erratic lit edge that is thick and thin. You can create new shapes and swirls with your erasers. In addition to the electric eraser with the hard nib, I used one with a soft nib and employed a stick eraser.

### STEP 8/Final

To finish the painting, I removed all masks and airbrushed a little opaque white over the “sun” shapes to diffuse the edges. I also fogged a glaze of blue onto the lower part of the fish so that it would not look quite so foreign to the extremely dark background. ❖



#### ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Michael Cacy is a world-class illustrator whose career spans more than 30 years. A recipient of the 1997 Vargas Award, Cacy’s client list includes Iditarod, Nike, Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, and many more. His video and DVD, *Illustration Cheap Tricks & Special F/X*, is considered one of the best airbrush instructional presentations ever made.